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Chapter 1

Bear Country

Becky Sandersen looked down at the Mustang Mountain Ranch and let out a howl.

'NO-O-O-O!'

She would never call this place home.

Her cry echoed back from the high walls of the Rocky Mountains all around her. Mustang Mountain rose to the right, the Bighorn Range towered like jagged teeth at her back. Below her

the long low ranch buildings followed the curve of the river.

A big truck and horse trailer had just dropped all of the Sandersen family belongings at the ranch and driven away in a cloud of dust. Becky had fled up to the mountain meadow to be alone, even though she knew her parents needed her to help unpack.

She buried her face on her knees and felt the rough cloth of her jeans against her cheek. How could they push her around like a bale of hay? How could they dump her on this wilderness ranch where there was no town, no kids her own age, no paved roads, no trucks or cars? Becky wasn't a girl that cried often. She almost never cried when she was hurt, or sad. The tears that blurred her eyes now were tears of anger and frustration.

Becky lifted her head, swiped the tears out of her eyes and took a long breath. The wind blew strands of her honey-blonde hair across her



damp cheeks. She tugged it back impatiently with one hand, dug into the pocket of her jeans with the other and found a ragged tissue.

Enough crying, she told herself, blowing and shaking her head. You're out of Kleenex, and there's sure nothing else in this miserable meadow to blow your nose on! She would have to start, right here, right now, to think of a way to get back to a normal life. Somewhere far away from Mustang Mountain.

The wind sighed in the pine trees behind her, as if it was in sympathy. The same breeze rustled the spiky mountain meadow grass with a whisper of warning. Danger, close by. Becky suddenly realised she shouldn't be up here on her own, sitting quietly like this.

There were grizzlies in these mountains. The bears were coming out of hibernation, and there had already been three reported bear attacks on people this spring. Becky scanned the surrounding mountain meadow, looking for any

sign of movement. The grassy slope where she sat stretched up to the pines at higher elevations. Above the pines soared the peaks; so high the snow still glistened in the June sun.

A flicker of movement made Becky drop her eyes back from those peaks to the edge of the meadow. A bear? She sucked in her breath, watching. A reddish-brown animal shambled out of the shadows of the trees. It raised its huge head to sniff the wind.

It was a grizz, and a big one. Becky lowered herself carefully on to her stomach, hoping the bear would not catch her scent, would not see her. Her dad had showed her bear droppings near the ranch, and places where grizzlies had torn apart dead trees, searching for grubs. They were ravenous after their winter sleep.

Becky lay still, watching the bear. The stiff grass prickled her nose but she did not dare to scratch. Any sign of movement might alert the grizzly that she was there. It scraped at a rock,



then ambled a short way down the meadow towards her. Her heart thumped like a drum. She closed her mouth tight, to keep the loud beating sound inside, afraid the bear would hear. It stopped, sniffed the wind once more and lumbered back into the trees.

Becky counted to two hundred, slowly. Nothing moved.

She stood up on shaky legs. Close one! She could not come back here alone, on foot. Grizzly bears were the kings of the mountains, the top of the food chain. They were protected in this wildlife refuge, and according to her dad it was people's responsibility to stay out of their way. She would have to stay close to the ranch buildings.

As she ran down the meadow towards the ranch Becky felt the mountains squeezing in around her. She was even more trapped here than she had imagined.

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The slight figure of her mother came striding to meet her at the ranch gate. Mom would no doubt have something to say about walking up alone into bear country.

But her mother's mind was not on bears. She peered at Becky from under the brim of her wide hat. 'We just got a call on the radio phone from your Aunt Marion in New York. She wants to send your cousin Alison here to stay with us for the whole summer. And Alison insists on bringing a friend, a girl named Meg!'

Becky stared at her. She'd only met Alison once in her life, four years ago. Two strange girls, her cousin and a friend, coming here? She didn't know what to say. She shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other.

Her mother shook her head, echoing her feelings. 'I just don't know what to say . . .' She gestured around the ranch buildings and then glanced impatiently at Becky. 'There's so much to do, without looking after two extra kids.'



Becky bristled. 'We're not kids. Alison and I are almost thirteen. We don't need looking after.'

'I wouldn't be too sure about that! After all, these are city girls. Are you sure you want them tagging along with you all summer long?'

'City girls will be better than nobody,' Becky shot back. 'You've made sure I have no other friends!' These days it was so easy to get into fights with her mom. She was always saying things that made Becky mad, treating her like a baby!

Her mother was still shaking her head. 'This is just like my sister Marion,' she said. 'She makes these sudden plans without thinking about anybody but herself. What am I going to do with three girls?'

'You talk about us as if we were some of your horses!' Becky exploded. 'Don't worry, we'll stay out of your way.' If only she had known how true that would turn out to be!

'All right, I'll let Marion know they can come.'

Her mother turned away. 'And speaking of horses, go and help settle Tamara in her new stall. She's a bit skitterish after being trailered.' Tamara was her favourite mare.

'Isn't there something else I could do? You know how I hate . . .'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Laurie Sandersen said crisply. 'You've got to stop acting nervous around Tam.'

'I'm not nervous. I just don't like her.' Becky felt a familiar sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach as she followed her mother to the barns. A skitterish Tamara could kick you right through a barn wall.

It would be good to have some other girls to talk to this summer, Becky thought. Her parents never listened. They were thrilled about this move to a wilderness ranch. It was their dream come true – to breed and train sturdy mountain horses.

But it's not my dream, Becky thought, and I'll die if I have to stay here.



Chapter 2

The Horse in the Park

Meg O'Donnell stared up at the electronic departure board at La Guardia airport and blinked in disbelief.

'They've cancelled our flight. This can't be happening.'

Beside her, Meg's friend Alison Chant gave a tiny, bored shrug. 'Sure it can. The pilots are on strike, remember?'

Meg felt like screaming. 'But they can't have a pilots' strike now,' she groaned. 'Not when we're finally on our way to the ranch!'

'Don't worry about it,' Alison said. 'My mother will find a way to get us to Mustang Mountain if she has to fly us there in a private jet.'

Meg stared at her. 'Don't you want to go to your cousin's ranch?'

Alison shrugged again. 'I guess so.'

How could Alison stay so calm? Meg wondered. Here they were, ready to board a plane to visit Alison's cousin on a real horse ranch in the western Rockies, and all she could do was shrug! But then Alison was always calm, poised, perfectly groomed. Always the best-looking girl in the group. Meg often wondered why Alison had chosen her for a friend. It wasn't that she was actually repulsive, just that she could never get it all together. If her long brown hair looked right, her clothes looked wrong. If she managed, by some miracle, to dress like a



normal person, her hair stuck out like a porcupine. Most of the time, she didn't really care, but when she was beside Alison she felt like a Shetland pony beside a thoroughbred. Short, and brown, and shaggy.

Meg suddenly remembered the day, eight months ago, when she first met Alison. As usual she, Meg, had been wearing baggy sweats. How was she supposed to know her whole life was about to change?

She was walking her golden retriever, Sam, in an upscale neighbourhood where they'd never been before. At the end of a quiet street she saw trees and grass.

'Sam – that looks like a park. Maybe you can get off the leash for a run!' Sam pulled towards the park but there seemed to be no way in. The wire mesh fence was high and strong. Too bad, Meg thought. The grass looked so green and inviting beyond the fringe of trees.

As they got closer Meg saw a special gate for

walkers, shaped like a paper clip. She had just entered the gate, with Sammy still panting and pulling, when something large and alive went by the fence just an arm's length away.

A horse! Meg caught her breath in that dazzling moment. The smell of her, the sun glancing off her shiny hide. The size and the weight of her! The sound of her hoofs on the soft path and the sound of her breath all around Meg. She was close enough to almost touch her.

Meg plunged forward, catching a glimpse of a large bay horse, trotting on a sawdust path, with a girl in neat boots and a white shirt riding expertly, high above her.

Sam was beside himself with excitement. He wriggled himself into a frenzy and caught his leash in the bars of the gate trying to dash after the horse. By the time they burst through the fringe of trees, the horse had disappeared down the path.

Meg was as excited as Sam. Ever since she



could remember she had loved horses. This was the closest she had ever actually been to a real, live horse, and the glorious moment had taken her breath away.

Sam, nose to the sawdust, trotted ahead. The trail led steeply down, through a tunnel of overarching trees hung with wild grapes. When the path bent sharply to the left Meg found herself in a lower level of the park. The scene in front of her was so perfect that she caught her breath.

There, in the middle of green lawns was a big blue barn and a riding ring surrounded by a white fence. The tall bay horse stood near the fence on the far side.

Meg looked for the girl in the white shirt she'd glimpsed through the fence but she was nowhere to be seen.

A sign on the fence said PLEASE KEEP BACK. Meg wound Sam's leash tightly around her fist and climbed up on to a low set of tiered benches with her dog held firmly by her side.