

CHAPTER ONE

Longacres Racetrack, Seattle, 1976

A hush fell.

All the jockeys, with one exception, had stopped pulling on their boots, donning silks and chattering among themselves to stare at her.

Lorraine paused at the threshold. Dressed in the gold and orange silks of Sunrise Stables, she clutched the racing saddle to her chest, breathing in the mentholated odors of deodorant soap, leather conditioner and deep heating rub as she scanned the jock's room.

What made them scrutinize her so intently?

It wasn't because female jockeys were a novelty. Six years had passed since the first woman licensed to ride racehorses was escorted to the paddock surrounded by cops protecting her from an angry mob who thought the racetrack was no place for a woman.

It wasn't because they were unaccustomed to Lorraine walking in on them while they dressed. For three seasons, she'd dressed in the ladies' john before coming into the jock's room to get weighed in.

No, the jockeys had another reason for their barely concealed hostility.

Jorge's were the only eyes in the room that didn't mark her entry. Jorge—his lean body perfect as a Greek God's—sat on a bench, bare from the waist up, pulling on his boots,

studiously ignoring her. Briefly, she admired his athletic body, a body she had known intimately—until two days ago.

Two days ago, face contorted with rage, dark eyes hard as obsidian, Jorge had cornered her in a tack room. “Is it true what they’re saying about you and Harrison?”

She looked away, ran a hand through her hair, wiped imaginary dirt from a saddle and tried to get around him. But he grasped her forearm so tightly, she winced.

“Lorraine?”

“Yes, but—”

“We’re done.” He released her and walked away without a backward glance.

So, it was over. She’d made a deal with the devil as if she’d met him at a crossroads, not at the Finish Line Lounge over drinks and later at Harrison’s apartment with a view of downtown Seattle, Elliot Bay and the Space Needle. Did she have any other options? If she’d been a guy, she could have made it on merit alone. But she wasn’t. She was a five-foot-nothing, curvy, redheaded gal weighing in wet at 102 pounds trying to make it in the macho, male-dominated world of horseracing. She’d worked out how a woman got to ride the top horses. You simply rode the right trainer.

She hadn’t calculated how harshly they would judge her. For the past five years, she’d worked her way up like everyone else. She’d been a groom, a vet’s assistant, an exercise girl, an apprentice jockey and now, a full-fledged jockey with forty-three wins under her belt, a jockey noted for her skill and courage riding rank horses no one else would touch. She’d paid her dues—goddamn it.

But nothing remains hidden on the backside for long. And her relationship with Harrison was the newest hot topic. They weren’t giving her credit for her talent and grit. The assholes

were acting like the *only* thing she'd done was fuck her way to the top. So be it. After trying everything else to gain access to a higher class of racehorses, she'd resorted to the one resource that was hers alone in this male-dominated enclave, a resource that women had been using for centuries to get ahead.

There was yet another reason the tension in the room could have cut cement: this was the big one. This race, the Longacres Mile, was the most prestigious and lucrative race of the meet, and whoever won this race would be top-earning jockey of the year at Longacres racetrack. And she, Jorge and two other jockeys in the room were its most likely recipients. Jorge had held the title for two years, but this year, she wanted it—wanted it more than anything she'd ever wanted in her entire life.

She felt like she'd been kicked out of the clubhouse. Why couldn't things be different? Why had the price she'd paid to ride winners been so dear? Lorraine considered extending her hand to Jorge, saying something—anything—to get him to look at her. Instead, knowing full well he would reject any peace offering, she walked over to the scale. She had made him lose face, the worst thing you could do to a proud Hispanic male. He had every right to hate her. No, now was not a good time, not with everyone watching. Maybe sometime down the road, she could figure out a way to make it up to him.

“Good luck, Lorraine,” the weight clerk said to her as she stepped onto the scale. “Ignore them. They're just being jerks.”

“Thanks, Pete,” she said. “It's nice to know not everyone thinks I'm a ruthless hussy.”

“Okay. You're weighed out. Show them what you can do.”

For the first time in her three years as a jockey, Lorraine walked alone through the tunnel to the paddock. She already missed the camaraderie and friendly banter in the jock's room. And

she would miss hanging out with them after races at the Turf Club Café or the Long Shot Bar, where they drank low-calorie beer and ate burgers most of them would flip before going home.

Regrets were for losers. Jorge had given her a start, but in the end, he'd held her back. She would've always been living in his shadow, riding mediocre horses and winning modest purses. Harrison's barn was full of the best horses at Longacres. He had talent, she'd give him that, a knack for recognizing the potential in a horse and bringing it out. And he made good use of the Irish gift of blarney. Harrison could charm the pants off a prospective client—as he'd charmed the pants off her, at least in the beginning.

She walked into the paddock, and there he was, Satan himself with his devilish grin and insinuating eyes, waiting to give her a leg up on a big gray gelding named HiQue.

In front of all the other jockeys, owners, grooms and trainers in the paddock, Harrison boosted Lorraine onto HiQue with maximum contact on her ass. He ran the tips of his fingers up and down her leg as he told her how he wanted the race run. She wanted to slap his hand away. How dare he mark her as his territory in front of all the other jockeys! How dare he tell her how to ride a horse he knew nothing about.

Harrison might dazzle owners with his bullshit but not her, not anymore. The real Harrison was like a used car salesman, all flash and no substance. As he continued to fondle her leg, a slow flush crept up her neck like a bad case of hives. When one of the jockeys she used to drink with gave her a conspiratorial grin and winked, her cheeks turned bright red. Damn! She couldn't allow herself to get rattled before a race. It didn't help that her fair complexion announced her moods as obviously as a chameleon changing colors. She shrugged and took a deep breath. *Relax! Focus! Think only of the race ahead.*

“Remember, he's a stalker,” Harrison said.

“Yes, yes. I’m aware of that.”

“So, keep him back until the final stretch, honey.”

Lorraine glared at him. Harrison knew she disliked being called honey. She tried to keep the edge out of her voice when she said, “I know this horse. Let me ride him the way I want to.”

“Sure, sure, honey. Just bring home the money.” He gave her leg a final squeeze.

Lorraine did know all about the horse she was riding. She knew what Harrison hadn’t bothered to find out because he paid scant attention to modest money earners. The big gray gelding didn’t expend an ounce more energy than necessary during a race and seemed to intuit exactly when he needed to step on the gas to perhaps not win, but at least take home some cash. He was well-built and well-bred but homely, with a crooked blaze on a Roman nose that made his face look off-kilter. But he had kind eyes and was utterly predictable, a horse you could always trust to run the race the way he wanted to, no matter what his rider had to say about it. Lorraine hoped that HiQue would agree to floor it in that crucial moment on the homestretch when she asked him to go all out.

Lorraine aboard HiQue and all the other horses and jockeys filed out of the paddock into the bright sunshine of a lovely fall day. Canada geese and one lone swan floated on the infield pond, the Lombardy poplars lining the track were just beginning to turn gold and Mt. Rainier to the south had shed her cover of clouds, flaunting her gorgeous contours like a cancan dancer flaunts her petticoats. The crowd, full of beer and overpriced junk food, tooted cheap horns bought at the concession stands and shouted out at the jockeys as they passed. Fans packed the stands for this last big race of the meet.

In the post parade, HiQue cantered along calmly with no need of an escort, totally unfazed by the noise of the crowd or the antics of a few bad actors getting pushy with the pony

riders. Lorraine wished he had a little more fire. Still, she appreciated a horse that made her job so easy. No one else had made it easy for her, not growing up, not at the track. She had to be tough, self-reliant and fearless. She'd taken enormous risks, pushing herself beyond pain and exhaustion. But the biggest gamble of all, dumping Jorge for Harrison, might prove to be the worst mistake of her life. She quickly dismissed that thought. Lorraine could not dwell on the sacrifices she'd made to get ahead. If she got a few lucky breaks, if she played things just right, if HiQue gave his all and she could just win this one race and clinch the title—maybe then, she would get the recognition she deserved. Maybe then, she would truly be one of them. It would be worth the price she'd paid.

Lorraine entered the gate.

It was a big field, fourteen in all, and she was in the unenviable twelfth post position. She crouched low over the thoroughbred's neck, letting a deep calm settle over her as she waited for the opening bell. From five stalls over, she could sense Jorge's eyes upon her. Despite her resolution to focus only on her horse, she glanced his way. He met her gaze and nodded, one slight tilt of his chin. Then, did she imagine it? The ghost of a smile. She turned away and slipped her goggles down over her eyes.

The bell clanged, the gates flew open and they were off.

All her troubles were left behind when the horses broke from the gate. Like a blast of cocaine, adrenaline lit her up as her mount accelerated with each stride, a jet taking off. This high was why she rode and nothing else mattered. Having a powerful animal gathered between her legs was better than the best sex, more intoxicating than any drug and as vital to her well-being as the blood that pulsed through her veins. Her body yielded to the exquisite sensation of being one with the animal beneath her, and her mind mapped out the race like a chess game.

Lorraine scanned the field ahead. Jorge on a front-running bay and five others held the lead at the rail. She would stalk the pace, keeping HiQue under wraps to conserve his energy until the final stretch. Not that she could do anything differently; that was HiQue's preferred running style, and it was futile to mess with it. He was running evenly without fighting her, his breath a steady *humph, humph, humph* with each long stride, and all she had to do was sit chilly.

Mud flew up and splattered her face and goggles, the going heavy. This Seattle track was seldom fast, a fact of life in the damp and rainy Northwest. She wiped the muck from her goggles and then edged closer to the rail, hoping this was the right move, and she wouldn't get boxed in at the home stretch. If she tried to force her way through, interfering with another rider, her jockey's license could be revoked. So much depended on luck, luck and *cojones*, as Jorge used to tell her.

At the backstretch, she trailed six horses with the rest of the pack straggling behind. After the home turn, she asked the big gelding to pour it on. HiQue stretched out, and she could feel the powerful push of his rear quarters and the forward thrust of his front legs as he fully extended. *Thank you, Jesus*, he put up no argument. He gobbled up the distance between her and the tightly bunched pack blocking the path to the finish. Mud flew in her face blinding her, and she exchanged her dirty goggles for her second set. Closer and closer, they came to the churning hindquarters of the lead runners battling for first place. She was upon them—and still, there was no way through. Too late to go around, she must force an opening. Putting the bat to the big gray's butt, she shouted, "Give me room!"

Jorge, to the inside of the lead horse and third over from the rail, glanced back in alarm. He edged his horse over, giving her just enough room to squeak through. She hurtled forward.

Victory was hers!

For one tantalizing moment, Lorraine thought she had the race in the bag. But then something went terribly wrong.

Jorge's horse stumbled and went down. HiQue pulled up short, gathered himself and soared upward in his attempt to clear the fallen bay. His front feet must have caught on the downed horse because he plummeted—down, down, down into the muck of the track. Lorraine up and over the big gray's neck, arms out flung. Horses collided, silks flashed by in a kaleidoscope of colors and the crowd screamed.

Tuck and roll.

Darkness descended.