Chapter 1

Lauren flipped the sign on the door to “Open” and headed toward the back of the flower shop she co-owned with her best friend and roommate, straightening some of the displays of gifts as she went by them. She flipped on the tiny television in the back, and settled on a stool to clean and sort the flowers.

The announcer was listing the names of horses and riders for the next steeplechase race, and Lauren looked up when she heard a familiar name. “And horse number four is Anybody's Guess, ridden by Frankie Muer. It really is anybody's guess how this horse will run today. His times in practice have been inconsistent at best, I think that's fair to say. We know he's been seeing reclusive trainer John Macon, so that is points in his favor. Frankie is pretty confident about their chances, but we still think he's a long shot to win.”

Lauren set down her scissors and propped her head up on her hand. So that was the horse her father had been talking about. The announcer was only half right. Most of what her father had been working on with the pair was the rider, not the horse. He'd called her more than once in the last few weeks to complain that Frankie had no feel for the horse.

Emma came in from the back, and set a box down on the floor. “Anything good on?” she asked absently, searching for a knife to cut it open.

“Anybody's Guess is racing,” Lauren answered, handing her the one she'd been using on the flowers. “What's in there?”

Emma opened her mouth to say something, then clamped down hard on what she'd been about to say. It was an old argument, one Lauren refused to give in on, and one Emma refused to give up on. “I hope it's those little terrarium ornaments,” Emma answered finally. “Either that or they're still on back-order and it's just the corn dolls.” Her eyes flicked between Lauren and the horses on the screen, as if she was still deciding whether or not to push the issue. They both knew that, had things been different, Lauren would have been out there on the field, not watching the races on a tiny television in the back of their small store. But Lauren hadn't ridden since the accident, refused to even go the stables anymore. She wouldn't get any closer to a horse than the video cameras did, never again. Her father, who had once been one of the best known names and faces on the international steeplechase scene, now settled for being the “reclusive trainer”. He sometimes worked with horses, like Anybody's Guess, as favors to old friends, but mostly he just spoke at seminars, and claimed he was working on a book. If he ever went to the races or the stables, he didn't tell Lauren about it.

Emma had just touched the knife to the tape sealing the box when the bells over the front door tinkled. With an over-dramatic sigh, Emma moved to set down the knife.

“I'll get it,” Lauren laughed, sliding off the stool. “You've been waiting weeks for those silly glass balls.” She moved back to the front of the store, and stopped in the wide doorway. The man who had come in was peering into the glass eyes of a tortoise garden decoration, hands stuffed in his pockets like a kid who'd been told not to touch anything. The intensity with which he was studying the tortoise was reflected in the set of his broad shoulders, and the curious determination on his chiseled features. Lauren realized she was studying him just as intently, from his dark hair to his aquiline nose to the line of his jaw. Her eyes roamed over his dark green blazer, down khaki slacks and back up again.

“You can't win, you know,” she said, and her voice sounded breathless in her own ears. He turned, and she put a hand on the doorway to steady herself against the unexpected effect his blue eyes had on her.

“Are you sure?” he asked, a little half-smile playing over one side of his mouth. His voice was rich and deep, and held the promise of laughter. “I swear he almost blinked.”

Lauren found herself smiling back at the impish playfulness in his eyes. “Quite sure. He's the grand champion of stone tortoise staring competitions.”

“Oh really?” His eyes widened in mock surprise. He turned back to the tortoise, taking a step back, pulling his hands from his pockets and bowing to the decoration. “I apologize, and concede my defeat.” He patted the sculpture on the head, and Lauren wondered if his touch was as electric as his eyes.

“Is there anything else you want?” she asked, her words tumbling over themselves to reach him, sounding breathless again. What was with her today? How was this man any different from the hundreds that had been in her store before? Well, other than the way she could see his muscles ripple beneath his blazer when he moved, and the way his voice sent delightful shivers through her, and the way his eyes sparkled when he talked. He turned back to look at her, his hand still resting on the tortoise's head, one dark eyebrow arched above his dancing eyes. “Or are you just looking?” she finished lamely, fighting to keep the embarrassed blush out of her cheeks.

“Oh, I'm definitely looking,” he answered, his half-smile widening to a grin that turned Lauren's knees to jelly again. “But I do need to buy some flowers.” He crossed the small shop in a few lazy steps, belying the strength and purpose he moved toward her with. “I need some flowers for a co-worker. He and his wife had a baby on Wednesday.”

“Oh, that's wonderful,” Lauren whispered, and he smiled. She wondered if she meant the new baby, or how much closer to her he was. “Boy or girl?” she asked, turning to look at the coolers of flowers and dragging her mind kicking and screaming from the breadth of his chest beneath his white linen shirt.

He didn't answer, and she turned her head to look at him. He was staring past her, and she turned, puzzled. Her eyes fell on the television, where the race was just about to start. She had forgotten all about it. The gun sounded, signaling the start. Emma sat back on her heels and looked at the television, surrounded by packaging and price tags. Lauren moved closer to the screen as the horses approached the first jump together. They cleared it in a clump, but Anybody's Guess' long legs brought him over a little ahead of the others. It wasn't a lead he held onto, though. He was lagging into third place before they reached the second jump. The horse gathered his feet under him to take the jump, and a rich dark voice in Lauren's ear asked; “Which one is your horse?”

Startled as much by the warm shivers of pleasure his breath on her skin gave her as by the question itself, she answered automatically. “Number four.”

“He's a long shot,” he answered, and she turned her head to meet those brilliant blue eyes looking down at her with the same delighted intensity they had studied the tortoise.

“Not as long as you might think,” she answered, familial pride overcoming her desire to do nothing but breathe in the spicy scent of the man behind her.

“Really?” he said, the playful half-smile back on his firm mouth. “Care to make a wager? I'll put free flowers against that tortoise that he doesn't place higher than fifth.”

“Done,” she answered, barely hearing him. She was aware of little more than the few scant inches between their mouths.

He smiled, a slow, warm smile that lit some deeper part of his eyes. “Done,” he echoed quietly. He held her gaze for a moment longer, before turning back to watch the rest of the race. She turned back, too, a tiny sigh escaping from her. Anybody's Guess was running solidly in sixth place, and the race was nearly half over. She could see Frankie holding the horse back, running the race for him instead of letting him run it. As he gathered for the next jump, she could see the frustration bunch in his muscles, and she sympathized. As much as Anybody's Guess wanted to cut loose and take the field, she wanted to cut loose and take the man behind her. She bit her lip at the sudden rush of warmth the thought gave her.

Halfway through the straightaway after the next jump, Lauren saw Frankie ease up, and Anybody's Guess, at least, got to do exactly what he wanted that morning. He charged past the fifth place horse, gaining on quickly on fourth place. The two horses gathered for the jump together, and just as in the first jump, Anybody's Guess' long legs brought him out just ahead. This time, though, his jockey didn't reign him in, and he set off like a shot weaving past third place, second place, and taking the next jump just behind first place. By the time he got to the next jump, the announcer was going crazy, the crowd was cheering wildly, and Lauren was grinning to herself. There were still more jumps to go over, but anybody with eyes could see who's race it was.

She turned her head up to look at those compelling blue eyes behind her, and was greeted with an open-mouthed look of amazement. “I never would have thought . . .”

Lauren's grin broadened. “They've been working with one of the best trainers around here.”

“He must be amazing. Last time I saw that pair run, fifth place would have been an accomplishment for them.” The playful sparkle faded from his eyes, replaced by something else. Something warmer, almost hungry, and Lauren was aware again of how close they were. She wouldn't even have to take a full step to press her body against his. To press her lips against his. To see if he tasted as warm and rich as his voice, to see if his kisses were as playful as his eyes.

They both looked up, startled, as Emma's loud cheer propelled her to her feet, sending packing peanuts skittering across the floor. “Sorry,” Emma apologized, gesturing at the television. “He, uh, he won is all. I'll just finish pricing these now.”

He laughed, and Lauren couldn't help but laugh with him. “I'll just go get that tortoise, then,” he said, taking a step back. “While you put together my flowers.”

“Right,” Lauren answered, feeling suddenly colder than she should have as the heat of him moved away. “Was it a boy or a girl?”

He stopped and turned halfway to the turtle, a puzzled look on his face. “You know, I'm really not sure.”

She laughed this time, and he grinned sheepishly. “It's all right, I'll do something in yellow.”

“Yellow works great!” he declared, lugging the tortoise to the register. “Thing's heavy. I think I'll name him Buddy.”

Lauren put the flowers in a little white vase, and tied a ribbon around it. “You know you don't really have to buy that. It's not exactly cheap.”

He shook his head, the sparkle back in his eyes and the half-smile back on his lips. “A bet's a bet. And I am about to be the proud owner of the grand champion of stone tortoise staring competitions,” he responded, handing over his credit card.

She couldn't help but laugh again, as she ran his card. “Well, Mr . . .” she checked his card for his name. Tyler McLellan. “McLellan, I hope you and Buddy there have a fine day.”

“I'm sure we will,” he answered, one of those soft smiles playing warming his eyes again. He tucked his card back in his wallet without dropping his gaze from her. Then with a little sigh, he scooped up the sculpture and the flowers, and headed out the door. Lauren was surprised at how final the tinkling of the bells sounded as the door swung shut behind him.

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