

Unleashed

a novel



Skye Blaine

Unleashed is a work of fiction.

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ISBN: 978-0-9779483-6-9

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Published by:

Berkana Publications

Sebastopol CA 95472 USA

Cover image: Balnagown Maybe, photographed by Thomas Christ

Book layout: Berkana Publications

Printed in the United States of America



Chapter One

Sisters, Oregon—July 2005

Stiff after weeding, Moss straightened up and mopped his face with a faded, red bandanna. Two hens dead, probably that fox again. Their torn remains took him back to war—the stench of blood, the abrupt void of premature death. The past remained an open wound; dwelling there was destructive. Worrying about the future sucked the present away—at least that’s what his mindfulness teacher said. The guy’s recommendation kept him from sinking into the quicksand of despair.

After feeding the girls for months and collecting their warm, colorful eggs, he’d grown fond of them. It wasn’t like having a dog, not like Sherlock—damn, he missed him—but breathing creatures, nonetheless. They helped. He had to get out of bed to take care of them. In the morning, he’d drive to Sisters and get more chicks at the feed store. It was late in the season; they might have to special order them.

He walked over to the porch, tilted his head, and listened—too early for evening frogs, but he recognized a couple bird calls—a Pacific-slope flycatcher, he was sure. His tattered *Sibley Guide to Birds* lay on the step, and he instinctively reached for it. He stuffed loose pages back in, including his lifetime birding list. He held the broken binding. *Time to replace this.*

Tonight, he’d sit on the front porch and soak up the sunset. Last evening, beered-up yahoos tracking cougar stomped through his property. He took care to respect boundaries and land ownership, and expected fellow hunters to do the same. In his experience, men who pursued cat

were a different sort altogether from deer and elk bowhunters like himself. Cat hunters sought only to overpower the creature, kill for the thrill of killing. Resenting their attitude, he'd gone on a little expedition, shot off some cherry bombs, hollered, and scared the shit out of them. They wouldn't be back, and maybe they'd pass the word on to their cronies.

Moss's focus shifted to the clearing. The bees busied themselves collecting honeysuckle pollen. The plant's sweetness reached all the way to the porch. In search of carcasses, the peace eagles—he couldn't call them vultures, such an ugly name for birds that mostly cleaned up—floated on higher drafts. A black-tailed doe and her fawn foraged a hundred yards away.

He liked the stillness. No one around to blather or bother him. Not wanting to startle the grazing deer, he moved slowly, closed up his chickens for the night, and limped inside to pour a full glass of merlot. No beer or hard stuff. Not anymore. The smells swamped him with war flashbacks. Even though his hard-drinking service buddies chided him for kicking back a woman's drink, he wasn't about to tell them why.

None of their damn business.



Chapter Two

Zephyr cowers beneath the clothes and tucks her paws under. She wraps her tail around her body and up over her nose. She feels safe inside the house—even safer in the closet—but fear still tracks her down. The monster garbage truck rumbles outside. Zephyr remembers clouds belching out the back end—it stings her eyes and eats at her throat. Like the truck that carted her to the shelter, it growls. Its mouth gulps giant-sized buckets—big enough to swallow her.



As the garbage truck lumbered near their house, Rowan brought a picture to mind of the two of them, the boulder in the field, warm from the blazing sun. Lying nearby, she and the pup laze in the shade. Once the images were firmly set in her mind, Rowan concentrated, then hurled them toward Zephyr like whizzing arrows.



Under the clothes, Zephyr receives Rowan’s mind-pictures one after another. It’s like watching a rabbit jump from spot to spot to spot. Boulder. Field. Sunshine. Companionship. She raises her head, listens as the monster moves farther away, and cautiously crawls out to find Rowan. Her girl comforts her and says, “Good dog! Biscuit?” They walk to the utility room where the box of goodies is stored, and Rowan gives her one. Zephyr swipes her hand with her tongue.



Truck gone, Zephyr and Row bounded through the kitchen almost knocking down Rowan’s mother, who grabbed the counter edge for balance. As Rowan charged past, she snatched a warm brownie from the stack on the plate and giggled, “Yum! My favorite! Thanks, Mom.”

“Outdoors, both of you,” Carolina ordered, her frown as deep as her tone was mild. “Our home is not a racetrack.”

They blasted outside, leaping over Stormy—Mom’s old shepherd snoring on the front porch—flew down the two wooden steps, out the path, and into the field. Zephyr bolted ahead, then made a wide, looping circle back. Zephyr panted and Rowan huffed as they stood together in the recently mowed weeds. Rowan knotted her fingers in her dog’s fur. It was too hot to hang out near their favorite boulder. In her mind, she created the new picture she wanted to send—lying in the shade, soaking in the love they felt for each other.

Zephyr abruptly sat and stared at her. Rowan sent the picture and feeling again. This time, her dog took off across the field, and Rowan burst out laughing before following her at a trot. Zephyr received the vision, for sure, because she plopped down in the cool of the old oak and waited for her. Only one ray of sun illuminated her.

Rowan knew she was the alpha-dog in their pack of two—it needed to be that way—but she always thought of Zephyr as her equal. She slowed to a walk, taking in her beautiful four-legged friend who was tall enough to snare goodies from the kitchen counter if Mom wasn’t careful. Her wiry, gray-mixture coat glowed reddish in the sunlight, and she sported eyebrow furnishings Rowan had to trim to see Zephyr’s dark almond eyes. The dog’s one-and-a-half inch goatee could carry a lot of water right after she drank—she’d sopped Rowan often. Zeph had been so small when they found her at the Humane Society that Mom hadn’t visualized what “giant breed” *really* meant. Thank heavens, her mother had grown to love the pup, too.

Rowan lay down and put her head on Zephyr’s chest, listening to her heartbeat. Her favorite place.



Zephyr awakens and shifts to lick her paw, her tongue curving between her toes as she searches for a sticker lodged in her fur. If she can’t find it, Rowan can. Her girl knows how to ease a burr out.

She understands only a few of Rowan's words, like "dinner," "wait," "walkies," and "biscuit," but when her girl makes mind-pictures, she sees them clearly. They play games, and Zephyr loves this most. Rowan makes her "stay," hides in the woods, sends an image, and Zephyr must find her. But even stronger than pictures, she can feel her girl. It's like water ebbing and flowing between them.



A half hour later, as Carolina unloaded the dish drainer, Rowan and Zephyr returned to the house and settled on the couch—her daughter with a book, Zeph with her head in Rowan's lap. Carolina heard a fly zip past as it zoomed from the kitchen into the living room. Zephyr startled, jumped down, skittered around the corner, and slunk toward the master-bedroom closet, her safe hidey-hole. Again.

The pup, for all of her restorative qualities, shied from visitors and, in addition to the garbage truck and house flies, was so terrified of the vacuum cleaner, they had to put her outside until the loud noise was over. Carolina prayed Zephyr would develop some backbone, but neither puppy socialization nor obedience classes had bolstered the dog's confidence. Rowan insisted Zephyr communicated her fears, but the truth was—communication or not—they were living with a huge wimp of a dog. Carolina sighed, put the last cup away, and headed downstairs for a karate workout.

Tired and sweaty, Carolina walked back upstairs to a quiet home. Zephyr slept upside down on the couch, legs splayed in the air, Rowan beside her. Her daughter was rereading *The Bridge to Terabithia* for the umpteenth time, one hand fiddling with the pup's oversized toenails. Hand and glove, those two. Nearby, Carolina saw Rowan's word clipboard and dictionary.

Dark wouldn't fall until after nine, but outside the light was already changing. The late afternoon with its golden slant of sun was her favorite time. She hung up her *ghi* and black belt and took a quick shower.

Afterward, with Stormy snoozing at her feet, Carolina flipped open the road atlas on the kitchen table. It was time to figure out how to manage a car vacation with this unique family of four. She stretched to reach the radio on the counter and turned off the six o'clock news so she could

concentrate. Using her toes, she played imaginary tunes on Stormy's back.

She couldn't separate dog and daughter any more than Stormy could be pried away from her side. Her shepherd had aged so much in the past six months that Carolina refused to kennel him. And no museums or city stuff—Zephyr needed long walks every day. Carolina turned to their own state of Oregon. She ran her finger eastward from their home in Eugene. They could try Malheur Wildlife Refuge; she'd long wanted to go there. Her travel book said the wetlands drew a multitude of bird species and lots of waterfowl. A birder's paradise. She shook her head. Fat chance—Zeph would scare away every winged creature in the place. Other birders would complain.

Earlier, Rowan suggested going to the mountains. Camping *was* the best idea this year. They had the needed equipment, so the vacation would be inexpensive—a huge plus. They could head for higher altitudes, maybe Little Three Creeks Lake? She'd been there once, fifteen years ago. Climbing would serve them, muscle them up. Stormy could stay at camp if hiking stressed him too much. She'd find a campsite in the deep shade so he could hang out in the van.

If they were lucky, they might glimpse wild horses, which would thrill Rowan. Well, to be honest, she'd be thrilled too. How would Zephyr respond to the sight of running mustangs, perhaps a whole herd? Lunge or cower? No doubt she'd be a handful. But they couldn't let her off leash, not in the wild. If their dog saw game like elk or deer, or horses for heaven's sake—if either breed description told the truth—she would roar off with her nine-foot strides barely touching ground and land in California before she stopped for breath.

Carolina glanced out the window. This fall, the front field would come alive again. The browner summer landscape held a beauty of its own, but nature's full range of greens bolstered her spirits. The pasture was rimmed by fir and oak woods, Rowan and Zephyr's favorite place to hang out.

Carolina jotted a to-do list: library, bookstore, Bureau of Land Management for maps. She'd put off planning too long; they were leaving in a few days. It was clear why she'd procrastinated. This camping vacation without an adult companion didn't appeal. After her husband died—but before they'd adopted Zephyr—she boarded Stormy and they headed

for Seattle, Victoria, or Portland—a different city each year. There was so much to do with a child in metropolises.

In moments like these, Carolina grieved for Rafe. She'd slammed the secret chamber of her heart shut after the blunt-force trauma of losing him. Rowan missed him too. If only he could see his daughter now, four years older. Carolina rested her head in her hands. How could a strong, young man, only thirty-two, just up and die of flu? Sighing, she stared out the window but saw only her own despair.

She pressed the palms of her hands on the table. Okay, five-minute pity-party limit reached. Today was today—each new moment unknown and fresh, blossoming with possibility. Yesterday was gone like crumbled, desiccated leaves carried on the wind.

Time to start dinner. Afterward, she faced a long evening of sewing. Clients waited impatiently for equipment to be repaired—tent tears, broken sleeping bag and jacket zippers—and those packages, plus invoices, had to get shipped if there were to be any vacation.

She smacked the atlas closed, rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands, held them there for a moment, then rose to rinse the sprouts greening on the window sill. She opened the fridge. “Sheesh, stinky. Bad dairy,” she muttered. Rafe had always cleaned the refrigerator, and whenever it needed wiping down, she ached for him, for how he had willingly and lovingly tended their home. It was one way he'd shown his devotion to their family. Doing it herself was an emotional chore.

Shifting containers around, she found tomatoes, avocado, green onions, the last batch of sprouts, cheese—and the soured milk, which she poured down the sink before returning to study the tortillas. Good, not moldy. She didn't have time to go to the store. Tonight would be a this-and-that burrito night.

Carolina smiled at her three charges. Stormy had climbed on the couch with the others, white muzzle plunked between her daughter's bare feet. Rowan slept with her head on Zephyr's hip, the paperback upside down and open on the pup's chest, which rose and fell with every breath. Ten legs among them.