

MAN'S BEST FRIEND

P.A. BROWN



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CHAPTER ONE

It was purely accidental that I even met him. Or fate. I think I prefer to think of it as fate. What would my life have been like if Shadow hadn't stepped on that piece of glass that day?

I'd been looking for a new veterinarian for a while. The dogs might have been happy with the old fart I took them to now, but I wasn't. I'd overheard more than one homophobic comment from Fritzzy in the past, and it seemed to me his attitude was getting worse, not better, with time. I'm a pretty live and let live kind of guy, but intolerance like that is hard to stomach. I don't think he knew I was gay, which is probably how I overheard him; he wasn't being cautious about what he said. Already a couple of my more overt gay friends had quit going, saying they didn't feel comfortable with his hostility.

I'd taken the two dogs out for their usual run in the dog park, but it wasn't until I got home that I noticed Shadow was limping. A quick examination of his right front foot revealed a razor thin piece of glass embedded in his pad. I extracted it, but got to worrying about how long it had been since he'd had a tetanus shot. Too damned long.

A glance at the kitchen clock told me Fritzzy, the old fart, was closed for the day. I knew from past experience that a call to his emergency service would yield a very grumpy visit and a whopping bill not justified by what he actually did. That was when I thought of the new guy who'd opened an office in the area only a few months ago. I called and the girl who answered said yes, they were open, so I booked an emergency appointment, crated Sleuth, bundled Shadow into the van, and headed over.

The waiting room was empty except for a harried-looking, middle-aged woman with an equally harried-looking Yorkie. Both of them eyed Shadow apprehensively, but I'm used to that reaction. Dobermans have an unearned reputation for meanness, but Shadow was a complete gentleman who never

even glanced at the other dog as I checked in and confirmed our appointment. After a few minutes the Yorkie was called in to the examination room, leaving a relieved Shadow and me alone in the waiting room. The receptionist, a teenage girl with frizzy blonde hair, kept glancing at the two of us. Finally our eyes met.

“Nice dog,” she said. “Purebred?”

“Yeah,” I said, touching Shadow’s head possessively. “Both of my dogs are.”

“You have two? Neat. I love Dobes.”

Smart girl. But I could tell she was flirting with me, and while I’m used to it—I’ve been told I don’t look gay—I still never quite know how to handle it. So I ignored her signals and picked up a *Kennel Club* newsletter to browse. She went back to her keyboard and phone.

Several minutes later the woman with the Yorkie came out, accompanied by a man I assumed was the new vet, and I forgot all about flirting receptionists and yappy terriers.

He was about my height, just over six feet, with well-defined shoulders and chest on a slender body. He had dark, tousled hair, sleepy-looking eyes that just screamed sex appeal, and a mouth I had a sudden urge to kiss. Even in a plain white lab coat he oozed sexuality, and I knew then and there my dogs were never going to be seen by another vet.

I stood up when his gaze fell on me. He smiled. “Shadow?” Shadow scrambled to his feet when I tugged on his lead, and the two of us followed the gorgeous vet into the examination room. He closed the door behind us.

“This your first visit?” the hunk said.

I nodded and extended my hand. “Todd Richards,” I said. “And this is Shadow—Silhouettes First Edition, to be exact.” His fingers closed over mine, and I wanted nothing more than to pull his pliant body against mine and taste that delicious-looking mouth. Instead I shook his hand and smiled inanely.

“Beautiful animal. I’m partial to Dobes myself.”

Smart man. God, gorgeous and smart. I was smitten.

"I'm Dr. Keith Anderson. Let's get Shadow up on the table and see what's going on."

Together we lifted the hundred pound dog onto the examination table, and the vet slid his stethoscope over Shadow's rib cage.

"Good, strong heartbeat. How old is he?"

"Three last month."

"He's not an American breed, is he?"

I was impressed. Most people don't pick up on that—European Dobermans are bred heavier than their American counterparts. To my eye, American Dobes look frail. Lightweight. I'd always favored the Dutch Dobes myself. They look more butch; just like I like my men. I grinned. If he wondered what I found so funny, he didn't ask.

He checked out Shadow's impressive teeth and looked in his ears. I confess I like the cropped look, so both my dogs have their ears cut. Only Shadow has one lazy ear, so he has a lopsided look. I think it's endearing. Keith seemed to agree.

"Aren't you just a sweet thing." He rubbed Shadow's head. "Bet you're spoiled rotten."

"Oh, yeah. Major suck. They both are."

"Most Dobes are. You show them?" Then he answered his own question as he examined the dog's back end. "Oops, guess not. Not fixed like that."

"Nah, dogs shows aren't my thing." Suddenly I was wishing I were a dog so that Keith, the way hunky vet, could examine me all over. I was sporting a boner and was thankful the examining table was between me and Keith. "Too political. We do special shows. Superdogs type thing; obedience and agility. They've picked up a few ribbons. I'm booked into the county fair next month. Maybe you could come see us."

There must have been a catch or something in my voice because Keith gave me a weird look. Then a smile burst out of his gorgeous face.

“They must be something to see, watching all that muscle in motion.”

“You’ll have to come out and see for yourself.”

Another weird look. “I’d like that.” He picked up Shadow’s injured paw and studied the cut. “Ah, here’s the culprit. Glass?” I nodded. Keith cleaned it out and gave Shadow his shot. “That ought to take care of him. He’s lucky. It’s not deep enough to need stitches.” Keith’s hand rested on Shadow’s head, right near my hand. “I’ve seen you around.”

“Oh?” I figured he meant on the street, maybe walking the dogs, so he surprised the hell of me when he said, “Yeah, at the Green Lantern Bar and Grill.”

My mouth must have hung open because he was grinning crazily. The Green Lantern was a gay restaurant right in the heart of boy’s town. I went there at least once a week for beer and munchies. No way had I ever seen him there. I said as much.

“It was my first time. I was new in town and feeling a little down, so I went out for a nice meal. Someone had told me about the place. I’m out, but I wanted to be careful about being seen by my clients, so I stayed inside. I’d rather be known for my skill with animals than my sexual orientation. You were on the patio with a bunch of other people, as I recall.”

We put Shadow back on the floor and stood there looking at each other. I could feel the heat radiating off his body and suddenly knew under that white smock that he had a hard-on as heavy as mine. But I’m not a forward kind of guy. I never did well in the club scene, and I was a disaster on the circuit, which is probably why I’m alone more often than not, so as usual I did nothing except look at him longingly.

Fortunately Dr. Keith wasn’t as reticent. “Would you like to join me there for a drink sometime?”

Would I? I smiled dopily. “When?”

He put his hand over mine where it lay on the examining table. “How about when I get off here? I’m done in...” he

glanced at his watch, "twenty minutes. Unless there's an emergency walk-in, you're the last appointment of the day."

I stared into his eyes, which were a beautiful mountain-lake blue. I could drown in eyes like that. "Do you have to go home to get changed?"

"I live here," he said, jerking his head upward. He came around to stand in front of me, wiping his hands on a sterile towel. "Above this place. It was a package deal. I couldn't resist when I was looking for a business location. Live close to work; no commuting costs. Considering what I'm driving, that's a good thing. You can come and have a drink while I get dressed. As long as you like beer... I'm afraid it's all I have."

Is that all? I wondered wistfully. He could have offered me tap water. I couldn't seem to lose the dopey smile.

Maybe that's why Keith did what he did next. He leaned over and planted those perfect lips on mine.

I haven't been with a ton of guys, and I'm not the most experienced person in the world, but that kiss just about blew me away. It wasn't over-the-top raw lust; he wasn't trying to fuck me right there, but he was definitely sending a message. Call me Western Union.

I opened my mouth, and groaned when his tongue accepted the invitation and slipped inside. His hand went behind my head and pressed me against him. I grabbed his hip for support. My body swayed and leaned into him. I groaned again when I felt his erection press against my belly. I must have been wrong about his height. He had to be an inch or two taller than me. His dick felt huge.

"God, you're cute," he murmured when he broke the kiss. He nibbled on my mouth, then leaned away. "Sorry."

"For what?" I stared at his mouth, wishing he'd kiss me again. "For kissing me?"

"For being so forward. I don't normally go around kissing my clients."

I stroked his face, feeling the start of a five o'clock shadow. I was glad to feel him lean into my hand. His skin felt hot and

invited exploration. I stroked his cheek, and then ran my fingers around his outer ear, feeling his pulse leap under my sensitive fingers. “Good,” I said a little breathlessly. “As long as it’s just me.”

“Oh, you’re definitely the first.” Then he pulled away completely, straightened his lab coat, and smoothed his ruffled hair back into place. The gesture only made me want to run my fingers through it and mess it up again. “And if I don’t get out there and help Mandy close up we’ll never get to dinner.” He gave me that killer smile again. “Or anything else.”

I wanted to ask him about the anything else, but he was gone.

I stared down at Shadow, who was watching me with his normal Dobe intensity. “I think I’m falling big time, guy. What am I going to do?”

Shadow’s stub of a tail wagged in what I took for approval. He liked this new vet, too.

“I hope you’re right.”

CHAPTER TWO

Keith's apartment was a small, cramped place that seemed to be almost an afterthought on top of the commercial space below it. It was attached to his clinic by a narrow, windowless passage up a flight of steep stairs that creaked and didn't sound all that stable. Shadow didn't like the stairs any more than I did, but he gamely followed me. We found ourselves in a dingy living room with a single warped multi-paned window overlooking the alley behind the clinic. The room was filled with cast-off furniture and smelled faintly of old cooking and carpet cleaner. It was painfully neat, and the only clutter was a pile of veterinary periodicals on a scarred wooden table, beside an overstuffed easy chair. The doctor's chair? I took a seat on a sagging couch facing the chair. Told Shadow to down, and he lay at my feet.

Keith discarded his lab coat the minute he was through the door, and disappeared through another door into a back room. He came out wearing faded jeans and a plain black T-shirt. They both clung to his slender body, showing off a surprising amount of muscle and a nice fat basket. He headed for the kitchen. "Want that beer?" he called over his shoulder.

"Sure."

He came out carrying two Stroh's. Handed one to me and took a deep drink of his own. He waved the beer bottle around to indicate the room.

"Sorry for the place," he said, "but it's cheap and with the clinic downstairs, it lets me concentrate on establishing my business." His self-deprecating grin was cute. "Later there will be time for fancy digs, once I've made my first fortune."

"I'm still after that myself," I said. "Know any secrets?"

He looked around at his shabby apartment. "Marry rich?"

We both laughed, then silence fell over us. I realized he was as shy as I was. That felt nice. Someone who wasn't into

groping and fucking at first sight. Not that I didn't want to touch him, mind you; or better, get a taste of what lay between his jeans-clad legs. But slow was nice, too. I wasn't into one night stands.

"How long have you been a vet?"

"Set up practice five months ago." He tore at the label of his beer, shredding it with his long, delicate fingers. "It's slow."

"I can probably send some business your way. I know several owners who aren't too happy with Fritzzy."

"Fritzzy?"

"Dr. Fitzgerald Daniels. Over on Third. He's not too fond of us." I wished my wrist to show him who I meant. "Not too fond of anyone, that I can see."

"Good with the animals?"

"He's okay. Nothing special." I edged over on the couch and patted the seat beside me. "Sit down."

He sat, his leg touching mine. Electricity jolted down my spine, settling in my cock. Something similar must have hit him. He sighed.

"Jesus," he said. "Is it just me or is something going on here?"

"Oh, I think something is definitely going on." I took the beer out of his hand and put them both on the side table. "Do you know how hot you are?"

"Me?" He seemed genuinely puzzled. Never been told he's hot before? Hard to believe.

"Yes, you." I leaned over and touched my mouth to his. This time the kiss we shared was even hotter and sexier and wilder than before. Our tongues tangled and untangled, exploring the depths of each other's mouths in a frenzy of lust. I groaned when his hand moved across my face. I never knew a simple kiss could be so intoxicating. I closed my eyes against the vertigo that set my head spinning.

I was already leaking precum and knew I wasn't far from exploding. That had never happened before. Not like this, so

fast and so sudden, without even being touched. I broke away, gasping for breath.

"Christ, Keith," I said. "Where the hell did you learn to kiss like that?"

His eyes were dark blue pools I could have drowned in. "Me?" he whispered. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me?"

As though to show me, he grabbed my hand and pressed it against his swollen cock. He hissed when my fingers closed over the blatant bulge. He felt huge.

"If we keep this up, this evening is going to end sooner rather than later. And while part of me doesn't care, I'd rather get to know you better, if you don't mind." Keith suddenly looked shy. "I don't really do this very often."

I don't know why his confession turned me on even more. Was I really getting excited by his innocence?

"Dinner then?" I asked in a strangled voice.

"Please."

I pulled away from him, and he stood. That might have been a mistake on his part; it put the thick bulge of his crotch right at eye—and mouth—level. My mouth filled with saliva at the sight. I swear I could smell him through the material of his jeans. Without thinking, I leaned forward and kissed the pulsing protrusion.

Keith jumped. When I stood up, he wrapped his arms around me and held on, pressing himself full length against me.

"Maybe," he said shyly. "Maybe you can come back here after supper. For dessert."

"Dessert," I said hoarsely. "That sounds... perfect."

I grabbed Shadow's lead, and we left the apartment. We decided to take my van. I would drop the dog off at my place, and we could reach the restaurant before the big dinner rush filled it up.

The Green Lantern has world class pizza on its menu, including all the trendy items Californians seem to think are

mandatory haute cuisine. Thank you, Wolfgang Puck. Keith surprised and pleased me by eschewing gourmet for good old-fashioned pizza, the way it was meant to be. Mushroom, tomato, and bacon, with a pitcher of Bud draft beer. Somebody who really liked me had gone behind my back and designed the perfect guy for me. I watched him pick at a bowl full of shelled peanuts with his thin, surgeon's fingers, and couldn't wait for dinner to end. I wanted that dessert.

He caught me looking and blushed. "What do you do, Todd? Dog trainer?"

"Nah, that's a hobby. Assistant manager at the Hilltop Inn. I'm pretty new, too. Been there nearly nine months." A recent degree in hotel management had landed me the gig. Eventually I hoped to have my own place, maybe a bed and breakfast someplace with some land. Cater to the outdoor, animal-loving crowd. I found myself telling Keith my dreams, and he nodded.

"I'd love to have a country practice. Handle some horses as well as the usual small animal stuff. Think you'd like New Mexico?"

"New Mexico? Never been. But I've heard it's nice there."

"Better than nice. It's gorgeous. The enchanted land, closest place to heaven on earth. My folks have a small spread out there. Ten acres backing onto federal land."

It sounded like he was angling to invite me, but before we went any further in that direction, our pizza arrived, and we dove in.

I ate three pieces, then quit. There was no way I wanted to feel bloated tonight. I had other plans.

I found Keith surprisingly easy to talk to. He told me about his years at college where his grades had been good enough to give him a partial scholarship to Cornell University's veterinarian department. He'd always loved animals and had a built-in curiosity that made his career choice a natural. I'd thought of it once myself, but I was too squeamish around pain and gore. Stuck to dog training instead, with a couple of years at a local dog therapy place doing some work with dogs that were considered incorrigible.

"I had the most incredible experience a few years back when I got to meet Cesar Milan. I did a volunteer stint at his dog psychology center in South Central L.A. This guy had his kennel in the heart of gang territory, and he had an entire pack of Pit Bulls and Rotties that were supposed to be dangerous animals. Every one of them was sentenced to death. He rehabilitated them. That was something, let me tell you."

"I've heard of the guy. He does some impressive work." Keith grinned. "The dog whisperer." He arched his eyebrows and leaned toward me. "Are you the pack leader?"

I slid my hand under the table and along his thigh. I traced the outline of his rapidly hardening cock. "What do you think?"

His hand clamped down on mine. "I think if you keep that up I'm going to cream my pants and think what a waste that would be."

I put my Master Card on the table. "What say we get out of here?"

"Now you're talking my language."

We got the remaining pizza put in a to-go box—with what I had in mind we just might get hungry later on—and almost ran out to my van, which was tucked away in the small parking lot behind the restaurant.

I parked in the alley behind his clinic, beside a beat up Honda Civic that might have been gray once, but was now so rusted that it looked marbled. Keith's car? He gave me a crooked grin.

"What can I say? The Mercedes is on back order." He leaned over the gear shift and drew my face around toward him. His lips settled on mine. The kiss was gentle and not the least bit erotic. When he finally broke away, he traced the outline of my swollen mouth.

"I'd really like to see you again, Todd."

I could tell by his tone that he was saying goodnight. I opened my mouth to tell him I didn't want to leave, then snapped it shut. Keith was letting me know we could be

something. Maybe something special. But not if I pushed too hard or too soon. I slid back behind the wheel.

I thought hard.

"I've got a practice event with the dogs this Sunday. Would you like to come out and see the two guys in action?"

A smile lit up his angular face, crinkling the skin around his eyes. "I'd love to. I used to go to lure coursing events with my greyhound, until he got too old to run. That was quite a sight, let me tell you. Dogs running for the sheer fun of running."

"So Sunday then?"

He jumped out of the van, turned around, and leaned in the open window. "Sunday."

"I'll pick you up around nine?"

He slapped the door panel. "I'll be ready."

"With bells on," I murmured and fired up the still-warm engine. I drove away before I could change my mind, or try to change his.

I spent the next two days mooning around work. My boss, Jim Grogier, sensed something was up, but was respectful enough to keep his thoughts to himself. We were busy with the usual summer crowd of tourists, and when one guest had a run-in with a local panhandler, I calmed her and her teenage daughter down and comped them a meal in the hotel diner. I only left them when I was sure their negative experience had been mitigated by a good meal. I returned to my tiny office to catch up on my correspondence. When the day finally ended and the evening concierge had poked her head through my open door, I wrapped things up and headed home for a late dinner.

First I rounded up the two dogs and took them for a run in the nearest park. There were too many other people to dare let either dog off leash. Though I knew they'd be well behaved, there was something about a couple of Dobermans that aroused fear in even the most level-headed person.

I had some leftover ziti in the freezer, and I popped it in the microwave to heat it up. I ate in the living room with a tall glass

of ice tea and the TV remote, channel surfing, until darkness descended on the city outside my third story window. The dogs settled down around my feet, until I signaled it was time to go to bed. They trotted into their crates and curled up on their blankets.

I had almost dozed off when the phone rang. Shadow perked up at the sound; I normally don't get calls in the evening.

It was Keith. The sound of his voice, like dark, liquid honey, stroked my nerve endings, finishing all thoughts of sleep.

"Hey, sleepyhead, did I wake you up?" he asked.

"No," I said, knowing I sounded like I was half asleep. Laughter tugged at my voice. "You always up this late?"

"Had an emergency surgery tonight. Some poor Chihuahua got hit by a bike, and the owner dumped him off with me."

"Dumped—you mean they left him with you?" I could never understand how people who owned, and professed to love, their pets could do something so callous, but I know it happens.

"Pretty well," Keith said.

I switched the phone to my other ear. My gaze found Shadow still watching me, his dark eyes glittering in the nearly lightless room. I couldn't imagine ever abandoning him for anything. "What will you do with him?"

"Keep him for now, I guess. Can't let the little guy go to the pound, can I?"

"What's his name?" I asked and wasn't surprised when Keith snorted.

"Taco, what else."

"The guy clearly had no business owning a dog."

We both laughed.

"We still on for this weekend?" Keith's voice dropped an octave. "I've been thinking about you all day."

I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat. "You have?" I whispered, mesmerized by his smoky voice. I stared at Shadow,

who wiggled his tail stub. He knew I was happy, even if I was too dazed to realize it.

“Haven’t you been thinking of me?”

Had I been? Had I thought of anything else all day? I think I’d had a permanent hard-on since I’d left him at his doorstep the other night. “You better believe it. What are you doing right now?”

“Trying to get Taco settled down. His owner might have acted like a jerk, but the poor guy doesn’t know that. He won’t stop crying for him.”

“Some people should be shot. At the very least they shouldn’t be allowed to have pets.”

“Agreed. But right now little Taco and I are going to bed. I think he’d be happier if he’s in bed with me.”

Him and me both. I cleared my throat. “Well good luck. I hope he does okay. So, I’ll see you Sunday?”

“We’ll be there.”

Sunday was a glorious day, with perfect northern California weather, the kind they photographed to fool the tourists into thinking it was always like this. A few soft clouds dappled the azure sky, and gulls from the nearby bay glided over our heads as we made our way to the temporary fence that marked the agility course. Both my dogs wore matching rainbow-hued neckerchiefs; they trotted buoyantly beside me. They knew what today meant, and they couldn’t wait. I waved at the fellow participants I recognized. Like most dog owners, I knew their dogs better than them. Sleek Sadie, the Belgian Malinoise that consistently gave Shadow and Sleuth a run for their ribbons. Gus, the German Shepherd that was in training to be a search and rescue dog. His father had been among the dogs that had been taken to the site of the World Trade Center to search for buried bodies. I remember how his handler, Josie, had been prone to tearful outbursts for weeks after. I had thought once of training my dogs in S&R. Shadow would have been a natural, but after watching what Josie went through, I didn’t think I could stand it. Rescuing people from certain death would be

uplifting, but delivering nothing but dead bodies under such tragic circumstances could drag any spirit down.

I went to collect my arm band and headed toward the waiting area. The field was full of smaller dogs, Border Collies and such, doing agility. I watched one brindled bitch race the course like she was greased lightning, and wasn't surprised when she came in first.

I spotted Keith just before our class was called up. I waved and signaled him to come down. He maneuvered through the crowds, carrying a small, black and tan dog wearing a cast on its hind leg. Shadow greeted his vet with quiet enthusiasm. He knew better than to get rambunctious, but at the rate his tail was going, I knew he was nearly as glad to see Keith as I was.

The tiny Chihuahua lay in Keith's arms, eyes at half-mast, a purely contented animal. I curled my finger around his muzzle.

"I see he's settled down."

"I was going to leave him at home, but I couldn't abandon him again so soon. I was worried how he'd react to all these big dogs." He gazed down at the sleeping dog, and his look was adoring. "I don't think he's even noticed."

Meanwhile Shadow was trying to get close enough to sniff, but I told him to down and he dropped in his tracks beside Sleuth. Keith gently put Taco on the ground between the two Dobes. The toy stretched delicately, then wandered over to give Shadow the once over. Shadow looked up at me and, seeing it was okay, began nosing the pint-sized dog, which was barely as big as his head. Taco fell over under the onslaught but, unfazed, was right back up, furiously licking Shadow's massive jaw. It was definitely an *aaah* moment. Keith and I looked at each other and burst out laughing at the same time.

Shadow was licking Taco's face, his whole tongue covering him in one stroke. I saw Keith's eyes darken. My voice was husky when I said, "Hey, I'd like to do that to you. What do you say to a little tongue bath?"

Keith flushed and looked around nervously. Afraid someone might have overheard? I dropped my voice to a whisper. "Hey, Keith, you want to come to dinner at my place? I make a mean

almond-crusted chicken. You can bring Taco over; I can make him a bed in one of my teacups.”

“Very funny.” Keith rescued his dog from being licked to death. Taco wasn’t having any of it. He wanted back down to play with the big boys. Keith relented, and this time both Shadow and Sleuth were drawn into play.

“Come on.” I called the two enamored Dobes to my side. “You’ll wear my guys out before they start.”

Laughing, Keith scooped up his dog, which happily cuddled in his new owner’s arms. “See you after the show.”

I wanted so desperately to kiss him, but knew that would be too forward. So I contented myself with a half-smile and a wave. Then the three of us trotted off to the starting gate.

Both dogs performed brilliantly that day. Shadow flew through the obstacle course like he had wings on his feet. He scaled the eight foot wall, barely touching the rough wooden surface, and he cleared the five foot water hazard without getting so much as a toenail damp. I was all too aware of Keith watching on the sidelines, his face aglow with pride. Taco was watching the big dogs race with keen interest. I knew it wouldn’t take any encouragement to have him running the course, though he’d have no chance of competing with dogs three times his size. I’d never met a Chihuahua yet that knew he was a small dog. They were all convinced they were giants.

Shadow picked up a blue ribbon for his efforts, and Sleuth, who was still in training, took a fifth in his class. I took out the dog’s water bottles and let them each have a sip, then slipped them back into my backpack. I gave each dog a treat and a soft word of praise. Then Keith was beside me, and I forgot everything else.

Taco was wide awake now and squirmed to be let down. Together the five of us walked toward the parking lot, moving with streams of other competitors and spectators. I had arrived earlier than Keith, and my van was several rows in front of his beat-up Civic. We stood closer than necessary while the crowds streamed past us. Keith picked up Taco to keep him from being crushed by a stray foot.

"Meet you at my place?" I asked, unable to take my eyes off his stunning face. Beside me Shadow sat down and began grooming himself.

"Sure," Keith said. "Ah, where—"

I frowned and admitted, "It's not all that easy to find. Here, I'll write down some directions."

"Listen, why don't you come to my place. I know it's not much, but I should check my messages, make sure there aren't any emergencies. Plus, I have to get up early tomorrow."

I frankly didn't care where we went, as long as we went together. I smiled and edged closer, my hip brushing his. The same spark of electricity I had felt earlier shot from my spine straight into my cock. "Sure." I slid the van door open, and the two Dobes jumped inside. I stowed my backpack and climbed into the driver's seat. "I'll follow you. You sure you don't mind having the dogs there?" No question I'd leave them in the van. I didn't treat my dogs like that.

"No problem. They're welcome."

He spun around and trotted toward his car, barely looking to see if there were any oncoming cars before he crossed the tarmac, which was filling up with vehicles trying to reach the exit.

In the distance, the Golden Gate Bridge glittered in the lowering sun. A massive tanker cruised under the structure, looking small against the famous landmark.

I followed him through the streets, past the Castro and into an older section of town.

We climbed the rickety stairs to his apartment, and he shut and locked the door behind us. He showed Taco his bed, and the dog went willingly enough. My two lay on the blanket Keith hastily pulled out of the closet. Afterwards, he found a bowl to fill with water. All three dogs gathered to drink.

The minute he turned away from the dogs, I put my arms around him and pulled him against me. We fit together like we were made for each other. I was beginning to suspect that was true. Where the hell had he been all my life?

My mouth crushed his, and this time he was the one who groaned. My kiss started off hot and wild, but then I gentled it, massaging his lips with mine and spreading a layer of kisses along the strong line of his jaw, up to his ear. His hands clutched at me when I licked his earlobe and nibbled the soft flesh. He whimpered my name.

“What about supper?”

“The only thing I’m hungry for is you.” I don’t think I’ve ever been so bold in my life. But I wanted my vet in a way I’ve never desired another man. “Where’s the bedroom?” I growled.

“In there,” he gasped. “Oh, Jesus, Todd, hurry.”

I led the way, and we tumbled together onto the top of the double bed. It creaked under our weight. His T-shirt rode up and exposed his belly. I leaned down to kiss it.

“No,” I said. “I don’t intend to hurry anything tonight. God, you taste incredible.”

I pushed the T-shirt up to expose the rest of his chest. A thin line of dark hair snaked out of his jeans and expanded to a light smattering of soft hair over a well-developed six pack. His nipples were thick brown knots that swelled under my questing teeth and tongue. He groaned and held my head in his hands. He smelled exquisitely of soap and a clean, manly musk. I inhaled and scraped a wet nipple with my teeth. He lunged off the bed. I raised up long enough to strip the shirt off his writhing body, then took off my own and lay atop him. Our bare skin was sweat-slicked and hot. I moved between his legs, and he raised his knees to encompass me. Our hips ground together.

I could feel the solid pulse of his cock against mine. We were both too damned close for this to go on much longer. I put enough distance between us to get my hand to the top of his jeans. I slid the zipper down and reached inside. My hand closed over the thick pole of flesh that felt like hot, silk-covered marble.

“Oh, Todd, I can’t... I don’t think...”

"Don't think. Don't move. God, you're gorgeous. I want to suck you dry."

I scrambled down, pressed my nose against the skin of his lower belly, and inhaled the woodsy smell of him. Roughly I dragged his jeans off, throwing them from the bed, and sat back to look at what I had uncovered. I nearly came then and there. He had to be eight inches of angry, red cock, oozing thick, clear fluid that dribbled onto the sheets under him. I moaned his name at the sight. The thick, mushroom-shaped head strained out of its nest of dark hair. The veins on his shaft throbbed, and I could feel the heat from him on my face.

I encircled the purple head with my tongue, tasting his salty precum and coating his entire cock with saliva. "Pre-dinner hors d'oeuvres," I murmured, sliding the first three inches into my eager mouth. I worked hard and managed to get another couple of inches in. That was about as far as I could go. I covered the rest with my fist and began pumping up and down, licking and tonguing him. His hips bucked and squirmed. He chanted my name.

"Todd. Oooohhh, fuck, I'm gonna come. Todd. Oooohhhh!"

I pulled away as he arched his entire body in release. I watched as his cock spewed out gobs of thick, hot cum. I smeared it all over his washboard stomach and abs. Leaning down I licked a path up to his turgid nipples, while he continued to pump out thick, gluey fluid. Five, six times his cock spasmed and poured juice all over himself and me. I released his softening cock and slid up his body, smearing it even more, coating us both in hot, salty cum. I captured his mouth in a kiss that left us both breathless. I rolled him over and pressed my hard cock against the soft skin of his ass.

"I want to fuck you, Keith. Do you want me? Do you want me inside you?"

"Yes, oh God, yes." He reached across the bed into the top drawer of the bedside table and pulled out a tube of lubricant and a package of condoms. I hurriedly shed my own jeans and jock. "Please, Todd."

I kissed him savagely, then gentled it again, murmuring his name as I unscrewed the top of the lube. I wasn't anywhere near as big as he was, but I still had a respectable six inches, and the last thing I wanted was to hurt him.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I've never... Just... be gentle."

Oh God, he was a virgin. I was awed at what we were about to do. "Always," I choked.

I unrolled the condom over my cock and slathered lube on three fingers. The first one slipped into Keith's tight ass easily. My mouth found Keith's, and we kissed as I carefully inserted a second, using my thumb to stroke the skin behind his balls. He humped my hand, his own dick getting hard again as I played with his prostate.

Making sure the condom was well coated with lube, I pushed the cock head up against his tight sphincter and eased past the ring of muscle. Keith winced once, and I stopped, letting our bodies adjust to the new invasion. Keith urged me on hoarsely, bucking under me and gripping my hands.

I moved slowly, rocking back and forth, feeling my rigid cock slip deeper and deeper into his tight hole. God, he felt so good, so right.

I turned him over without breaking our connection. Rising up on my elbows, I watched his flushed face and dilated eyes. His lips were open in need, and I leaned forward and buried my tongue in his mouth. Our hot breath mingled, and I ate his heated cries of abandon. I began to lose what little self-control I had kept till now. My thrusts grew wilder, and I plowed him deeper and harder. He rose to meet me, thrust for thrust.

Ropey cum shot out of his straining cock all over my stomach and chest, and the sudden tightening of his ass sent me over the edge. I shouted his name and slammed into him, holding his straining legs high over his thrashing head as I poured my liquid seed into his hot, wet hole. We collapsed on the bed, our bodies glued together. I made no move to extricate myself from him. Instead I covered his damp face with soft, feather-light kisses.

"That was the most incredible... You were wonderful. Oh God," he cried against my throat. "Where the hell have you been all my life?"

"Waiting for this," I whispered. "Waiting for you. Can I stay the night?"

"Oh baby, you can stay as long as you want."

We fell asleep still holding each other.

CHAPTER THREE

It was still dark when I awoke. Confusion held sway as I blinked and looked around. Something heavy lay across my legs. Warm, slightly sour breath brushed across my cheek.

I was disoriented. I rarely slept anywhere but my place, and I knew I wasn't there. The weight on my leg wasn't from a dog, neither was that deliciously hard cock pressed into my hip. Then I remembered. Dr. Keith Anderson. The dog agility event. His place. Keith. I rolled over, and Keith adjusted to my movement in his sleep. His arms came around me, and his hips twisted to push against mine. I was as hard as he was.

He murmured something in his sleep and rocked against me. God, what would it feel like to have that monstrous cock inside me? My hole twitched at the thought. My cock began oozing. Someday, maybe... but for now...

"Wake up, sleepyhead," I whispered.

I slipped down on the bed and slid my mouth around Keith's massive cock head. His groan, this time, told me he was no longer asleep.

"Baby... Ahhhhh, yesss," he hissed. Both hands pressed into my head, and his hips moved in that ancient blind rhythm of need and lust. "Oh fuck, yyyesss!"

He came with a sharp cry, and a surge of salty cum filled my mouth. I swallowed, sucked, and swallowed some more. Finally his dick slid limply out of my mouth.

I moved up along his body, my lips coming down on his. His arms held me close.

Then he pushed me away. "My turn," he whispered, grabbing my hand and drawing me out of the bed.

"What—?"

He pulled me into the small bathroom and quickly turned on the shower. When he had the water temperature to his

satisfaction, we both slipped under the warm spray. He pressed himself into my back, his half hard dick moving between the crack of my ass. One hand cupped my balls, and the other gently caressed my swollen cock. He grabbed a handful of liquid soap and began lathering me up. The sensation was exquisite. He ran a soapy hand between the cheeks of my ass, lightly fingering my puckered hole.

I groaned.

Immediately he sank to his knees. I cried out when he parted the round mass of my ass cheeks and pressed his hot mouth against my hole.

I'd only been rimmed once before in my life, and while it had been good, it was nothing like this. I flashed instantly to a state of arousal that left me gasping for air and moaning his name. I leaned my weight against the shower wall, no longer sure if I could stand upright under his assault. His tongue worked into me, digging and probing, sending wave after wave of raw lust singing along my nerve endings.

When he inserted two soapy fingers into my hole, I slammed into instant, gut-wrenching orgasm. I shouted and shot a powerhouse load of cum against the shower wall, again and again, until I was weak kneed and drained. I sagged, and only his strong arms around me held me upright. I leaned into him.

Gently he turned me around and kissed my shaking lips. He towed us both dry and led me back to the bed. I rolled into his arms and held him tight.

I wanted to tell him he was wonderful, that I was glad I had met him. Instead I fell asleep with his arms around me and his lips on mine. Maybe the feeling was mutual.

The next time I awoke the bed beside me was empty. Sunlight dappled the far wall, and birds trilled outside. I heard banging and humming from the kitchen.

Grabbing my clothes off the floor, I pulled on my boxers and jeans, not bothering to do them all the way up as I padded barefoot in search of my doctor.

I found him tending a pot of delicious-smelling coffee and a frying pan full of bacon. I came up behind him and buried my face against the bare skin between his shoulder and his neck. He wore only a pair of black boxers, and I pressed my denim clad hips between his legs.

"Morning, handsome," I said.

I noticed the dogs had already been fed and were ready for their morning walk. I spied what looked like an omelet waiting to be cooked. The bacon had begun to sizzle in a second frying pan. "You cook too? I think I'll marry you."

"Accepted." Keith turned in my arms and hugged me back. "Set the date. Ah, hold that thought."

"Let's get the dogs out first. We have time for a quick run." I grabbed him around the waist. "I've got plans for you later."

There was regret in Keith's voice. "I have to open the clinic in an hour."

"Tonight, then."

Keith took the bacon off the burner and set it to draining in a paper towel. We grabbed the dogs' leads and trotted down the steep stairs. All we could manage was a quick jog around the block, then back to the apartment to finish breakfast. Keith put the eggs on while I dropped thick slices of sourdough into the toaster.

Toast popped up, and he grabbed it and spread butter on the dark surface. Then he slid the omelet onto a large platter, dumped the toast, quartered tomatoes, and bacon beside it, and carried the lot to a scarred, wooden table with two chairs in the corner of the kitchen. He gestured at the coffee pot and a pitcher of orange juice.

"Help yourself."

We dug in, and I found I had a developed a hearty appetite, which necessitated a full helping of omelet, tomatoes, and bacon, several butter-slathered pieces of sourdough toast, and two brimming mugs of coffee.

"What time does the clinic open?" I started my third cup of coffee but slowed down considerably and only sipped this one.

"Nine," he said, glancing at the wall clock. It was eight-fifteen on a Friday morning. "What about you? Work today?"

"Afternoon shift. Three to eleven," I said regretfully. "Then days the next three. I work all weekend."

"I'd like to see you again."

"Ditto." I reached across to take his hand. He squeezed. "You open on weekends?"

"No. Nine to six three days a week. Surgery the other two after four o'clock. Today's surgery. I've got nothing on board, so I'm free at four. Early weekend."

"I could come by after work. I wouldn't get here till around midnight though. If that's too late..."

He walked his fingers up my hand, cupped my face, and leaned over the table for a kiss. "For you I'll wait up."

I thought of something. "Or you could meet me. There's a bar in the hotel lobby. It's not a rowdy place; a jazz sax player comes in on weekends. It's quiet, we could talk."

"I'd like that. What time?"

"Eleven? Then if you want we could go to my place. I have to get up early tomorrow; it would give us more time together."

"Shadow won't get jealous, will he?"

"He'll just have to get used to it. I plan on keeping you around a while."

"Mmmm, I hope so."



When I walked into work that afternoon, my boss Jim Grogier took one look at my face and grinned.

"Wow," was all he said.

"What does that mean? Wow?"

"Who's the lucky guy?"

Jim's known I was gay since before he hired me. He's straight—married to a friendly lady named Carolyn, with three great kids—but my orientation never fazed him. He said he'd

known I could do the job, and that's all he cared about. The hotel was his life, and when he'd come on board three years ago, business had been bad. Since then, he'd made it into a growing success, that was often booked solid, and was listed in all the travel sites. I'd learned a lot from him and hoped to learn a lot more.

I loved my job, but tonight it was the furthest thing from my mind. All I could think about was a dreamy pair of blue eyes and magic lips and a dick to die for. But I could hardly tell Jim that.

I grinned. "My new vet."

"A doctor. You're moving up in the world."

I thought of Keith's shabby apartment, and my grin widened. "Oh, I hope so. If you stick around, he's meeting me after work in the Blue Room."

"Sorry, no can do. Big plans this weekend. Family coming in from out of state." He grimaced good-naturedly. "Got to be *presentable*."

"Ugh, in-laws?"

"How'd you guess?"

We both laughed. Then we moved into his office to go over the day's events. There was a convention in town—plumbers—and the hotel was booked. I'd be kept busy until my shift was over.

That suited me just fine. Busy meant the time would go fast, and it would be that much sooner till I saw Keith again. I got hard just thinking about him.

Jim must have sensed something. He slapped me on the back. "You going to make it through the day?"

"I'll make it."

"This guy's really special, isn't he?"

"I think so."

"Lucky you."

Yeah, lucky me.

I got to work.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Blue Room was a small bar tucked into the corner of the hotel, with an entrance off Hemlock Street. In bygone days it had been a smoky retreat, with dark paneling, fake Tiffany lamps, and padded bar stools. With the advent of the state's no smoking laws, it had lost the smoky part, but kept the rest of the ambiance. Live plants, tended by a local gardener, filled every nook and cranny, spotlighted by pot lights.

I sometimes stopped in there after work for a glass of micro-brewed beer. It was a nice place to unwind after a frantic day of solving everybody else's problems. Nobody bothered me, and everyone kept his or her voice low. Even the background music, between jazz sets, was muted.

The sax player had taken a break when I saw Keith enter the room. I waved him over to the table I'd procured in the furthest corner, and watched him stride across the carpeted floor.

He moved like a man confident in who he was and where he stood in life. I liked that quiet confidence, and the way his face lit up when he saw me. For all his talk about not wanting his clients to see his orientation, he wasn't reticent about greeting me.

He kissed me square on the mouth and slid into the booth beside me. His hand immediately captured mine.

"Miss me?" he asked, raising my hand to his mouth and caressing the skin with his lips.

"You have no idea."

"Oh, I think I might." He grinned. "Mandy kept asking me what was wrong—I spent the whole day mooning around the office like some love-struck kid."

"My boss is a little more perceptive, I guess. He figured out right away I was in love."

Keith's eyes darkened. "Is that what it is? Love?"

"I don't know," I said in all honesty, a little uneasy at the way the conversation was going. "I've never been in love before. But it sure feels like something special is happening."

"What do you want to do about it?"

Now this was ground I could handle. I grinned and lowered my voice. "Do? Why fuck you silly, then when I'm done with that, suck you until you can't walk straight."

"Jesus, Todd," he hissed. I could see a pulse beat in his throat. His eyes were dark blue pools. "How do you expect me to walk out of here after you talk to me like that?"

Suzy, the bar's waitress, approached our table. She smiled at me. "Todd, what can I get you and your friend? Another beer for you?"

"Sure, Suze," I said, not bothering to pull away from Keith's grip. "What about you, Keith?"

"Whatever you're having is fine."

Suzy brought our beers, along with a basket of nachos and homemade salsa that was so hot it could burn your tongue if you weren't careful. I liked to watch first timers try it. Keith was game. He loaded his chip and shoved the whole thing in his mouth. When he didn't immediately grab for the beer, I knew I'd found a winner.

"Do you really think it's love?" Keith asked, once he'd sampled a few more nachos and tongue-burning salsa. I joined him, and it wasn't long before we'd emptied the basket.

I dipped my index finger in the remnants of the salsa and wrapped my lips around it, not taking my eyes off his face. His eyes grew dark as he avidly watched me suck on my finger. I reached out and rubbed my thumb over the fleshy part of his palm. "I don't know. All I know is I've never felt like this with anyone. It's not just sex. That's great, and I want you so much I ache at times, but I like just sitting and talking to you, too. I can see us together years from now, older, grayer. It's weird."

"I love it," he said, his voice husky. "I've only been with a couple of guys in my life—and one of them was in junior high, so it hardly counts, since neither of us had a clue." He gave a

dry laugh. "The other guy was one of my technical advisors in college, who was married, and barely able to admit he liked men. I've never done the bar scene, never just picked up someone for a one-night stand. Experienced is not my middle name."

"Me either. I'd rather pull a couple of hot pictures off the Internet and give my hand a workout." I stroked his hand as though it was a cock, and saw him catch his breath.

"Todd—"

"Just a couple of old-fashioned guys looking for love."

The look he gave me was tender, full of passion, and yes, love. I melted.

"I'm more than willing to hang around and see if it's the real thing," I said softly. "What about you?"

"Just try and get rid of me." He squeezed my hand. "Can we get out of here now?"

We stopped by and picked up Taco, who spent the ride to my place lathering Keith's face with kisses. Definitely an affectionate dog. What did I have to do to take his place, so that Keith could lather my body with kisses like that?

My place was slightly better looking than his; I'd spent a few dollars, over the year I'd lived there, picking out furniture I liked, and adding some artwork that appealed to me. Nothing expensive, but I liked them. Mostly outdoor paintings, Bateman prints, a couple of Glenn Loates, that kind of thing.

I'd also splurged on a king-size waterbed, and I was more than eager to try it out.

The dogs greeted us at the door, alert and watchful. Shadow cocked his head at Keith's greeting, and Sleuth studied the stranger, taking his cues from me. At my command they both went back to their crates and lay down. Keith took Taco in and let him find a place on an over-sized pillow I had put down between the two crates. After their ritual greetings and play bowing, all three dogs settled down and were soon dozing. I led Keith into the living room and told him to make himself at home.

I grabbed a bottle of white wine I'd had stashed in the fridge for a special occasion, and scooped up two glasses before heading back. Keith was crouched over my CD collection, and as I watched he pulled out a Miles Davis retrospective and studied the back flap.

"Put it on if you like."

He loaded the disk and came to sit beside me on the couch. His hips touched mine. I handed him a glass of wine and raised mine in the air.

"To us, wherever it leads."

"To us!"

We drank. In the background Miles laid a track down.

"You know," he said, playing with the rim of his wine glass, "I always had this recurring fantasy. After I came out to my folks I dreamed of finding the man of my dreams and introducing him to them. They're always asking if I've met someone, telling me they want me to be happy." He looked up, smiling shyly. "What about you? You out to your folks?"

"Yeah, a few years now. Dad passed away a couple of years ago. Mom's cool with it, but I'm not sure about bringing a boyfriend home. She never asks." I tried to imagine showing up at my mother's with Keith in tow. Would she wish me well? "Do your parents really live in New Mexico?"

He nodded. "Bought ten acres a few years ago as a vacation spot, but they liked it so much they moved there last year. It's a friendly place, full of artistic types. Not a good place for the intolerant."

"I'd like to meet them sometime." I smiled, thinking of Jim's in-laws.

"Do you mind if I tell them about you?"

Did I? I shook my head. "Go ahead. How often do you see them?"

"Not often. Money's so tight, what with start up costs at the clinic. I talk to them every week, though. But enough about family." Keith's fingers traveled up my thigh as a devilish look

came over his handsome face. "Let's talk about what you do to me. You have an absolutely delicious cock. I love sucking you."

As though I wasn't hard enough, his words had the affect of sending a bracing jolt of raw desire surging through my nerve endings. When he feathered his fingers across my throbbing basket I groaned. Visions of his massive cock played through my head.

"Tell me more," I whispered.

"I want to suck you dry. I want to lick your asshole until you scream for me to fuck you. I—"

I leaned into him. "You want to fuck me?" I fumbled with the zipper on his jeans. "The first time I saw you, I wondered what it would be like to have you inside me. Is that what you want?"

"I don't know." Keith flushed. "I've never actually done it before." Suddenly he looked scared. "What if I hurt you? I couldn't stand it if I hurt you."

"We're both virgins then," I said softly, and the knowledge was a powerful aphrodisiac. I pulled that incredible cock out of his jeans and licked my lips at the sight. The massive head gleamed wetly as it leaked precum. I bent down to lick it clean. His fingers curled in my hair, and he moaned.

"Oh God, man. I love it when you do that."

I lifted my head and met his eyes, and found that they were dark pools of desire. "I want you to fuck me, Keith. Please, baby, I need to feel you inside me."

"I don't know," he groaned, though I could tell the idea excited him.

"Please," I whispered. I wrapped my lips around his cock head, and felt it jerk in my mouth. More precum oozed out. "Please, baby. For me."

"Anything for you." Eagerly I stood up and took his hand, leading him into my bedroom. The sounds of Miles Davis's song *Mystery* followed us. It was the perfect music to make love to.

We shed our clothes, dropping them in untidy heaps on the colorful area rugs I had scattered over the hardwood floor. We fell across the bed and embraced. Our cocks strained together as he rained wet kisses over my face and chest. The bed undulated easily under us, intensifying our arousal.

I found the lube and a pack of condoms, and I was shaking as I watched him prepare himself. When he inserted one coated finger into my ass, I moaned and ground against his hand. Two fingers elicited some pain, but he was gentle and worked me easily, stretching my virgin muscles until he was able to insert a third finger. I cried out when he stroked my prostate with his index finger, at the same time his thumb stroked my perineum.

When he replaced his fingers with the head of his cock, I willed myself to relax. There was a brief shot of indescribable pain and burning, and he froze, holding himself still while my body adjusted to the invasion. My sphincter muscles relaxed, and the pain subsided to a dull ache. There was a feeling of fullness I wasn't accustomed to.

He layered my upturned face with kisses. "Are you sure, Todd?"

"Don't stop," I said hoarsely, grabbing his ass and pulling him deeper into me. "Please, don't stop. I need you to take me. Oh baby..."

He began moving, slowly at first, his strokes even and measured. As he eased his weighty cock into my tight channel, he murmured my name. His breath was hot against my throat, and he whispered steamy obscenities in my ear.

"Todd, baby. Fuck, you're so tight man. God, my cock feels incredible inside you. I can't... oh fuck..."

When he was all the way in, he stopped moving, resting his weight on his forearms as he rose above me. I ran my hands over the damp skin of his back, then slid down to his butt again. I squeezed his ass, urging him on.

"Don't leave me hanging, baby. That's it," I said, when he started moving again. "Oh, yeah. Just like that. Oohhhhh."

There was no pain now, only an indescribable, fiery pleasure that mounted and climbed with each powerful stroke. He filled me, stroking me from inside, touching me in places no one else ever had.

His tongue filled my mouth. I groaned against his lips, tasting him, our tongues grappling and tangling as we pursued a pleasure that never seemed to crest, only rose higher and higher. His strokes increased in tempo, and his breath grew ragged and hot against my mouth.

"Oh, baby, so tight, so hot. So fucking incredible. Oooohhhh, fuck, yes, yes, yes!"

He slammed into me, all control gone. Out of his mind with pleasure, his strokes became feverish, wild. He held my hips and chanted my name. The bed undulated wildly under us, and I clamped my legs around his waist, pumping with my ass as my own pleasure mounted. Then it broke out into a starburst of pleasure, and exquisite pain, as wave after wave of release slammed through me. My cock twitched and jerked as I came, pumping what felt like gallons of cum onto my chest, face, and hair.

He shouted my name, and his cock pulsed inside me. Almost impossibly, he seemed to grow bigger, harder. Hot cum shot out of him into my hole, claiming me as no one else ever had. His orgasm went on and on, draining himself into me, pouring his life's force into the condom I wish he didn't have to wear. What would it feel like to be ridden bareback by Keith?

His cock slipped out of me with an audible pop. He didn't move. Maybe he couldn't move. I held him. I wanted to stay like that forever. Finally he broke away, rolling over to lie beside me, his arms still locked around me. I could still feel his heart pounding behind the sweat-soaked muscles of his chest.

I pressed my trembling mouth to his hot skin. "Oh, baby," I sighed.

"Are we still alive or did we just die and go to heaven?"

"As long as we're together, who cares?"

The rumble of his laughter vibrated through his rib cage. I grinned weakly.

“Promise you won’t leave tomorrow,” I said. “Promise you’ll be here when I get off work.”

“I’ll be here. I’ll always be here.”



As usual the dogs woke me up at dawn. I climbed out of bed, groaning at the interrupted sleep. I felt a tenderness in my ass that was a reminder of what had happened last night. I tingled at the memory. On the bed Keith rolled into the space I had just left, then jolted awake as he realized he was alone.

“What?” He groped at the sheets, and then sat up groggily, the light blanket pooling in his lap. “What time is it?”

I squinted at the bedside clock. “Six-twenty. Sorry, I should have warned you. The dogs are used to being walked early in the morning.”

Keith opened one eye wide enough to glare at Shadow and Sleuth, each one looking disgustingly eager. “The only thing early birds get are worms. You guys like worms? Is that it? What are you, fucking robins?”

Shadow wagged his stub of a tail.

I slapped Keith’s butt under the sheet. “Come on, join us. It’s good for you. Fresh air. Exercise.”

He groaned and buried his head under the pillow.

“Not a morning person, huh?”

“Morning people should be shot.”

I sat on the edge of the bed and snaked a hand under the sheet over his lap. I inched up his thigh.

“I bet I could interest you in a morning activity.” I leaned over and nuzzled his ear. I felt his cock stirring under the sheet. “I bet I could get you real interested.”

The groan this time was of an entirely different caliber. I slipped my lips over his face and felt the rasp of a morning beard.

"Someone needs to shave."

He reached for me but I backed off. He tried to glare at me.

"Cock tease. You know what they say about guys like you?"

"Haven't a clue. You getting up?"

"I'm up."

"I mean are you getting out of bed?" I looked at him dubiously. "I'll meet you at the front door."

"You'll get yours, cock tease."

"Oh, I certainly hope so."

We left the apartment five minutes later. The park was three blocks east, one of the reasons I had picked this place. It was a perfect dog-walking area, with lots of open space, light traffic, and drinking fountains for days when it was hot.

I handed Shadow's lead to Keith and kept Sleuth at heel. He was younger than Shadow and still needed reminders about how to walk in a civilized way. Once in the park we slipped the leads off, and the two of them took off at a full gallop.

Watching a pair of Dobes run full tilt is a sight to behold. They run like miniature horses, and not many dogs are faster. I kept an eye on them to clean up any messes they left behind, but otherwise let them run. They needed to blow off a lot of energy, and today was a good day—not too hot or humid.

"They really are something, aren't they?" Keith stood with his shoulder touching mine, watching Shadow chase Sleuth through a stand of trees, playing tag between the trunks.

"You said you had a greyhound that got too old to run. Why no animals since then?"

"I do work long hours, but no, I lost my last dog only a few months ago. Buddy was a greyhound from one of the rescue groups. Had him for nearly ten years. I was thinking of getting in touch with them again when I met you. And 'Taco.'" He grinned. "Long stretch from a greyhound."

"So you really are a softy at heart, Dr. Keith Anderson."

"Hey, that's Dr. Doolittle to you."

I was running late by the time we took the dogs back, fed them, and put coffee on. I grabbed a blueberry muffin and a coffee to go. Bussing Keith quickly on the lips, I handed him my spare key.

"In case you get back before me. I'm not sure what's in the cupboard for supper. There's a market just down the road that has a decent deli and bakery, if that appeals to you."

"Let me surprise you," he said. He cupped the back of my head and took the time to give me a very thorough, heavy duty kiss.

I broke for air. "Jesus, Keith, I'll be hard all day after that."

He squeezed my crotch. "Keep it hot for me, okay?"

I escaped out the door before he could tempt me to stay.

The convention was still on, but, despite being busy most of the morning, the day still crawled. Face it, I wanted to be home in bed, taking care of our problems—mine in particular, a nasty set of blue balls that wouldn't quit. You'd think with all the sex I'd had lately, I'd be less needy. If anything, I seemed to want Keith more. Would there ever come a time I didn't look at him and grow hard?

I so badly wanted this day to end.

What if Keith got tired of waiting? What if he changed his mind?

What if he wasn't there when I got home?

Doubts began to plague me as the day wore on. I grew restless, which only made the waiting worse.

CHAPTER FIVE

I let myself into the house. It was dark and silent, and even before I shut the door behind me, I knew it was empty. Or nearly so—the dogs greeted me warmly. But no Keith. I was surprised to see Taco skirting around the big feet of my two boys. He seemed totally oblivious to the dangers of being trod on.

I checked for a note, hoping maybe he'd just slipped out, but there was nothing. I glanced at the wall clock. It was almost six. Keith had said he was done by four. Where was he?

Had I been mistaken about his feelings? Or had something come up? Had he checked with his service and received an emergency call from a client? Keith claimed he didn't work evenings or weekends, but I knew him well enough now to know that he wouldn't turn away a sick or wounded animal. Look at Taco. Most people would have turned the animal in to the humane society, figuring he'd be adopted before a date with euthanasia came. But not Keith. He had taken the little dog in and had the appearance of a man who was planning on making it permanent.

I wanted that to be the reason he wasn't here. I wanted it to be okay between us. But I was suddenly scared that it had been too much, too fast. The phone rang. I grabbed the portable off the coffee table before it rang a second time.

"Hello?"

"Hello?" a female voice, hesitant. "Is Keith there? Keith Anderson?"

"Keith?" I almost said *You have the wrong number*. Instead I said, "No, he's not. Who's this, please?"

"I'm Keith's mother. Becky—Rebecca Anderson. Is this Todd?"

I slid onto the couch, laying my hand onto Sleuth's knobby head when he thrust his nose against my thigh. "Yes, it is. What—"

"Keith called us earlier today. I'm sorry for being so forward, but he told us about you. About how you met and... I wanted to talk with you."

"Oh?"

I found myself staring at Shadow as he crossed the room and fell down at my feet, resting his long nose on my bare feet. Keith's mother sounded pleasant enough. Curious, but not at all judgmental, given that she was talking to a total stranger who had slept with her son. It would be easy to open up to that voice. I steeled myself to not give anything away. It wasn't my place to tell a stranger about my relationship with her son.

"You're probably wondering why I called," Rebecca said. "But Keith sounded so happy on the phone, I just had to—I'm sorry, this probably isn't making any sense to you."

"Keith isn't here right now—"

"It was you we wanted to talk to." We? I heard a second voice in the background, a man's voice. Then Rebecca came back on, sounding slightly breathless.

"My husband, Martin, would like to talk to you." I could hear her handing the phone off to someone else.

"Afternoon, Todd, is it?" The voice on the other end of the line had the raspy quality of a longtime smoker. "Martin Anderson here. I suppose you're wondering what the hell this is all about."

I heard Rebecca's voice in the background. "Marty, don't scare the poor boy."

Poor boy? What was with these people?

"I'm not scaring him, Becky," Martin's voice boomed over the phone. "I'm not out to intimidate anyone, Todd, least of all someone who's special to my son." Then the booming voice was back, and he was speaking to me again. "But I do want to know a little more about you, if that's okay by you."

"Er, yeah, I guess so."

"Keith tells me you work at a hotel. Front desk clerk?"

"Assistant manager."

"Ah, management. Any plans to move up to manager? What was the name of the hotel again?"

I hadn't told him the name, but I did now.

"Hilltop Inn? Not one of the big chains then." Martin sounded disappointed, and I bristled. Who was he to put down my work place? "Ever consider working for one of the big places? Marriott? Ramada Inn? I know some people—"

"Thanks, Mr. Anderson, but I've got a good job where I am. It's a great learning experience, and I like what I do."

"Nothing wrong with that," Martin said, his voice full of good humor. "Good people, are they?"

"The best. Listen I have to—"

"Keith thinks highly of you. He seems to think you could go far. I like to see that in a man. Ambition."

Suddenly it dawned on me what was going on here. I couldn't believe it; Keith's father was concerned about what my intentions were toward his son. I would have laughed if it hadn't been so weird. At the same time, I found I envied Keith. Most men in Martin's place would be angry at the hand the world had dealt them, or at least be embarrassed by their son's choices. This guy genuinely sounded like all he cared about was his son's happiness. How rare was that?

"Listen, Mr. Anderson, I appreciate your concern," I said, my grip on the phone tightening. "I don't know how much Keith told you, but I love your son very much. Anything I do from now on is going to be done with both of us in mind. Truth is, I've always entertained the idea of running my own place someday. A bed and breakfast. Now that Keith is in my life, I like the idea even more."

"Bed and breakfast, eh? Nobody ever got rich doing that," Martin said. "But how would Keith's practice fit in to that? You

wouldn't expect him to give that up, would you? He loves his job. It'd kill him to lose it."

"I wouldn't ask him to. I know what it means to him."

"You know," Martin's voice was softer. "I always hoped Keith would meet someone who could love him like I love his mother. We met back in seventy-three, just out of high school, and I fell in love with her in the first five minutes. Asked her to marry me ten days later and darned if she didn't say yes."

"That's really interesting, Mr. Anderson, but—"

"Since then we've been happy, but it's always worried me that Keith would never know that kind of joy. Now that I've had a chance to talk to you, I can rest easy. You be good to my boy, Todd."

"Oh, I will, Mr. Anderson."

"And for God's sake, call me Martin."

"Martin."

The front door opened to a volley of barking from the dogs. I could hear Martin shouting something but couldn't make out the words.

It was Keith, carrying an armful of grocery bags. He came over and kissed me on the mouth.

"Hi, babe. Been home long?"

"No—uh, yes, Mr. Anderson," I finally responded to the voice on the other end of the line. "Er, Martin. Actually Keith just walked in. Do you want to talk to him?"

Keith stared at the phone in my hand, then up at my face as though I was joking.

"You're serious? My father?"

"And mother. Here, you ask."

I got up and grabbed the groceries, taking them into the kitchen where I dumped them on the counter and began to sort through the bags.

Salmon, watercress, new potatoes, a bottle of California red. I heard Keith move around the living room. Minutes later he

entered the kitchen and began to remove the salmon from its package.

"Sorry about that. If I'd known they would do that, I never would have called them."

"Hey, they just care about you."

"It was still rude. I—"

I grinned. "Actually I thought it was kind of cute. I've never had anyone ask me my intentions toward someone before."

Keith groaned. "I swear I—"

"So, I told him I wanted to marry you, and in twenty-eight years I will tell anyone who will listen that it was love at first sight when I met you. Just like your mom and dad. How's that for intentions? Honorable enough?"

He grabbed me and pulled me against him. His mouth assaulted mine in a kiss that left us both gasping. He rubbed my cheek with his.

"Dad really likes you. He thinks you sound sincere, whatever the hell that means. Mom just thinks you sound wonderful. They want to meet you."

"Sure, I'd like to meet them..." I was being glib, and Keith grinned. "You mean now?"

"They want to come out next month. Dad asked if you could book them into your hotel. He wants to make sure you're not running some sleazy, rent-by-the-hour place."

"Hey—"

"I told him you made sure everyone rented for at least the night, but you only changed the sheets once a week, and they had to bring their own rent boy—"

"You are so dead." I reached for him, but he was faster and pinned my arms at my side. He took advantage of my predicament to tickle me and rub his swollen cock against my stomach.

Shadow came into the kitchen barking and jumping excitedly. Sleuth hung back, shy around strangers.

Keith grabbed my hands and clapped them over his butt. He growled against my throat. "Keep him from biting my tush. I have plans for that later on, and they don't include getting teeth marks—well, unless they're yours."

With my hands on his ass, I was able to drag him forward, grinding into him and moaning his name. My hands got real busy real fast.

"What about dinner? I thought I was cooking for you," Keith sighed against the skin of my neck.

"Oh baby, you are cooking. We'll just get to the food later." I pulled away from him long enough to tell the dogs to go to their crates, hoping Taco would follow. Then I dragged him to the bedroom. My hands shook as I shed my clothes and watched him dump his. When that incredible cock came into view, I started shaking all over.

"When I came home and you were gone, I thought for sure you had changed your mind about us." I pushed him back across the bed and fell beside him, my hands already roaming the moist skin of his body. Tasting him. Glorifying in the feel of hot, sweat-slicked skin under my lips and tongue. "I felt the most indescribable pain—like I'd lost something more important to me than life. Then, when your Dad called and I realized you had told him about us, I couldn't believe it. I thought he was nuts. Then I realized how very much they love you, and I felt jealous. And afraid. How the hell could I measure up to that kind of love?" I shook my head, my mouth traveling down his hard, muscled body. "I felt like a fraud, like I didn't deserve you, so maybe it would be better if you did leave."

"I could never leave you—"

"Good." I spread his legs and opened him up to my admiring view. His massive cock head lay across his stomach, oozing creamy precum, and his round, egg-sized balls nestled above that beautiful, brown puckered hole I intend to fuck very shortly. I licked the wetness from the slit at the top of his purple helmet.

"Todd, oh, baby..." Keith moaned. His hands clamped over my head and guided me to his cock. "Please. Suck it. Suck my dick, baby."

I wrapped my lips around the moist head and got nearly seven inches down my throat this time, before I couldn't handle anymore. His hips came off the bed. He rolled his head from side to side, thrashing on the blankets, his pelvis grinding into my face.

"Not so fast," I gasped, dragging my mouth off his cock. I reached for the lube and a condom, and Keith whimpered. "Your ass is mine tonight."

Before I opened the condom package, I knelt down and took one of his balls in my mouth. I rolled the wrinkled mass around with my tongue, then gave the second one the same treatment. Keith muttered and whimpered and flexed his hips.

I moved down. My tongue darted out and pushed between the cheeks of his ass. This time Keith gave a strangled cry as I stroked his hole with my stiff tongue.

I fucked him with my tongue, probing and pressing until he was writhing under me, and I knew he was seconds away from exploding. I arched away from him, ripping open the condom pack and unrolling it over my bulging cock. Slathering my fingers with lube, I explored Keith's damp hole, then lathered my cock with more lube. I eased the cock head in, past the ring of muscle, pausing long enough to let his body adjust to me. Then I sank into him and began to pump. In and out, keeping the tempo easy, determined to prolong the pleasure for both of us.

I leaned down and shoved my tongue into his mouth, roughly probing past his lips and trying to fuck his tonsils. He grabbed my head and arched against me, engulfing my cock with his ass. The rhythm increased, driving us both closer to the edge. He bucked under me, and I could feel his orgasm starting. His balls tightened, and his hips surged up while his ass clamped down on me so hard I nearly screamed at the sensation. His cock jerked between our squirming bodies, and hot cream spilled out of him, a ropey streamer of cum that

covered us as our bodies jittered and jived in an ongoing rush of pleasure.

I wasn't far behind him. My own cock spasmed and throbbed in release. I cried out his name again and again as my body drained into the condom.

"Someday," I whispered against his mouth, "I'm going to do that without a condom."

He sucked on my lower lip. "I'm clean. What about you?"

"Last time I was tested, sure." I rolled over to lie beside him, pulled the condom off, and wrapped it in a tissue. "We should get tested again. Then we'd know for sure."

He ran his fingers over my sticky belly. "You hungry?"

Suddenly my stomach growled. We both burst out laughing. "Guess that answers that." He rolled out of bed and tugged at my hand. "Come on, let's grab a shower. Then I'll feed you."

Keith proved to be an excellent cook. He grilled the salmon steaks on my barbecue, tossed the watercress with a light vinaigrette dressing he whipped up in my blender, and boiled the new potatoes. He served them with butter and chives.

I uncorked the wine as he brought the plates to the table. I had dug up a pair of tapered candles and pewter holders, and set them on the table. Setting Miles Davis on low, I raised my wine glass in salute.

"To good food, fine wine, and the greatest guy a man could ever know," I said. "Here's to the next twenty years."

"To twenty years."

There were tears in his eyes, and I hastily put my glass down. "You okay?"

"Never better." He blinked away the wetness. "Just happy. Not sure what I did to deserve this all of a sudden."

"I know what you mean. I keep thinking there has to be some mistake and I'll wake up and it's all been a pleasant dream. Nothing more."

"You okay meeting my parents like this? I mean, it's kind of early in the game. And I know Dad can be a bit overwhelming at times."

"I'm looking forward to it." It was only a partial lie. I was nervous, but I did want to meet them. I grinned. "Think they'll come armed with baby pictures? Cute little pix of little naked Keith lying on a fur rug?"

"If they haven't burned those things by now, I'll make sure they get buried so deep they never see the light of day."

I laughed, glad to see his humor restored. After clearing the dishes off the table and loading up the dishwasher, I went back to the dining room where Keith was still drinking his wine.

I slipped up behind him and slid my arms around his shoulders.

"Feeling up for another walk? I like to take the dogs for a long evening run when I'm on days."

"Sure. Same place?"

I nodded and went to retrieve the dogs' leads. All three animals were instantly at the front door, eyes bright with anticipation.

At the park we moved away from the more traveled areas and unleashed the big dogs, who took off after an overconfident squirrel. Taco strained at his leash, wanting to join them in the chase, but Keith held him at heel. After treeing the indignant chittering animal, the two Dobes decided it was more fun to chase each other. Soon they were a black-and-rust-streaked blur amidst the tree groves.

I didn't realize how close Keith and I were until a couple walked past us on the dirt path, and I caught the tail end of a disgusted glare from the guy. I glanced at Keith, but he didn't seem to have noticed. He nudged me with his elbow and pointed at Shadow, who was barking frantically at Sleuth, demanding he run faster. Sleuth obliged, and the race was on again.

"Yeah, Shadow's the bossy one. Always has been."

Ignoring everyone around us, Keith slipped his hand around my waist. I wasn't used to being so brazenly out there, and wasn't sure I appreciated the stares we were getting.

"It doesn't bother you, getting dirty looks?" I asked.

"Normally I don't advertise," he said, obviously considering the question carefully. "But then I've never felt like this for anyone before, either. It's like I'm so happy it just boils over, and I can't keep it to myself. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it does. I guess I've just gotten a little more sensitive to the anger—I mean I still think of poor Matthew Shepard and get scared. What if someone decided I should be eliminated because I don't conform?"

Keith shivered and hugged himself. "I know what you mean. It is scary. But I won't live a life run by fear. I can't." He turned toward me, close enough that our bodies touched. "I won't pretend I'm something I'm not. I won't deny who I am, either."

Shadow and Sleuth raced by us, the simple joy of running free radiating off their panting bodies. We watched them gallop off again. They weren't troubled by what others thought of them. Dogs didn't go in for judging others. Why were people so obsessed with labeling everybody and trying to fit them into boxes, and then rejecting some boxes as inappropriate or deviant?

"Come on," I said. "Let's round these two clowns up and go home."

"Whatever you say, boss."

CHAPTER SIX

Over the next couple of weeks, Keith basically moved in with me. There was never any formal announcement or decision, but every time he went back to his old place, he seemed to return with more of his stuff. Not that there was much; the place had come furnished, and he hadn't bothered adding much to it. He had his clothes and a few personal affects.

Finally he talked about subletting the place. "I could use the money toward the business. I know I couldn't get much for it, but every penny helps right now."

I agreed, and he called to put an ad in the paper. As we integrated our lives, there were other changes too. We switched from an answering machine to a full service that would handle all our calls. Keith got himself a cell phone and a pager.

"Hey, I'm finally entering the twenty-first century."

"Yeah," I muttered, eyeing the tiny phone nestled in the palm of his hand beside the even smaller pager. "Just don't bring them to bed with you. In this or any other century."

He laughed and clipped both devices to his belt. It really was something he needed. His business was picking up, thanks to referrals from happy customers impressed with his skill and his soft touch—and maybe a few impressed with his dark good looks—and word of mouth through the gay community that finally one of their own had arrived.

I was happy for him, but a little bit jealous, too. I knew a lot of hunks were now bringing their dogs and cats to see the 'gay vet.' What if one of them proved to be too much of a temptation for Keith?

Over dinner one night I ventured to bring it up. I've never been very good at confrontations, benign or otherwise, and dreaded Keith's reaction. What if he thought my jealousy was

silly, or worse, unfair? I didn't want to come across as the controlling type.

I surprised myself with my feelings. I sincerely hadn't thought I was the jealous type. It had never bothered me before whether the man I slept with fucked someone else. Just like I never thought much about my own fidelity. Now I found myself wanting to be faithful. And I desperately wanted Keith to be, too.

Keith was quick to assure me he felt the same way. I think I fell deeper in love at that moment.

Dinner was another excellent meal prepared by Keith, who was turning out to be a bit of a gourmand now that he had someone to share his skills. Tonight it was stuffed manicotti shells with herbed spinach and cheese filling. I'd made up a fresh pitcher of ice tea—we made it a habit not to drink at every meal. Everything in moderation, you know. Well, except for sex. We hadn't gotten around to moderating that yet.

"So, did you have a busy day?" I asked, spooning some extra sauce onto my pasta, along with a generous sprinkling of *Parmigiana Reggiano*—until Keith, I'd never realized there were top-shelf cheeses right up there with premier wines. We both talked freely about our disparate jobs. I was fascinated about veterinarian medicine, even if I couldn't stand the sight of blood. I can't even watch CSI, I'm so likely to blow my popcorn.

"I don't even look at the clients," he continued our conversation. "Their pets get all my attention, I'm afraid. If they're angling for attention, they're in the wrong place. The only man who interests me is already in my bed."

It was less than two weeks before Keith's folks came out. I'd already booked a suite for them, making sure I got them one of the best rooms our hotel had to offer. I wanted to make a good impression on the people who were essentially going to be my parents-in-law. We planned on having them to our place for dinner on the first night. Then we'd take them into the city to sample some of the finer restaurants the Bay Area had to offer the rest of the time. It was their first time to the west coast.

Keith wanted to make the most of it. He wanted to show off his new home.

"They don't take holidays often enough," he said. "Between the two of them, they spent so long pinching pennies they've sometimes forgotten how to spend. I keep telling them they're young, that they need to enjoy life now while they can."

Keith intended to make sure they enjoyed every minute of their stay. I was determined to help him.

"We'll make it special," I said. "They'll go away with so many memories, it'll take 'em months to sort them out." We were lying in bed, enjoying a quiet evening at home, something that seemed to happen with regrettable infrequency. I was working long hours, since the summer was our busy time, and Keith's hours were taken up with all those new clients. His surgeries had expanded, and now it was a rare night he made it home before eight. More than once he had stayed at the clinic until after ten o'clock, tending to emergencies.

"Speaking of holidays..." I walked my hand up his chest, playing with the light dusting of hair on his pecs, pinching one of his nipples into erectness. "We should plan something for the fall. I can get away for a week after September. What about you?"

"I can get Ahmed to cover things." Dr. Ahmed Alzhar was a floating vet who covered for vets around the city when they needed time off. "Let's check our calendars tomorrow and see what's a good time."

"Where would you want to go? Las Vegas? Santa Barbara? Vail?"

"That's too early for skiing, and I'm not much of a gambler. Santa Barbara sounds nice. Or Carmel."

"I'll see what I can swing as far as a room goes—"

The phone rang.

"It's your turn." I reluctantly stilled my wandering hand. I hoped it wasn't some veterinary emergency. I was primed for this night to end with a wild, raunchy fuck. There was no way I wanted to spend it alone.

Keith picked the phone up. "Dr. Anderson here."

His face went white, and he swayed on the bed. I grabbed him before he could drop the phone or fall over.

"What is it, Keith? What—?"

His mouth was open, and he was hyperventilating. I saw tears spring up in his eyes. He was shouting into the phone.

"When? Oh God, when? How—?"

"Keith! Baby, what is it. Talk to me!"

With horrendous effort he turned his glassy stare on me. The phone dropped unnoticed to the bed between us.

"My parents... car." He gulped, and the tears came in torrents. "Car accident. They're dead. Oh, Todd, they're both dead."

CHAPTER SEVEN

It was a nightmare. It had to be. Soon I would wake up and find out it had been a bad dream. I tried to tell Keith that, but for some reason he wasn't listening.

He scrambled out of bed after the phone call and ran through the apartment. I heard the crash of a kitchen chair and knew he had blundered through that room. There were no lights on anywhere. I continued to hear bumps and thuds, and dry, hoarse curses. From the other room I heard the dogs whining, upset by the spiking anger and fear in their world. More enraged curses from Keith.

I would have preferred tears. But once the first few had fallen, he had gone dry. Maybe it was his way of denying it. If he didn't cry, it wasn't happening.

I ran after him, trailed by a trio of confused, whining dogs. I gently ordered Shadow, Sleuth, and Taco back to their beds, and they went. I was sure they were grateful. Dogs don't take emotional stress well.

I followed the noises and found Keith back in our bedroom, throwing things into a battered suitcase. He didn't look up when I came in. I sat on the rumpled bed and watched for while.

He packed with a sloppy abandon that was so unlike the normally fastidious Keith. Things I knew he would never use even in a million years found their way into the suitcase, while he completely forgot to pack even one pair of underwear. I reached past his groping hand and pulled out a bright fuchsia and yellow Hawaiian print shirt that had been a gag on a gray California evening, and right now didn't seem so damned funny.

"You aren't going to wear this. Here, let me help."

I gently eased him aside, and surreptitiously began to empty the suitcase, then filled it up with appropriate clothes—and underwear.

He watched, still clutching a holey T-shirt with the name of a heavy metal rock band on it. This one had been used when we painted the kitchen in preparation for his parent's visit.

"I wish I could tell you it's all a dreadful mistake," I said softly, hoping my words would penetrate the fog he was in. "I am so sorry, Keith. Please, if there's anything I can do."

"No." He turned away abruptly. "I have to go to the airport. Buy a ticket..."

"Let me take care of that. You just get dressed. Can I make you a coffee? Would a glass of wine help?"

The tears came then, hard. He collapsed on my chest, drenching my bare skin with a flood of anguish. I held him as tight as I dared, and cried with him.

When the flood had been reduced to a hiccupping dribble, I leaned back. "Let me make those phone calls, okay?" I drew him up and guided him into the bathroom. "You take a shower. I'll be in the living room if you need me."

Still numb, I made the first phone call. Behind me the shower came on. I was able to book us onto a flight to Albuquerque that left in four hours. Too much time to sit and brood, but what could I do?

The next two phone calls were much harder.

"Hi, Mandy? Todd here."

"Todd, hi what's up?"

I told her what had happened. She'd been with Keith from the beginning of his practice. She knew how close he was to his parents. Her tears over the phone set me off again.

"He's really upset, Mandy. I have to get him on that plane. But I know Keith; he's going to start worrying about things. Can you take care of the clinic so I can tell him not to worry? Will you do that for us?"

"Oh God, of course I will. You tell him to go home and take care of himself. Oh Todd, he hasn't any other family, has he? How will—?"

"He has me," I said more fiercely than I meant. That stopped her cold. Stopped the tears, too. Good, now we could get things done.

"You're right. I'll go into the clinic and start pulling files. Tomorrow I'll make some phone calls. I can get Ahmed, no problem. I know he's not working right now. What about the dogs? Who's going to look after them?"

That stopped me cold. For the first time in my life I hadn't thought of my dogs first. I floundered for an answer. It was too late to call any boarding kennels. I'd have to postpone our flight—

"I'll take care of them," Mandy said.

"Are you sure?" I wanted to weep again, this time with gratitude.

"Of course," she said. "Anything for you and Keith. You take good care of him, Todd. Don't you worry about anything else."

I promised and left her blonde head buzzing with things to do. She was a good girl, she'd take care of things just like she said. Right now I had to concentrate on taking care of Keith.

The third phone call was to Jim, my boss.

"Sorry to wake you, Jim, but I got a bit of a crisis here." I told him what had happened.

He was instantly awake, the grogginess I had originally heard in his voice gone.

"I'm so sorry, Todd. You'll go back with him, right? That's okay," he said. "You take as much time as you need. And if anything else comes up, don't hesitate to call."

"Jim, you're the best. I'll let you know once we get to Santa Fe." I shook my head, I felt slow, drugged, and out of it. "God, this is such a mess. I can't believe it's happening."

"You just take care of Keith."

I hung up and made my way back to the bedroom. Keith was out of the shower, his hair damp and uncombed, dressed in

jeans and a T-shirt. I grabbed a brush off the dresser and brushed it, then leaned in to kiss him lightly on the mouth.

“All set, babe?”

When he didn’t speak, I got shoes and socks on him and guided him out of the house and down to the van with the dogs. We dropped the animals off at Mandy’s, then drove in silence to the airport.

New Mexico was a nightmare. We had to rent a car in Albuquerque, then drive through the night and try to find a place I’d never been to before. Keith was minimally helpful. I think shock was setting in, and he kept dozing off, sliding into a shallow sleep, in which he would moan and jerk, then snap awake with a soft cry. I pulled over once when he started thrashing around, afraid he would hit me by mistake and make me drive off the dark road.

We passed through the darkened streets of Santa Fe, and finally found the road the Anderson’s had their ten acres on. It was little more than a flattened dirt road. The entrance to their place was a hokey sign that read *Rancho Bonito* beside a mailbox atop a fake cactus. Beautiful Ranch. Martin’s sense of humor shone through the kitschy stuff. Day break suffused the eastern sky with saffron and pink by the time we pulled up in front of the one-story adobe ranch house and killed the rental engine.

We both climbed out onto the hard, packed driveway and stared up at the house. Keith was crying again, tears tracking silently down his unshaved cheeks.

I wanted to go and put my arms around him, but before I could move, the front door to the house opened and a short, balding man of indeterminate age stepped out onto the wide, wraparound porch. Or did they call them verandas here? Or maybe some arcane Spanish term? Funny the inanities that go through your head at a time like this.

The balding man approached us, arm outstretched. He looked from Keith to me, before finally settling on Keith.

“Dr. Anderson? Keith Anderson? I’m Ferris Bartlett, the Anderson’s—your parent’s—attorney. I am so sorry for your

loss. Please, come into the house, and I can answer all your questions.”



It had been a stupid accident. As long as anyone could remember, every Saturday the Andersons drove to the farmer's market on the other side of Santa Fe. They liked to pick up lots of local produce and corn-raised beef from one of the organic ranchers in the region. This Saturday had started out the same as any other.

Then came the encounter with a big rig on the trip back, followed by tragedy. It was small consolation that both of them had died instantly when their small SUV had ended up under the larger truck.

Keith still looked shell-shocked when Bartlett was done with his report. Then Bartlett looked at me.

“I'm sorry, I didn't get your name.”

“Todd,” I said, half rising from beside Keith. “Todd Richards.”

“Ah, Mr. Richards. Good, I'm glad you're here, too. That makes the reading of the will so much easier.”

I traded looks with Keith. Will? What the hell was he talking about? What did I have to do with Keith's parents' will?

“Mr. and Mrs. Anderson asked me to rewrite their will just last week.” Bartlett didn't seem surprised by that. Maybe his clients were always rewriting their wills. “Mr. Anderson mentioned an upcoming trip, and Mrs. Anderson seemed... uneasy.”

Keith's mouth trembled. “Mom was always a little afraid of flying. It was a really big deal for them to book the flight to California. When she gets...” He swallowed hard. “When she got nervous, she let her imagination run away with her. Always thinking the worst...”

I took his hand in mine, squeezing the cool flesh. I ignored the look Bartlett gave us.

He cleared his throat. “Er, yes. At any rate, they had me draw up another will. I can go over the details later today in my office, but the crux of the document is simple. The entire estate is deeded to you, Keith, as their sole heir, with the exception of this property.” Bartlett’s washed out blue eyes scanned the cozy living room, with its infusion of southwest artifacts and decor. “This, and the ten acres surrounding it, are deeded to Mr. Todd Richards and you, sir. Your parents gave it to both of you equally.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Why would they do that? Why give it to me, too? That’s not right...”

We were sitting in the kitchen on a pair of high-backed bar stools drinking coffee from a real Espresso machine. Keith still looked haggard and pale. My heart broke every time I looked at him.

He hugged his coffee mug in both hands, and drank what must have been his fifth coffee that morning. He’d start buzzing soon, but I didn’t know how to stop him. And a caffeine buzz was preferable to him drinking himself into a stupor.

“What?” Keith focused on me, then he let his gaze slide away again. He had been continually scanning the brightly lit room since we had moved here, after Bartlett had left. Was Keith remembering his parents? Did he see them move like ghostly doppelgangers through the place that had been their home?

The place that now belonged to me as much as to Keith.

What had Keith’s parents been thinking?

“They liked you,” Keith murmured. His voice still sounded hoarse, as if speaking was an effort. “They wanted to help take care of us. Oh, my God, what am I going to do, Todd? Everywhere I look, I see them. They were so happy here.”

I caught him as he came off the bar stool. He was trembling, but whether from fatigue, grief, or caffeine jitters I didn’t know. I smoothed my hands over his broad, muscular back, and wished I could take his pain away. He clutched at the material of my shirt, but no tears came.

“Come on, babe,” I said. “You need to rest. We can deal with all this later.”

“We have to go see that lawyer, Bartlett. I need to make arrangements—”

“Later,” I said firmly. “Bartlett will wait. So will everything else.”

I pulled him down the back corridor, wondering which room had belonged to his parents, knowing I didn’t want to take him there. I found a room that had a double bed and a stale, unused feel to it. This had to be a guest room. Was it where Keith had slept on his rare visits? I pulled him into it and sat him on the off-white duvet.

Reaching down, I swung his legs up, pulled off his shoes and socks, and went to work on his pants. When I had stripped him down to his boxers, I pushed him under the covers and shed my own clothes.

When I joined him, he rolled over and clung to me.

“Thank you for being here, Todd. I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

I brushed his lips tenderly with my own. “Hey, I love you, remember. And whether it’s ever official, I buy all that ‘in sickness and in health’ stuff. I’m not leaving unless you kick me out.”

I was glad when he drifted off to sleep. Thank God the coffee hadn’t interfered with that. I knew he’d feel a hundred percent better once he had some sleep, sleep and some distance, because in the end only time was going to heal this wound.

Time and hopefully my love.

I woke up once to find him sitting on the side of the bed, his head buried in his hands. I slid up beside him and put my hand on his arm.

“Keith?”

“I’m all right,” he said. “Really. Well, okay, not all right. But I’m getting there. It’s still so hard to believe they’re gone. It seems like a bad joke.”

I rubbed the bare skin of his back.

“Come back to bed, baby.”

He did, and we made love. It was a sweet, life-affirming act; there were no fireworks, but in the end, we fell asleep holding each other, and didn't wake up until the New Mexico sun was streaming in the curtainless windows.

Keith blinked at the too-bright sunlight. "Remind me to switch rooms. I always hated this room."

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. "Ready for some breakfast?"

He shook his tousled head. "Not right now. Just coffee is about all I can handle at this point." He must have seen my frown because he smiled. "I promise I'll eat later. Maybe we can grab something in town after we see Bartlett."

It was a rough day. We got the official reading of the will, and it was just like Bartlett had said. It all went to Keith, except the ranch house and land. I was surprised to find out that included a couple of quarter horses housed in a brand new stable in back of the property.

"The Andersons became quite active equestrians since moving here," Bartlett said. "The property backs onto federal land. I understand you can ride for hours without seeing another soul."

After the reading of the will came the soul-wrenching task of making funeral arrangements. Fortunately—if you can call it that—I had helped my mother when Dad had passed two years ago, so I knew some of the ropes, and was able to get Keith over the major hurdles. He was pretty drained by the time we headed back to *Rancho Bonito*.

I managed to convince him to eat a roast beef sandwich and drink a glass of milk. At least I could get some nutrition into him. Then I put him back to bed, and while he slept I decided to explore.

Someone, maybe Rebecca Anderson, had been an avid gardener. But instead of trying to recreate New England in the south, as so many transplants did, she had been content to use native plants and supplement them with lots of local stone and wood.

Santa Fe was high country. Unlike the rest of New Mexico it wasn't a hot desert, but was rather a temperate zone, with true seasons. Right now it was high summer, with temperatures in the low eighties. A few scattered clouds marred the stunning blue sky. The trees that cast mottled shade around the ground cover were mostly deciduous.

I followed a stone-lined pathway back towards a couple of outbuildings. One of them fronted a large paddock. The new stable? I slid open a side door, and stepped into a dimness redolent of hay, dung, and horses. A sinuous bay head appeared from the furthest stall. A pair of huge brown eyes watched my approach. In the next stall, a gorgeous chestnut and white paint watched me warily, less friendly than his stable mate.

"Hey guy." I extended my hand, and the bay nuzzled it hopefully. "Sorry, no treats this time. Maybe later."

The lawyer had said they were quarter horses. I could see that at a glance. Good stock, too. Rebecca and Martin might not have been into horses before they'd picked up this pair, but they had known what they were doing, or they'd had expert advice. Under other circumstances I would have looked forward to getting acquainted.

I felt numb. Too much had happened in too short a time. I didn't know what any of it meant, and I couldn't begin to hazard a guess where it was going to take us.

I fed and watered the horses, then opened the rear stall doors and let the two of them out into the paddock. They kicked up their heels and raced around the perimeter, throwing up clods of dirt as they ran off some of the excess energy they had stored up from being cooped inside their stall too long.

I was leaning on the fence watching them when Keith found me.

"Hi," he said softly.

"Hi yourself." I turned to face him. He looked rested. He'd changed into a pair of worn jeans and a denim shirt that I had never seen before. On his feet a pair of well-worn cowboy boots hugged his calves. In his hand he clutched a cowboy hat.

"I kept this stuff here," he said when he caught me looking. "For some reason it made them feel better that I left some of my things here. Like they knew I was coming back, as long as I didn't take it all with me."

I gestured at the horses, now nosing the ground in search of grass. "You know this pair?"

He shook his head. "Dad told me about them, but I never saw them before. He always leased horses before. When he knew I was coming, he'd contact a neighbor and get them to truck in three. Last time I was out, he started talking about buying. Nice looking paint. That must be Mistral's Gold. The bay is Quincy."

I agreed. "Good stock. He knew what he was doing."

"That's the way Dad was. If he was interested, he got all the information available before he did anything." He stared down at the battered hat in his hands. "Probably why it took him so long to buy. He was waiting to find the perfect animals."

"Looks like he came damn close." I put my arm around his shoulders and pulled him against me. "How do you feel?"

"Better. Empty." His gaze went out to the distant, tree-covered land beyond the ranch. "Still feel like I'm on some heavy duty trans." "

"Shock." I ran my hands up his arms, feeling the tension in him. I leaned up and kissed him. He had shaved. "Do you want to walk a bit? You can show me around."

"Sure." He took one last look at the horses, and then turned away from the paddock. "Come on, I'll show you the back forty."

He led me past the stable I had visited earlier, and we circled around behind the white adobe structure. We passed a couple of empty paddocks, and Keith looked at them with a dull hollowness that prompted me to take his hand in mine. He met my eyes, and all I could see was a sadness that broke my heart.

"What is it, hon?"

"Dad..." He swallowed and looked out over the paddocks of rich grass and scraggly weeds. They had a neglected look.

“Dad was going to pick up some more mares and start a small breeding program of Quarter Horses. Mistral’s Gold was meant to be his foundation mare. He’d already been talking to a neighborhood rancher to have her covered by one of his studs. It was his dream to raise quality barrel racers. He and Mom fell in love with the sport when they moved here. Quincy is a retired barreler, and Mistral’s sire is one of the country’s top champions.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. It was always sad to hear about dreams that were never fulfilled. He shook himself like a dog and squeezed my hand. Without a word, he strode away from the paddocks, toward the rear of the nearest outbuilding. A pair of hawks glided overhead, wings barely moving in the warm updraft. A faint, dust-scented breeze whispered through a nearby grove of aspen and pine. In the distant, blue-gray folds of mountains reared over the forests that spread north and east, until they vanished into the far mists.

Keith saw where my eyes had strayed. “Santa Fe National Forest. One-point-six million acres. Those are the Sangre de Cristos Mountains. That high point is the Truchas Peaks. Some of the best trout fishing in the country up there.”

He recited it like he was guiding tourists. No passion. A heaviness filled my gut. I wanted his passion back. Would that ever happen?

But he never dropped my hand as he led me toward the nearest line of aspens to a crude wooden fence, half concealed with morning glories. As we approached, a rabbit darted out from under my feet and vanished into the thick brush on the other side of the fence. I jumped and then laughed at the unexpected fright.

He didn’t laugh with me.

“You know what I’d like,” I said, hoping to penetrate his depression. He turned empty blue eyes on me.

“What?”

“Take the horses out. I haven’t been on a horse in years. You could show me the sites. I could show you how dorky I look on a horse.”

"I don't know, Todd."

I swung around to face him, taking his face in my hands. "I can't stand to see you like this, Keith. Your parents wouldn't like to see this. You know that. I know you'll never forget them. Trust me, I know. I lost my dad four years ago, and it still hurts. That never goes away, but you can't stop living or loving. They would hate that." I stroked his smooth cheek. "Wouldn't they?"

I thought at first he was going to refuse to answer me. Then he shuddered and reached up to grip my wrists. But instead of pushing me away, he drew me against his lean form. I melted into his embrace, laying my cheek against his chest, feeling the slow, reassuring beat of his heart through his cotton shirt. I inhaled his achingly familiar scent and sighed.

"I love you, Keith."

He didn't answer, only held me close.

"Let's go home," I said softly.

He nodded and let me lead him back to the house.

CHAPTER NINE

The funeral was a somber affair. It was completely incongruous that throughout the entire ceremony the sun shone through the cemetery trees and sparkled off granite headstones with a blinding brilliance. It should have been raining. Even Keith was dry-eyed during the short service.

Nearly four dozen people came out to the cemetery. They were all in their forties or fifties, friends and acquaintances of Rebecca and Martin. None of them paid any attention to me. Some of them seemed to know Keith, though their greetings were subdued. It fit with Keith rarely coming back to visit. He was too busy and too poor. Did that torment him now? Did he wish he had made more time? I remembered the guilt I had carried for years over my father's death six months after I had left for San Francisco. He hadn't begrudged my moving away; in fact, my mother had told me afterwards that he was proud of me. I had been tearless through his funeral, too. Though my heart had ached, I had kept it together. My mother's words that day made me weep for what was lost, for what could never be.

Following the cemetery, most of us returned to *Rancho Bonito*, where helpful neighbors had earlier delivered enough casseroles to feed a standing army. I don't know about Keith, but I was going to be sick and tired of casseroles. Then again, the way he ate what I handed him, never asking for more, told me he probably wasn't tasting anything. I followed him around, plying him with tidbits of his favorite foods, trying to keep him away from the wine and Jack Daniels that some enterprising fool had brought in.

In the end, I gently shooed everyone away. Most went willingly, but a couple seemed determined to linger. I got the impression they didn't want to leave Rebecca and Martin's only child in the clutches of yours truly. But in the end my persistence paid off. Being a hotel manager gives you a certain talent in managing people. Once the house was empty, I led an

inebriated Keith into our bedroom and tucked him into bed. When I joined him, he rolled over, breathing alcoholic fumes into my face, and fell asleep, his arms draped over me. I didn't find sleep quite so easy to find.

The next morning he was even quieter than usual. I attributed it to a hangover, but his sullenness only grew as the day lengthened. I fed the horses, turned them out, and cleaned out their stalls. I wasn't used to such hard physical labor, and by the time I was done slogging manure-laden straw out and replaced it with clean, fed and watered everyone, and dragged my sorry ass back into the house, I found Keith back in bed. I tiptoed to the bathroom, showered, and made my way back to the kitchen, where I forced myself to cook and eat a tasteless breakfast. Then I went out for a long walk that I hoped would leave me exhausted enough to sleep.

When I returned, Keith was sitting at the kitchen table in his robe, a cup of coffee in front of him. I looked around but saw no signs he had eaten anything. His hair was damp, so at least he had taken a shower.

He glanced at me and looked away.

"We need to talk—" I started.

Abruptly he stood up. "Not right now." Finally he met my gaze. "Todd, I'm sorry. I need to go into town and talk to some people."

"Please, Keith."

"I need to do this. I'll only be a couple of hours."

I let him go. What choice did I have?

I didn't want to lose him, but I was at a loss as to what to do to keep him. He was shutting me out.

I hated it.

Keith found me later that day back at the stables. I was grooming Mistral's Gold, the paint, smoothing a brush over her well-muscle haunches, wondering what it would be like to ride her. She was gorgeous, and I was half in love. Grooming her had given my mind a chance to get off the torment of Keith. When he appeared in the stable door, my heart soared.

"Hi," I said.

"Do you want to take them out for a ride?" he asked quietly, feeding some carrot strips he had brought with him to Quincy, the bay in the next stall. "I'm sure they could use the exercise."

"Sure."

Maybe in a different environment Keith would open up. Maybe we could recapture what we'd had before this nightmare began.

He showed me where the tack was kept. I finished grooming Mistral's Gold and found I hadn't lost the knack for slinging the big western saddles around. Maybe I wasn't as green as I thought. I had him tacked up in no time. Keith was still applying the brush to Quincy's coat.

"I'll meet you outside." I led the paint out into the brilliant afternoon sunlight.

Once outside, I swung into the saddle and idled the time away by getting my riding legs back. I tested Mistral's response to the bit, and the rein, as well as my legs, and was impressed with her response. She was a well-trained horse, a pleasure to ride. I didn't need Keith to tell me she had good blood in her.

Keith emerged from the stable and vaulted onto his horse. He wheeled around, and pointed back toward the distant line of trees, where he had taken me on foot the other day.

"We can hit some nice terrain back that way. Follow me."

We kept to a sedate walk, warming our mounts as we left the ranch behind. There were trails everywhere, but the one we took headed due west, toward a row of low purple hills alive with wildflowers, fir, and aspen. After a while, Keith moved into a ground-eating trot. When he hit an open field, he urged Quincy into a lope.

We covered a lot of ground. A stream appeared on our right. The trail wandered down to it, then away. At one point we crossed at a shallow part, the horses carefully picking their way over the wet, pebbly surface. We frightened a kingfisher off his perch; the big, blue and white bird vanished downstream, in search of a quieter place to hunt for fish.

"Lots of trout in these streams," Keith said. "Good eating if you're into fishing."

"I have better luck getting my fish out of a supermarket."

Keith laughed. The sound was wonderful after all our days of darkness. Maybe we were coming out the other side. God I hoped so. I missed the old Keith something fierce.

We crossed the stream again, and looped back toward a stand of aspen, and a lone weeping willow that hugged the secluded bend in the stream.

Keith stopped his horse and dismounted. "Let's give them a break."

I swung down off Mistral, wincing when my legs hit the ground, and I straightened. Okay, guess I wasn't in as good a shape as I thought. We tied the two horses to an aspen tree. I was definitely not used to sitting on a horse for hours at a time. I rubbed my bottom.

"Sore?"

I shook my head. "I expect I will be tomorrow."

Keith showed his teeth in a dazzling smile. "No doubt. What you need is a sauna."

"Or a massage from a gorgeous Swedish masseuse." I sidled closer to him, our chests almost touching. "Anderson. Is that Swedish?"

"In your dreams."

"You usually are," I said. "In my dreams, that is."

I rubbed my knuckles against his cheek. He reached up to take my hand and pressed it against his skin. He had taken the time to shave after he returned from wherever it was he had gone. The scent of his aftershave lay over his always-intoxicating body smells.

"Todd."

"Keith."

"Hey," I said softly. "You must have seen Brokeback Mountain. Two horny cowboys up in the mountains..."

He crushed me to his chest, feeling the thunder of our hearts race under the onslaught of our kisses. I savaged his mouth, swallowing his tongue and diving for his tonsils. My hands roamed over him, relearning the delicious curves and swells of his muscular body. The hard tube of flesh between his legs pressed tightly against my own erection.

He fumbled with the zipper of my tight jeans and shoved them down around my ankles. "Get them off," he muttered hotly into my mouth. "I want to fuck you."

"Are you sure we're safe?" The last thing I wanted was for some tourist to stumble across our little tryst.

Keith yanked at my shirt. "I don't fucking care."

He dropped his own jeans to the ground and lay down on top of them. He pulled me down atop him. I straddled his hips. The helmet of his cock rode up between my ass cheeks. He undulated his hips, one hand grasping my cock and stroking it hard.

"Christ, Keith," I groaned. "I'm gonna fucking come right now."

He used the copious amounts of precum off my cock to coat his hand, and slid it between my ass cheeks. He shoved two coated fingers up my hole.

I threw back my head and rode his hand, bucking and twisting, as he worked me harder and deeper. He had never been so relentlessly aggressive in his possession of me. When he replaced his hand with the head of his cock, I growled. He shoved it into me.

"Oh fuck, baby," I yelled, no longer caring who heard. "Fuck me like you mean it. Oh God, yesss."

His hands held my hips so hard I would have bruises there the next day. I leveraged myself off his shoulders and plunged up and down on his swollen cock, my head thrown forward and my eyes closed.

Then one hand left my hip and grabbed my cock. It was drenched with precum, and he stroked me hard. His fist pumped me. Our ragged breathing and the harsh *slap slap* of

flesh pounding on flesh was the only sound in the clearing, the only sound in the world.

He began to moan my name, his voice rising in a crescendo of soaring passion. His head whipped from side to side. Then he froze, his body bowing and thrusting his rigid cock so far into me I swear he rammed my stomach as he came, squeezing off several shotgun blasts of cum into my clutching hole.

I came, shooting through his hand, splashing his chest and face with my spunk.

I fell across him. His arms came up to hold me tight, lightly tracing circles over the damp skin on my back. I pressed my face against his throat, and swore I heard the thunder of his heart as it slowed and finally settled back into a regular rhythm.

He blinked his eyes open and met my adoring stare. My breath was still ragged when I kissed his mouth.

“Oh, baby.”

“Shit, I know what you mean.”

He grabbed my shoulder and rolled me over so we lay side by side. I ignored the sticks and stones that dug into my bare skin as he continued to stroke me.

“I love you, man,” he said so softly I could barely hear him.

“Love you, too.”

Something buzzed around my ear, and I swatted at it. Keith sighed.

“We better get cleaned up and dressed before we get eaten alive. The sight of my butt all covered with bug bites is not likely to inspire passion in anyone.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think a knobby butt could be kind of cute.”

“Not covered in Calamine, it isn’t.”

We washed as best we could in the cold water and redressed. Leading the horses down to the stream, we let them drink before remounting and retracing our steps back to the ranch. The sun was spiraling down into the western hills, throwing out deepening purple shadows that slowly swallowed familiar

landmarks. If it wasn't for Keith, no way would I ever have found my way back.

We rode into the front yard as the sun balanced its golden orb on the horizon before sinking out of sight. Darkness descended over us.

Under the artificial lights of the stable, we removed the tack from the cooled down horses. We gave them a quick groom before putting them to bed for the night, with some fresh hay and clean water.

When I came out of Mistral's stall, Keith was waiting for me.

"We need to talk."

I swallowed, pushing my heart back down into my chest.

"That sounds ominous." I tried to laugh, but he wasn't smiling. My heart didn't want to stay down. "What is it, Keith?"

"I want to stay here for a while."

"Oh." Now if that wasn't lame. "Uh, what about your practice? What about my job—"

"I want you to go back."

"Me? Go back? But—"

"There's a flight in the morning." Keith's eyes wouldn't meet mine. "I booked you a ticket."

"Keith—"

"I need to do this, Todd. For me—for us. It'll be for the best. You'll see."

Bitterness assailed me. He had taken me out there to seduce me one last time. One last super, let-it-all-hang-out-fuck for old time's sake. He already had the ticket to send me back home alone.

"I'm standing here, with your cum leaking out of my ass, and you're telling me it's over?" He winced but I didn't care. He had hurt me. Now I was going to hurt him. "For what? A goodbye fuck?"

I didn't bother reminding him half the ranch was mine. It wouldn't mean anything if he wasn't part of the package. Without him, none of it meant anything.

I was supposed to go home, tail between my legs.

I turned and walked out of the stable.

That night we slept in different beds.

CHAPTER TEN

I picked the dogs up from the kennel where Mandy had boarded them after our hasty departure six days ago. God, had it only been six days? Not even a week and my life was a total mess.

Good work, Richards. Total screw up in record time.

The next morning, when I showed up for work, Jim threatened to send me home again. “You look like shit.”

“I’m okay. Honest. Just let me work and I’ll be fine.”

He didn’t say another word, but I knew he watched me all day. I buried my grief behind a mask of polite good cheer. Being in a service-oriented business, you learn to hide your emotional ups and downs behind a smile. The customer doesn’t give a damn that you’re life is falling apart. They pay for service, and you give them the best you’ve got, or you find another line of work. Park your baggage at the front door.

The dogs and I found a lot of comfort in each other. They knew something wasn’t right, and they took to clinging to my side. Even my orders to use their crates at night were usually ignored. Each morning I found all three dogs sharing my bed, draped over each other and me.

I took them to the fair I had booked into before meeting Keith. They put on a flawless show, no thanks to me. As usual, the crowds loved us and crowded around afterward trying to touch the ‘wonder dogs.’ But at the end of the day, I went home alone.

I called Mandy, Keith’s receptionist at the clinic, but she hadn’t heard from him either, and was as worried as I was. I even broke down and called *Rancho Bonito* once, but the man who answered wasn’t the man who had loved me so deeply for nearly three months. It was a stranger, speaking in Keith’s voice, and even using Keith’s words, but his soul wasn’t there.

I hung up after a few desultory words. The only thing Keith asked was that I ship Taco out to him. He'd pay the air fare.

I made the arrangements the next day, and when Taco's tiny crate disappeared into the shipping bay, I felt the last wrench of my life with Keith torn asunder. I was truly alone now.

I called the clinic a week later to bring Sleuth in for his yearly checkup, and found the number was no longer in service. I jumped in the van and drove by, but the doors were closed and the sign was gone. A tilted Closed sign on the door was the only thing that indicated it had ever been anything.

Another call to Mandy at home found her number disconnected.

I was off that weekend, and I said to hell with it. I wasn't going to sit at home and mope over someone who didn't want me anymore. I dug through my closet and found the sexiest outfit I owned, stuffed a handful of condoms in my pocket—I was depressed, not crazy—and headed down to Castro to get some action.

I slipped through the doors of the Pen and was immediately overwhelmed by the assaultive noise. Bodies were packed on top of bodies, and the smell was pure male stud on the rampage. I edged past hard bodies and groping hands to the bar and wedged myself between a leather-clad giant and a guy in a three-piece suit who looked like an accountant.

"Beer," I shouted above the din.

The barman nodded, slid a mug under the nearest tap, and poured. I tossed down a bill and turned away after telling him to keep the change.

A hand slid up my thigh, clamping down on my ass.

I looked up to find Leather watching me silently, a big leer on his pockmarked face. He looked rough and dangerous, and it took me about two seconds to decide. I nodded and jerked my head toward the back where the rooms were. I wanted rough and dangerous right now. If I had a shrink, he'd probably tell me I was punishing myself for being rejected. Well, fuck shrinks! And fuck Bubba here, too. Though I think in a few

minutes it was going to be me who got fucked. I hoped he had something worthwhile between those leather-clad legs.

We crowded into a small, dank room no bigger than my bathroom at home, and he immediately opened his pants, revealing a respectable seven inches of dark, meaty dick. He grabbed my head and forced me down to my knees. Subtlety was not this guy's middle name. All around us men were doing the same. The air was full of grunts and moans and the dense, sea water smell of fresh semen.

I'd gone too far to back out now, so I dove in. His pubes were sweaty and smelled of stale urine, and he forced all seven inches down my throat in one thrust. I sucked and pulled, hoping he'd come fast, but the guy must have had a few drinks too many before he laid eyes on me. He could barely stay hard, let alone come.

After several minutes of that, he jerked me to my feet and spun me around. He yanked at my tight jeans and shoved them down around my ankles.

"Bend over," he said.

Ah, a conversationalist. I did as he ordered, but not before shoving a condom into his sweating palm.

"Use it or I walk," I said.

"Oh yeah? What if I says no?"

"I scream rape and this place gets closed down for the night, and you get some heavy shit from the cops, not to mention the owners. Even if it comes to nothing, they still got your name in their little black book. Wear it and you can do what you want." I wagged my butt in his face. "I'm clean, and I damned well intend to stay that way."

"Anything?"

"Anything."

He slipped the skin over his rapidly hardening cock, and before I could say lube, he rammed it into me.

"Oh shit!" I screamed, and Leather put his thick arm around my upper chest, stifling my next cry.

“Scream away, chicken. This is your lucky night.”

Pain must have turned this guy’s crank, because this time he wasn’t long in coming. He drove into me seven or eight times, then grunted in my ear and bit me as he came.

“Fuck!” I yelled again, clapping my hand over my throbbing neck.

I jerked my jeans back up and hurried out of the room, past the groping hands that tried to take up where Bubba left off, before Bubba could decide to go for seconds. I’m sure it was my imagination, but it seemed that all eyes in the place watched me walk back to the bar. My beer was gone, and it took another display of cash to get a replacement. The barman licked his lips and leered at me as he slid the mug across the scarred bar top.

“How ‘bout you meet me after work, stud. I can keep you entertained longer than Wolseley can.”

“Wolseley?” I looked back at where leather-clad Bubba had taken me. He hadn’t come out. Maybe found some other sad sack to fuck. “His name’s *Wolseley*?”

I don’t think anyone knew why I burst out laughing, or why I was still laughing when I walked out of the bar five minutes later.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

By the time I got home I wasn't laughing anymore. I started shaking the minute I got the key in the lock and could barely get the door open.

What the hell was I thinking? Did I want to end up a squib on the back page of the daily newspaper? Cruising for dick and getting killed for it didn't qualify me for martyr status. It just made me stupid. Was I going to get myself killed to prove I wasn't good enough for Keith? Or was I trying to punish him for abandoning me?

Maybe I did need a shrink.

Shadow and Sleuth met me at the door, a hopeful look in their deep-set eyes. Normally I don't walk them after dark. I don't need them running into wild animals.

"Well guys, tonight's your lucky night. Walk?"

They went nuts at the W-word and started spinning around, barely waiting for me to get their leads on before they charged out the door. Normally I wouldn't tolerate that kind of behavior, but tonight it didn't seem to matter. Still, I had to establish some kind of order.

"Heel, settle down, guys. The park isn't going anywhere."

They heeled as ordered. This time I kept to the lighted areas of the park. No sense courting trouble by going off the beaten path. Not after dark. There weren't many people around anyway so I didn't have to worry about someone getting upset at my killer Dobes running amok.

I jogged with the dogs, trying to wear myself out. But even with that, sleep was a long time coming that night.

I dragged my sorry ass into work the next day, aching from my encounter with Bubba. Or should I say Wolseley? Fortunately, we were busy enough to speed the day along, and before I knew it, I was on my way home again.

When I got home, the phone was ringing. I leaped to grab it, my heart slamming in my throat.

"Hello?"

"Todd, it's me. How have you been?"

At my mother's voice my spirits sank. I flopped down onto the couch, not even reprimanding Shadow when he jumped up beside me. His head sank into my lap, and those soulful brown eyes peered up at me. I rested my hand on his knobby head.

"Hi, Mom. I'm fine. You know how it is, busy at work. No time for play."

"Todd, you are many things, but a good liar isn't one of them." Amusement and concern warred with each other in my mother's voice. I'm not sure which won. "What is it? Fess up."

"Oh, Mom," I sighed and rubbed the bridge of my nose. "What difference does it make now? He's gone."

"You met someone."

"There was someone. I thought it was serious but it's over..."

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry. I wish you had told me."

"Do you, Mom?" I sat up, rubbing Shadow's lazy ear roughly. He grinned at me and twisted around to expose his tan belly. "Doesn't it bother you that if I tell you I love someone it's going to mean a guy. A man?"

"I've known who you are for a long time. You can hardly surprise me now. Sometimes I think I knew before you did. Or at least before you acknowledged it."

"Come on, I knew I was gay in junior high. I just didn't know what to do with the information."

"Well there you go," she said. "I suspected it in your last year of elementary school. Do you remember your best friend, Roger Courtney?"

"Sure, I remember Roger. What about him?"

"You used to give him the biggest moon eyes when you thought no one was looking. Well, I was looking. He never even knew you thought about him that way."

We both laughed.

"Moon eyes. Give me a break, Mom."

"So who was this man? Was he very special?"

"Yeah, he was," I said softly. I rotated my free hand across Shadow's stomach. If he had been a cat, he would have been purring. "Still is, which is the part that hurts the most. I thought it was the forever kind of thing."

"Are you sure it's over?"

"About the only thing I'm sure of anymore is that I'm not sure of anything."

"My poor baby," she said. Only my mother could get away with that kind of inanity. "I'd tell you to be strong, but you already are most of the time."

"Most of the time?"

"We all have our moments of weakness."

I thought of Bubba and figured I could definitely qualify him as that. As long as weakness equaled stupidity. That was one moment I wasn't going to share with my mother.

"Listen, I gotta go, Mom. Thanks for calling, and for being there. It means a lot to me." I know I sounded glib, but it was the truth. It did mean a lot. I thought of all the poor guys out there I'd met, since coming out, who had been rejected by their parents for daring to be honest. At least I knew my mother would be there for me, even if she didn't always understand where I was coming from.

"I love you, Mom."

"Love you too, Todd. Call me soon."

I cradled the phone against my neck after the line had gone dead. Suddenly I didn't want to be alone tonight.

I stared down at Shadow's watchful gaze. "How about Danny? You like Danny, right? Let's see if he and Michael are in."

Daniel Ortez had been a friend of mine for years. He was into Dobermans in a big way, breeding and showing them over

in Petaluma. I hadn't bought from him—he was into American-bred Dobes—but he had nice dogs, for all that.

He answered on the fourth ring.

"Toddy, how's it hangin', man?"

"Hangin' with the best of them, Danny boy. How's Donita doing?"

"Best of Show last two times out. I'm thinking of breeding her to Poppy. They ought to have some dynamite pups."

"Your best bitch and your best dog, I'll say." I couldn't resist the dig, "For Americans."

"Yah, yah. Like we don't all know your bias. Why don't you come over and see for yourself. Michael was just asking after you the other day. He'd love to see you."

"I'd love to, Danny. When's a good time?"

"We were just sittin' down to dinner. How 'bout you come by for after-dinner cocktails. You can tell us all about your stimulating bachelor life. Us old married folks can always use the excitement."

"I'll take you up on that. See you around eight?"

"Eight it is."

The rest of the week crawled along to its natural conclusion. At least I worked this weekend. It was a relief not to have to face the empty house when everyone else was out partying.

Another convention hit town, and we were hopping. I put in double shifts Friday and Saturday, and saw the last of the conventioners off on Sunday. Then it was time to supervise the cleanup. I stopped in the Blue Room after work Sunday night and settled down at the bar with a mug of beer, a bowl of nacho chips and salsa. Suzy brought her tray over to lean on the bar beside me.

"Don't see much of you anymore, Todd. Guess Jim's keeping you busy."

"Yeah. It's been jumping lately." I licked a foam moustache off my upper lip. "How about you?"

"Busy. Haven't seen that cute guy you were with that night. I thought you two looked pretty serious. He not in the picture anymore?"

"He's in New Mexico."

"Well, speak of the devil," Suzy said quietly.

I turned.

Keith stood in the entrance. His eyes locked on me.

I stood up as Keith approached. My heart started hammering in my chest so hard I thought for sure that the whole room could hear it. I rubbed the sweating palms of my hands on my pant leg.

Keith stopped in front of me.

"Keith."

"Todd," he said. "Good to see you."

He looked good. Hell, who was I kidding. He looked great. At least I knew he'd been taking care of himself. He might have lost a bit of weight, but he still looked good. Damn good. He was carrying a briefcase, which I'd never seen before, and he wore a three-piece suit that showed off his fine body nicely. It was a far cry from the lab coat and jeans I was used to seeing on him.

"You down here on business?"

"What, this?" He laid the briefcase on the bar top. "I guess you could say that. I closed down the clinic."

"Yeah, I know. I went by."

He looked surprised. "Oh, well, yeah... I decided to move it out to the ranch. Dad had a workshop that's perfect. I've already picked up a dozen clients. Friends of Mom and Dad."

"I'm glad for you." I toyed with the rim of my beer mug. "I guess you won't be coming back this way much then."

"No, no reason to. Except to visit friends."

I winced. I'd been neatly relegated to the category of friends. Just how much better could this day get?

He gestured toward the exit. "Could we go someplace? I'd like to talk—privately."

"Sure." I wasn't sure I wanted him back at my place. But where else?

"I booked a room here." He dangled a familiar keycard in his right hand. One from this hotel. "Could we go there?"

"When did you do that? I handled all the bookings today. Nothing came through on my shift."

"I just booked it." He ducked his head shyly. "I watched you come in here, so I figured I'd catch you after."

"Oh. Okay. Now?"

"Sure."

He grabbed the briefcase and led the way toward the bank of elevators off the big oak and marble lobby. I waved at Tomas on the front desk. He nodded back at me.

Keith punched in the fourth floor. His room was at the end of the hall.

It was one of our smaller rooms. Not much more than a king-size bed and a couple of easy chairs with a TV mounted on a swivel, in front of the bed.

"I'd have upgraded you to a suite if I'd known you were coming. You should have said something."

He shook his dark head. "I'm only in town the one night."

I'd always heard the expression 'his heart sank' and never understood what it meant. But there's truth in some clichés, and when his words penetrated, I definitely felt a sinking feeling in my gut. I felt slightly nauseous. How could we have had so much, and it mean so little now?

He sat in the easy chair. I perched on the edge of the bed facing him.

"What do you want, Keith?"

"I'm sorry I hurt you, Todd. It was never my intention. I only ever wanted what was best for both of us."

And I thought we were best for us. Guess I was wrong. I planted my feet on the carpeted floor, and stared down at my hands, upturned in my lap.

"I really can't stay," I said. "I have things to take care of."

"This won't take long."

He opened the briefcase and drew out some papers. Several of them were slick, four-color sheets, like the type we set out in the lobby for tourists to grab, listing local sites and places of interest.

"I've got the clinic set up, and I've already established the hours. Only three days a week, plus a half day for surgery. That way I figure I'm free to help anywhere I'm needed."

"I'm not... I don't understand."

He handed me several sheets of paper. "I drew these up with the help of a guy I met in Santa Fe. You can probably do better, but they'll get us started."

"Started?" I took the papers. "Started at what?" Then I looked down at what was in my hand.

The first thing I saw was the name *Rancho Bonito* over a picture of the main house. Then a night shot, with the inner house lit up and several well placed spotlights on the grounds outside. There was even a small photo of the corral with Quincy and Mistral's Gold.

The copy was simple enough. The *Rancho Bonito* Bed and Breakfast was open for bookings year round and offered a variety of activities in and around the Santa Fe area. Hiking, horseback riding, fishing, golf, a pool, a sauna, and gourmet meals in the Cafe Kingfisher.

I looked up to meet his eyes. "Cafe Kingfisher? Gourmet?"

"I found this incredible chef who's all set to sign with us. Guy looks like a truck driver, is married to a lovely little Hispanic lady, has five kids, and cooks like a dream."

I put the advertisement on the bed beside me. "What's going on, Keith? I mean, one minute I think we have something special, the next I'm being invited to catch the next plane out of

town, do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars. Now suddenly you show up, and I'm supposed to what? Dive into your ass? Bend over so you can fuck me one more time? Sorry, I've been fucked enough lately, I don't need the aggravation right now."

Keith winced at my crudeness. "I know you're sore, and I shouldn't have done it that way, but I was so messed up with Mom and Dad. I think I mixed it all up with you somehow, and thinking of you made me think of them, and it just hurt so damned much I wanted away from all of it. Mandy says—"

"Mandy? I tried to call her to find out if she knew anything after you closed the clinic, but she was gone. She's with you?"

"I asked her if she felt like moving and she said hell yes. She's tired of the Bay area, said there's way too many gay guys here and how is she supposed to find the man of her dreams when there's no one straight around anymore? She helps in the clinic, but she's good with the horses, too. I have a lead on four more, by the way. But I didn't want to commit until I got you to look them over. If we're going to have guests who want to go on trail rides, we need more horses, right?"

"We? We? You keep saying *we* all the time. You were the one who cut out on us. I never left. I was invited to go. I had your spunk dripping down my leg, but I was still invited to leave. I left. Why the hell would I want to come back?"

Keith got out of the chair and before I could move sank down onto his knees in front of me. He took my hands in his.

"Because I love you. Because I want to marry you, and be with you the rest of my life. Because I fucked up and I'm praying it's not too late for us to start over." He raised my hands to his lips and caressed my tingling skin. "Is it?"

"Is it what?" I said hoarsely. I was having a hard time concentrating. I could smell him, the all-too familiar scent of his soap, and that special smell that was just his. I stared at a spot on his shoulder, doing all I could to resist the urge to bury my head there.

"Is it too late?"

"It's only seven o'clock."

"What?"

"I don't know, Keith. How am I supposed to trust you now? You think we can just brush it under the rug and forget about what you did to me—to us?"

"I told you I was sorry. I overreacted and lashed out at you. It wasn't fair and it wasn't right, but I wasn't thinking. Can't you give me another chance?" I'd never heard him beg before, but I still had too many memories of the pain he had inflicted on me.

"How do I know you won't do the same thing a week from now? A month? Next year?"

"You don't, I guess. All I have is my word. I love you, Todd Richards."

I reached out to touch his head, but he pulled away from me. Reaching into the inner pocket of his suit jacket, he withdrew a small box.

"Maybe they won't let us do this in a church, and maybe no one but us will recognize it, but I want to marry you. And I want you to wear this so you'll know you're married to me." He drew out a plain gold band, and while I stared at his hands, he slipped it on the third finger of my left hand.

I clenched my hand into a fist, mesmerized by the look and feel of the gold circlet. "Keith—"

"Don't say anything," he spoke in a strangled voice, squeezing my fingers so hard I winced. "Not yet. Not until..."

He slid both hands up my thighs, and before I knew what he was doing, he opened my fly. Before I could do more than groan, he leaned down and enclosed my cock with his hot, wet lips.

I had dreamed of this moment for so long, I couldn't believe it was really happening. Raw desire surged along my frazzled nerve endings, and I pumped my hips, driving my cock deeper into his wet mouth. God, I wanted nothing more than to fuck his mouth until I blew my load. But things had happened since we split, things he had a right to know about.

The hardest thing I ever did in my life was pull away from that delicious mouth and set Keith back on his heels. He looked up at me with glazed eyes.

“What?”

“We have to talk.” I deliberately used the same words he had used to send me home a lifetime ago. I pointed to the nearest chair. “Sit.”

He sat, folding his hand in his lap, which did nothing to conceal the sizable bulge there.

“What is it, Todd?” He sounded alarmed. “Please give me another chance. I swear I won’t screw up. I was wrong, I know I was. But you have to forgive me—”

“This isn’t about you. It’s about me.”

“You don’t love me anymore. I really fucked up, didn’t I? God, I don’t blame you for being pissed.”

“Don’t.” I held up my hand. Belatedly I noticed it was the one with his ring. I twisted it around my finger, and forced myself to meet his confused gaze. “I did something when I thought you didn’t want me anymore. I... It was stupid, and I don’t know what I was thinking at the time, but I went down to the Pen and let some guy shag my ass.”

He looked pained at the admission. I saw his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. His face was pale, and he avoided meeting my eyes. God, what was I doing here? Keith had come back for me. Was I going to deliberately torpedo that? “Are you... Are you still seeing him? Do you love him?” Keith whispered.

Bubba and the concept of long-term relationship didn’t exactly fit on the same page, but I wanted to avoid getting into the details, if I could. I knew how pathetic the whole sorry episode would sound.

“No. It was definitely a one-night stand.” Actually a two-minute fuck and a two-day stand, since it had taken me that long to be able to sit down again, after Mister Pain-Is-Fun got through with me. “I knew it was a mistake the minute I got into it. I did it to punish myself. I did it to punish you, too. Maybe that’s why I feel compelled to tell you this. But I figure you had

a right to know.” And maybe I was till punishing him. God, was I really that petty? I reached out and stroked his hand.

He was silent for several minutes. I thought for sure I had ruined everything, had gone too far with my cathartic confession.

“Did you... were you protected?”

I could tell he hated asking, hated thinking about what I had done. We were even, I hated having to talk about it. But he deserved to know.

“Yes.” I averted my eyes. “I, we, used a condom. It was only once. But it was safe.”

He was silent and unmoving for several seconds. I opened my mouth to speak, needing to break the silence. One of us had to say something. He squared his shoulders and took a deep breath. Then he clutched at my hands, pulling them against his chest, where I could feel his heart slamming into his ribs. “Do you think that’s going to be enough to make me leave you? Or is it your way of telling me to get lost? Because if it’s the first, I’m not going anywhere. I fucked up once, I’m not making the same mistake twice. You want me gone, you’re going to have to call security to toss me out.”

“I just don’t want there to be any bad secrets between us.” I studied his face, looking for what? Some sign he was playing me? That was so not Keith’s style. “No more secrets. Not like that. No lies, ever again.”

“No lies.”

The enormity of what he was asking suddenly hit me. “What exactly are you asking me to do?”

“I want you to come to New Mexico and help me run this bed and breakfast.”

“You want me to quit my job and move to New Mexico. Just like that?”

“I want you to quit your job and move to New Mexico with me.”

“You’re asking a hell of a lot.”

"I can prove it to you," he murmured. "I can prove I'm not lying or playing games. Give me the next twenty years and I'll prove everything. Just give me a chance. Can you do that? Take one more chance on me?"

He scooted out of the chair and sat beside me on the bed. Neither one of us paid any attention to the brochures under us. He pushed me down, and pressed his hard body against mine. I could feel his cock, and twisted around to rub myself against him. I reached down to stroke him through his suit pants. But I never took my eyes off his face.

"I need time to think about this—"

"Take all the time you want." Keith grew feverish. "But I need you to know this—I want to wake up beside you every morning for the rest of our lives." He squirmed into my hand. "I want you to help me turn *Rancho Bonito* into a successful business we can both be proud of." He pressed hot, open-mouthed kisses on my face and throat. "I figure if we drop ads into all the major gay publications around North America, we can build a client base that'll keep us busy all year round. I have a list. We can start right here, tomorrow—"

He sat up and reached for his briefcase. I stopped him by lunging for his mouth, my tongue reaching for the back of his throat. When I broke for air, I growled against his neck.

"I don't want to see any damned list. I don't want to hear about advertising or client bases. I want you to tell me how much you love me." I ground my raging hard-on into his. "Then I want you to show me. I want you to keep showing me until they call you to check out tomorrow. Then I just may pull rank and keep you here a while longer. This is my turf. I'm the boss here."

"My tough guy," he whispered. Suddenly he sat up and pulled away from me. He jerked off his suit jacket and tie. He tossed everything carelessly on the floor and followed it with his pants and dress shirt. I heard buttons pop off his shirt.

Then he tore at my clothes. My own shirt and tie came first. It was a struggle getting my wool pants off over my rigid erection, but once he had tossed them after his own clothes, he

wrenched my legs open and dove between my thighs. When his face hit my pubes, I felt him swallow one of my balls, and I nearly shot off the bed. Rolling it around in his mouth, he tongued it, and probed with his lips, and even gently with his teeth. Then he worked on the other one. He opened my legs wider, and shoved his hard, wet tongue into my hole.

I came off the bed with a roar. My hips ground into his face as he fucked me with his mouth. His tongue was a battering ram, forcing my hole open to him, letting him dig deep inside me. I clutched fists full of bed covering in my hands as my head snapped from side to side. Passion beyond anything I had ever experienced rolled over me like roaring tides. I screamed his name.

My balls tightened and my cock jerked, but before I could come, he left my ass and wrapped his mouth around my throbbing prick. He swallowed me whole and my cum boiled out, splashing the back of his throat with hot fluid.

But he didn't swallow it. Instead he moved back down to my hole and let my cum pour out of his mouth, using his stiff fingers to work it in and around my back channel. With a grunt he eased his cock head past the tight ring of muscle and slid into me. He braced his arms on either side of my head and raised himself above me. His eyes were glazed and his face taut with lust.

"Still my tough guy?" he whispered. He moved his hips with excruciating slowness, plowing me with hard, steady strokes that caressed my prostate, pushing all my buttons. "Oh, fuck, Todd, I missed you. Ohhhh, yesss, just like that. You are so goddamn tight. Fuck, baby, fuck yes!"

I raised my legs, resting my heels on his shoulders. That drove him into me even further, and he began to thrust faster, losing control as his desire spiraled out of check. I felt his balls slapping against my ass, his breath was hot in my mouth as he jammed his tongue down my throat. I groaned and rose to meet him thrust for thrust.

He threw his head back, eyes closed and a pulse throbbing in his throat. I could feel a matching pulse in his cock. I clasped

his ass in both hands and worked one of my fingers up his hole, and then another, working it all the way in to the knuckle.

His entire body went rigid. He slammed his hips between my legs and his back bowed. His cock spewed molten fire into my channel. Again and again, he spurted cum out of his throbbing cock. I could feel the strength drain out of him. He sagged against me.

His softening prick slipped out, releasing a dribble of cum onto my thigh. He rolled over and pulled me into his arms. His lips were on my throat, layering feathery kisses along my jaw and across my face. He even brushed them across my eyelashes, tickling my eyes closed. The room was redolent of sweat and sex, and I never wanted to leave it.

“So,” he murmured against my damp skin. “Have you thought about it?”

I started laughing. He threw one leg over mine and held me against his rumbling chest.

“Funny, is it? Guy gives you his all and you start laughing at him. Hmph, talk about ego-busting.”

“Was that your all?” I rubbed my hands over his ribs and down to his hips. “And here I was hoping you had a few more fucks left in you.”

My busy hands slid between the cheeks of his ass and fingered his hole. I used my knee to tease his limp dick. He twitched, and I could feel the laughter in his gut. Then he sobered.

“Do you forgive me?” he asked.

“Only if you forgive me.”

“Always. You’re here, now. That’s all that matters.”

I poked my finger past his wrinkled orifice. “Do you really mean that? Then prove it.”

“Give me a few minutes, stud. You’re killing me here.”

“Oh, I doubt that.”

Keith levered himself up on one arm. "What kind of room service does this dump have? Think we could get them to send us a bottle of bubbly?"

I reached for the bedside phone. "I know the manager. Let me call the kitchen. I know where the private stock is. How does Korbel sound to you?"

"Like heaven."

I planted a wet raspberry into his belly button. "I always wanted to drink champagne out of some hot guy's navel."

Keith rubbed his knuckle across my cheek. His eyes darkened. "In which case you better make that two bottles."

CHAPTER TWELVE

We went down to breakfast together the next morning. Both our suits were slightly rumpled from the night on the hotel room floor, and Keith had to keep the jacket buttoned up to conceal the two missing buttons on his shirt. I resisted the urge to hold his hand as we walked into the hotel cafe. There were a scattering of guests and local business people having their power breakfasts and coffee. No sense ruining anyone's appetite by being too in their face.

I had stopped at the front desk beforehand, and less than ten minutes after we grabbed a window seat, my boss Jim entered the cafe. I half rose and beckoned him over.

"Morning, Todd. You're here early. Something extra on the schedule...?" Jim's voice trailed off as he looked from me to Keith.

"Jim, I'd like you meet Keith Anderson, Dr. Keith Anderson. Keith, this is Jim Grogier, the manager of the hotel."

The two of them nodded at each other.

"Keith's the vet I was telling you about."

Jim's eyes widened slightly, but that was the only sign he gave that he understood what I meant. The man I'd been pining over, who I thought had left me, was back.

"Have you moved back from Santa Fe?" he asked Keith.

"No, I still live in New Mexico. I've asked Todd to come live with me."

"It's a bed and breakfast," I said. Jim had known about my dream for a long time. He knew how badly I wanted to have my own business.

I watched him process the information, and realize what it meant. Dismay was quickly replaced by a smile. "Congratulations. You're getting one hell of a hotel manager."

Keith reached across the table to take me hand. "I'm getting one hell of a guy. I hope you're not too upset at losing him. I know Todd thinks highly of you."

"Can't say I'm too thrilled. You'll be damned hard to replace, Todd." Jim sighed. "But this sounds too good to pass up, so go. We'll struggle along without you."

"Now you're being melodramatic," I muttered, blushing.

Jim smiled. He reached out and shook Keith's hand again. Then he shook mine. He noticed the ring on my finger and his smile deepened.

"Congratulations again. Best of luck to both of you." He looked around the small restaurant. "Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but I suddenly find myself shorthanded, and I'd better put it in gear if I plan to change that."

We watched him leave. I picked up a piece of cantaloupe off my plate and chewed on it.

"You really have to leave today?"

"Well, now that you mention it," Keith murmured, sipping his coffee. "I did sort of tell Mandy I might stay in town a few days."

"But you only booked here for one – you bastard. You planned that, didn't you?"

Keith shrugged. "Hell, if you didn't want me, why stay? I'd have been on the first plane out of here, crying in my double straight-up scotch all the way back to New Mexico. The poor attendant wouldn't have known what to do with my sorry ass."

"Well, I know just what to do with it." I dropped my voice. "Take it home and fuck it till you can't walk straight."

"Now there's a business plan I can live with." Keith grinned. He glanced at the briefcase beside him. "Can we stop and get a few of these ads running? I'd like to have things rolling by the time we pack up and head east."

"Pack—Jesus, do you have any idea what I have to do now? What am I going to take? What am I going to need? I have to

finish up here. I can't just leave Jim in the lurch. I owe him at least two weeks."

"Whoa, guy. We got time. We'll take care of it. I figure we can rent a truck, you can crate the dogs up in your van, and we'll use the truck to move the bigger things. I definitely want that waterbed. Oh man, I'm not leaving that behind." He traced his index finger through a water ring on the table. "The master bedroom is in the back of the house. We'll get privacy there—all the guest rooms will be in the front part. It was my parent's room." A brief look of pain crossed his gorgeous face. "The waterbed will fit in there, no problem. There's actually a smaller room off the master bedroom. It was a dressing room, I guess. I figure it would make a nice place for the dogs. Then they get privacy from our guests, too."

We paid our bill and left the hotel. The next three hours were a blur. We got the ad in two papers and had appointments scheduled for a couple of glossy magazines that would raise our profile substantially. When I saw the bill for the ads, I croaked.

"Christ, Keith. Did you rob a bank on your way down here?"

Keith flushed. "Dad was an insurance nut. He was always buying up life insurance policies. He wanted to make sure Mom would never want for anything if he was gone. He never expected they'd go together." He looked away, furiously rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his hand. "Damn, I thought I was done crying over them."

"Hey," I said softly. "They were your parents. How do you get over that?"

"Yeah, thanks. Anyway, the bottom line is, we have money to advertise right. Plus, the mortgage insurance paid off the whole mortgage. It's free and clear."

By the time we reached my place, I was exhausted. With almost no sleep the night before, and the strain of the last few weeks, I was fading fast. Keith must have noticed, because he led me into the bedroom and gently got me out of my rumpled clothes.

He lay me down on the bed. "You rest a bit. If you want, I'll feed the dogs and start doing an inventory of what we might be able to use at the ranch. Sound good?"

"Rest with me?" I patted the bed beside me.

"Later, I promise. Right now you rest."

I tried to protest that I wasn't really that tired when I yawned. The next thing I knew, I rolled over and found myself alone on the big bed. A quick glance at the clock told me nearly two hours had passed.

I blinked away the vestiges of sleep and sat up. My clothes were gone, and a glass of juice sat on the night table. I sipped it, then went in search of a shower and clean clothes.

I found Keith in the living room, an open pad of paper on the coffee table and a bottle of beer beside it. The paper was covered with scribbling.

Leaning over, I kissed him, then sat down beside him.

"Feel better?"

"One hundred percent." I grinned and captured his hand. "You wear me out, I guess. What have you got there?"

He tapped the pad of paper. "The way I figure, we can use most of your furniture. You have some nice pieces, and we can use them in the guest rooms. Same with the rugs. We can put your stereo system in our room and move the bigger unit Dad put in there into the front room. I see that as being the main common area."

"How are you going to handle the kitchen?" I said. Once I started into business mode, my head started filling with things. "If you plan on having a full-fledged menu, you'll need to upgrade the cooking facilities. Will non-guests be able to eat there, too?"

"What do you think? Should we go with a full service restaurant? It's a bed and breakfast, so all we agree to serve is breakfast, but if we offer other meals, we can boost revenue and build our rep, too. People can come to our place and do it all. But a good restaurant? I sort of like the idea. Keep it small and

intimate, but with quality service and food. I'd say the area holds a very discerning public. We should do well."

"You'll need to bring a contractor in to find out what that entails—" I saw the look on his face and stopped. "What?"

"Already done. Friend of Dad's, been in the business for years. He's going to run up a cost estimate and some suggestions so we can look them over when we get back."

"You have been a busy boy."

"Hard work was all I had to help me try to forget you."

I thought of all the double shifts I had pulled, all the long hours I had put in, hoping it would make me so tired I could actually sleep through the night without thinking of the man I lost. "Did it work?"

"Not for a second."

"Good."

He looked at me and grinned. "You're a mean prick, aren't you?"

"Nah, just a big softy. Just don't cross me."

We both laughed.

"So, when do you think we can be ready to leave?"

I looked at his list, then looked around my place. "Four weeks?"

"I can live with that." Keith reached for his beer. "I should call Mandy, let her know what's happening."

"Do that, and while you're on the phone, get us a pizza. I have the feeling this is going to be a long night. Jesus, speaking of phone calls, I better call my mother."

That conversation went well. I even put Keith on to talk to Mom for a minute, and she seemed impressed. She was thrilled about the bed and breakfast idea.

"You'll have to invite me out to see it sometime."

"Once it's all fixed up, you'll be the first," I promised.

The next four weeks were interminable. But in the end we got everything packed, labeled, and ready to go. The stuff that

was going with us went onto the truck Keith rented. The stuff we didn't need went to Sally Ann.

Finally all my friends had been called, final visits had been made, and promises to keep in touch had been spoken. The dogs were packed into their travel crates, and the two crates crammed into the back of my van. Keith would drive the truck, I would follow in the van. We had the route planned out, two nights in dog-friendly hotel rooms already booked, arriving at *Rancho Bonito* by supper time on the third day if the logistics went well.

The truck fired up, belching diesel smoke into the overcast San Francisco sky. Keith shifted into gear and leaned out the window.

"Ready?"

"Lead the way."

We rolled through the streets toward Oakland. New Mexico here we come.



I'd like to say it was a big adventure, driving across country with the man of my dreams, heading for a new home. Really, it was a royal pain in my not-so-royal ass.

The first hotel lost our reservations, claimed they had a firm no-dogs policy, even though their own website clearly said otherwise, and the snotty front desk clerk seemed to be on the verge of wondering aloud why two guys wanted a hotel room together with a king-size bed. I felt like telling him exactly what we wanted it for just to watch his face when I described what we planned to do in it. He'd probably have personally burned the bedding the next day. Maybe even the whole bed.

In the end we got our bed, with the dogs, and our wild night of passion turned out to be two beers and a semi-cold pizza that tasted vaguely like fish, even though I had specifically asked for no anchovies. Oh the joys of being a newlywed.

We headed out the next day, only to discover that the van had developed starter problems. Small Town USA just loves dealing with faggots with car problems. They must have heard

the cash register ringing the minute we pulled up in front of the garage with the rental truck. A hundred and seventy-five dollars and two days later we drove out of town, determined that the next time we moved we'd shoot ourselves first.

Near Flagstaff we hit some nasty weather. We'd watched the thunder heads pile up on the horizon ahead of us for nearly an hour, before the sky opened up and dumped a small ocean on us.

The wipers were useless; I couldn't see two feet past the hood. After less than two minutes of that, I saw the turn signal go on in the rental truck, and we guided our vehicles off the road, onto the wide medium.

With thunder rumbling all around us, I wasn't about to leave the dogs alone in the van, so I sat there and watched Keith's hazards blinking. Then I thought I saw a shape moving through the downpour, and minutes later Keith threw the passenger door open and fell onto the seat, instantly drenching everything.

He offered a few choice curses to the weather gods, then shook himself like a dog and shivered.

"You got anything dry I can put on?"

I clambered out of my seat and dragged a suitcase out of the rear of the van. I handed him a T-shirt and a pair of boxers.

"It's the best I can do. My pants are in another bag up there." I indicated the rental truck. "Drape your jeans over the dog's crate. They'll dry out eventually."

He stripped. Less than two yards beyond my door, traffic continued to whiz along I-40. The rain wasn't letting up, and I had to hope some speed demon didn't drive into us by mistake.

Keith was still shivering, even when he got out of his wet clothes. I cranked up the heater, making sure it was blowing on his feet and legs. While he wrestled into my T-shirt, which was slightly too small for him, I took his wet stuff back and draped it over Shadow's crate. I got a long-suffering look for my efforts. Shadow hated storms. Sleuth on the other hand never seemed fazed by anything weather-wise.

I came back to my seat, and paused to admire the sight of Keith in a very tight T-shirt and pair of snug boxers. Goosebumps rode up his arms and covered his legs, and his lips had a slightly bluish tinge. With the heat cranked up, the roar of hot air drowned us out. We were silent while we watched the storm rage outside.

I hadn't wanted to think about it, but my mind betrayed me, and the thoughts came anyway. Was I making a huge mistake leaving everything to travel a thousand miles from my home and life, to live with a man who had already dumped me once? Sure, he said he loved me, and I knew I loved him, but there has to be trust in a relationship, right? Could I trust Keith? It had been devastating when he so callously told me to leave. If he did it again, I knew I'd never recover.

I opened my mouth to say something when a violent shiver from Keith set the vehicle shaking. In alarm, I studied his pale face.

"Are you okay?"

"C-cold," he whispered. "S-sorry, I can't seem to get warm."

All of my carefully constructed fears went flying out the window. I knew I loved him with an intensity that was unstoppable, even as it was alarming. I would risk life and limb for that love. Doubt turned to ashes in my mouth. I could no more stop loving him than I could stop the rains that pounded our little refuge.

"Here," I said. "We can't have that, can we?"

Leaning over, I began to massage his legs, pumping warmth back into him and getting his circulation going. He did the same to his arms, and before long the goosebumps disappeared. But something else popped up in its place.

I stared at the swollen bulge between Keith's legs and licked my lips.

"Getting warmer?"

Keith rubbed my thigh and leaned his head back against the padded Captain's chair, pushing up his hips slightly. I didn't need any more invitation than that.

I leaned down and pushed aside the material of his boxers, exposing the swollen length of his dick. It was already leaking precum, and I swirled my tongue around the purple helmet, capturing every drop of his pearly essence.

He shuddered as I swallowed nearly all eight inches of fat cock. I was getting better at this. I guess practice does make perfect. He smelled sweet and musky like the sea. I bobbed up and down on him, licking and sucking, hoovering him until he cried out and shot his salty load into my waiting mouth.

He blinked across at me as I straightened and sank back in my seat.

"Wow," he murmured. "Even your quickies are incredible."

Outside, the rain seemed to be abating. We watched for a while, before Keith scrambled back to the rear of the van where he slithered into his still-damp jeans. He kept my T-shirt on.

Our next hotel stop was Sun Valley. The delay made us late getting in, but this time the clerk had no trouble finding the reservations we had rescheduled after our delay to fix the van. In less than thirty minutes we were checked into a clean, if slightly dingy, room with two doubles. I didn't bother unloading the dog crates, just put their blankets in the corner and told the two dogs to settle down. They did so easily enough. I guessed they were tired too.

We paused only long enough to shove the two beds together, then we undressed, showered, and fell into bed. I don't know about Keith, but I was out instantly.

Muddy light flowed through the thin curtains the next morning. Keith was pressed against my back, and his hard cock poked between my thighs. I sighed when his hand came around my chest and squeezed a nipple, then smoothed the heel of his hand across the nubby flesh.

I undulated my hips to let him know I was awake, and seconds later I groaned when he slipped his cock into my tight

ass. He fucked me leisurely, with a deliberate slowness that was more intoxicating than a wild free for all. The hand that had squeezed my nipple moved down to wrap around my cock. He pumped me, matching the rhythm of his own strokes, in and out, up and down. Warm lips worked over my shoulders and neck; his unshaved chin rubbed against my sensitive skin. He took my earlobe between his teeth and nibbled. Electricity shot straight from my ear to my groin.

I moaned and rocked backward. With the inevitability of tides he increased his tempo. His breathing grew shallower, and harsher, as he began to slam into me with more force. Inside me, his cock pulsed and jerked, finally releasing a flood of cum into my tight hole.

His hand on my cock moved faster. He bit my neck and muttered my name, and I responded by exploding into his hand, splashing my chest and stomach with thick salty cream.

I rolled over and pressed my sticky body against his.

“Morning, beautiful,” he said. “Ready to go home?”

We’d be in Santa Fe by noon. I was suddenly eager to get back to *Rancho Bonito*. Now my home.

After a quick shower, I took the dogs for a walk. I came back to find Keith packing up our stuff. He had bought a bag of donuts from the coffee shop, and I grabbed a couple on the way out to the van. Then we were heading back out to I-40 and on our way to Albuquerque, from there going north to Santa Fe.

The sky had long since cleared up and, as we sailed north on I-25, the sun drove out all the shadows and seemed to be welcoming me back.

When we pulled into the front yard, Mandy came running down the steps, her frizzy blond hair flying behind her. Her grin was huge as she threw open my van door and dragged me out onto the dirt driveway.

“He found you! You came. I’m so glad.” She bounced into Keith’s arms when he joined us. “Now, where are those precious dogs? I want to show them their new home.” She

threw open the rear door and unhooked the doors of the two crates. Shadow and Sleuth jumped out and started sniffing around the driveway. A black and tan blur resolved into Taco, as he greeted everyone with an enthusiasm that only a small dog can muster. I got dizzy watching him spin and dart through, and around, dog and human legs alike.

Another figure appeared on the porch. I looked up when she descended the wooden steps.

"Mom?"

Keith was grinning as I stood there, too stunned to do more than watch my mother cross the driveway toward us.

"When... How? What's going on?" I said plaintively.

"Keith called me up last week and asked if I wanted to come out now, instead of waiting," my mother said. "I confess I was dying to meet this guy of yours, so it was hard to say no to him."

"I know the feeling," I said. Keith's eyes were glowing when I went up to slip my arm through his. "Thanks, babe." I frowned. "What would you have done if I had refused to come?"

Without hesitating he said, "I'd have sent her after you. She'd have changed your mind."

"You're probably right." I pretended to glare at the two people who had just manipulated the rest of my life. Both of them smiled back, and I broke down and grinned. "I'm glad."

"You'll never guess what's happened," Mandy cut off whatever else might have been said. She was still bouncing, and the dogs were starting to bounce with her.

We all stopped to stare at her. She grinned at the attention.

"Well?" Keith asked.

"We have our first reservation. A guy saw your ad in some travel magazine and thought it sounded just perfect. He's booked for a weekend in September with his husband. I know you said you didn't want anyone booking in earlier, so I told him that was the earliest available date."

September! Less than two months away.

"September," I squeaked. "How the hell are we supposed to be ready by then?" I turned panicked eyes first on Keith, then to my mother, and finally to Mandy. I didn't bother looking at the dogs for direction. They didn't care if we slept in cardboard boxes on the street. That's just the way dogs are.

"By doing what we're good at," Keith said, squeezing my hand.

"And what's that?"

"By working our butts off for the next two months and praying for a miracle."

"Oh, miracles I can pray for," I said. "But this is beyond a miracle."

Keith's grin was wicked. "Hey, you're the hotshot hotel manager. You make it happen."

"Oh, you are so dead."

"People, people!" My mother stepped between us. She absently patted Shadow on his black head. "Let's take this inside and sort it out there. We have plenty of time."

I suddenly realized I was exactly where I wanted to be. I stood beside the man I loved more than life itself, embarking on the dream of my lifetime. It was going to work because we were going to make it work.

"And if it doesn't," I said aloud. "Who cares? We'll still have fun trying."

Arm in arm, Keith and I walked up the steps into our future.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Hold her head. Whatever you do, do not let her up.”

I was practically sitting on Sally’s head. Horses are funny animals. They can weigh in at over half a ton of nearly solid muscle, yet if you can immobilize their heads, you can prevent them from moving. That’s what I was trying to do with Sally’s Mark.

My lover, life partner, and best friend Dr. Keith Anderson lay stretched out on the stall floor. He had stripped off his shirt, and normally the sight of his beautifully sculptured bare chest would have had me thinking lascivious thoughts of how absolutely fuckable he was. But right now he was lying flat on his side, covered in straw, and blood, and other unimaginable filth, with one arm stuffed up a horse’s ass. Definitely not the thing to inspire lustful thoughts.

I kept my eyes glued on the opposite, fly-specked wall. Normally I’m a pretty tough guy, but the sight of all that blood and writhing animal flesh was doing a real number on my stomach. I could hear a sickening squelching sound, and I wished I could redirect my ears as well as my eyes, but all I could do was to try to think of something else. Golf. Baseball stats. How about them Dodgers?

Keith grunted, and my eyes skated over him, instantly regretting the trip. His sinuous chest was sheathed in blood and straw, and his muscles stood out in stark relief as he strained to turn the breached foal inside our favorite mare. Keith caught my eye and frowned.

“Shit, Todd, you look green,” he muttered. But if I was expecting sympathy, I was disappointed. All I got after that was, “Don’t you dare throw up.”

I ground my teeth together and looked away again.

“That’s my baby,” Keith said, and I smiled—until I realized he was talking to the damned horse. “Come on, girl. We just

have to get this little guy turned for you to do your job. But you gotta be ready, hon. That's a good girl."

I don't know if it worked on her, but it did a wonderful job of soothing me. Not that I wouldn't rather be anywhere else—grocery shopping, sleeping, enduring an audit of the books for the IRS—but any time I got to be with Keith was a plus in my ledger book. I'd loved the man passionately since I'd first met him a little over a year ago. It had been love at first sight for both of us when I took one of my dogs in to see the new vet. Love at first sight for the two humans, that is, though I like to think the dogs loved him too.

It hadn't always been smooth sailing since then; we'd had our ups and downs. But now we ran this picturesque little bed and breakfast, just outside Santa Fe, that was doing very well, and added nicely to the income Keith brought in as a veterinarian, with a mixed small and large animal practice. It had sounded so glamorous when he told me he'd be looking after the equine trade, too. I hadn't realized at the time what that meant. If I'd known it meant middle-of-the-night sojourns up some pregnant mare's birth canal, I might have told him to reconsider—at least, if he expected me to be part of the package.

Usually I'm not part of the deal. That was an honor that normally fell to our horse wrangler, Darrel, but he was with his own pregnant lady right now, our assistant manager, Mandy. She was having some kind of false labor pains, and Darrel refused to leave her side.

So I was stuck with sitting on Sally's head while the love of my life swam in blood and guts and stuff I didn't want to think about. Talk about the end to a romantic evening.

We'd been invited to a posh gig at the home of one of Santa Fe's socialites, Mrs. Emanuel Henry Dominguez. Keith's parents had long been members of the Santa Fe community, and Keith had inherited their social standing. At first the socialites hadn't known what to make of this wealthy, good-looking, *gay* man, so they had tried to treat him like a bachelor. But Keith would have none of that. Invitations he received that didn't include my name were summarily rejected. The town

socialites might have gone along with that, if Keith hadn't been such a big supporter of their favorite causes. As it was, they'd had to reconsider their priorities, and now the invitations to their soirees were routinely addressed to Dr. Keith Anderson and Todd Richards. The expediency of money.

This particular evening had been fun. We had attended the opening of a new art gallery featuring paintings I could actually understand, and a wine and cheese party that had edible food. I was in seventh heaven. After we arrived home, I entertained visions of tumbling Keith into bed for a late night romp when he decided to check up on Sally's Mark.

So, there I was, sitting on her head, trying not to watch the love of my life climb halfway up inside the mare in an attempt to save her foal.

"That's it. Now you're coming," Keith crooned encouragement. "Push now, girl. You're almost there."

I felt Sally's Mark heave under me, and her entire body went rigid. Then I heard more squelching sounds, and this time when I looked, I saw something wet and squirming lying on the damp straw beside Sally. Under me, Sally gave a guttural sigh and lay still.

"Let her up, Todd." Keith was busy at the other end when I climbed to my feet and watched Sally heave herself up, shaking straw and lethargy away from her. She swung around to stare at the bloody heap on the floor between Keith's legs.

"Come on, girl. Get over here and have a look at him. How's my girl? Come have a look at your little stud."

Sally stuck her nose down and rumbled something in her broad chest. The little colt that Keith had done a fair job of cleaning up wiggled under his touch.

Keith and I backed away from the pair. It was up to Sally now. She had to bond with her new foal, and give him his all-important first feeding, or all Keith's efforts were going to come to nothing.

We held our breath as Sally snuffled at the newborn. Then she nuzzled it, and it jerked its knobby head up and made a

minuscule sound that was barely audible in the big box stall. Sally reacted to it.

She snorted and began nosing the foal in earnest. She licked him vigorously. In turn the foal began to try to get its spindly legs up under it. When the foal actually tottered to its feet less than ten minutes later, I knew we had a winner on our hands.

“And look!” I whispered fiercely. “He’s a paint. Look at the chest on that thing!”

The little red and white newborn stood beside its exhausted mother and windmilled its tiny stump of a tail in circles. Its nose was buried between mom’s legs, searching for that all-important first drink. We left them to get acquainted, and walked back to the house arm in arm. I was no longer mindful of the crud all over Keith; I was too tired to care, and I felt too damned good over the new arrival. For his part, Keith was as depleted as the mare, and just as exhilarated.

“You were right about her having a paint,” Keith murmured. “I didn’t think Chief Boniface had another one in him.”

I clapped him on the back. “Hey, when I’m right, I’m right. You watch, this guy’ll be worth a small fortune when Darrel and I are done with him.”

I held the door for him, and followed him upstairs to the master bath, where we both stripped and had a shower. The waterbed I had hauled all the way from California looked altogether too inviting to pass on any more. Within minutes of our heads hitting the pillows, we were both out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Rustlers?” I stared over the top of the Santa Fe New Mexican paper at Keith and tried to make sense of what he had just said. I frowned. “Horse thieves? In the twenty-first century?”

“Hey, horses are still a hot commodity and anytime something’s worth big bucks to someone, there are always people who will steal to share that wealth.”

I knew all about horses being a hot commodity. Ever since Darrel had approached Keith and me about picking up a couple of horses he could train in the barrel racing circuit, I’d had a crash course in the monetary value of a good horse. Even a potential barrel racer cost a small fortune. We had paid nearly forty thousand for the two five-year-olds Darrel had pointed out as strong prospects. When, and if, they turned out to be the world class barrel racers Darrel said they could be, we could probably sell them for at least twice that. In the meantime we were surrounded by some very pricey horseflesh, and now Keith was telling me we had rustlers in the neighborhood.

Keith finished his coffee and stood up. “Gotta run. Want to check in on Sally before I hit the clinic. Surgery today.”

That meant a short day. I looked over the top of the newspaper, and tilted my face up to receive his kiss.

“Listen, if the last surgery goes without a hitch, I’ll be off about noon. How ‘bout we meet back here for lunch.” He grinned and nibbled on my lips. “I’ll let you have your way with me.”

I perked up at that. Now there was a promise worth pursuing.

“Really? Turn the phones off and lock the doors?”

“For you—deadbolts and alarms. I missed you last night.”

“Nowhere near as much as I missed you.” I slid my arm around his hips, patting his luscious ass through the tight jeans he wore. “I’ll be waiting.”

He reluctantly left, and I went back to my paper. My mind wasn’t quite on it anymore, so after a few minutes, I gave up and went back to find the dogs and see if they wanted to go for a run. Maybe if I worked off some of this excess energy I wouldn’t be so hair-triggered when Keith got back. Right now I thought I might come in my jeans if he touched me. It had been altogether too long—at least three days.

Did I mention the guy makes me hornier than a teenager?

The two Dobermans and I had a good run around the ten-acre ranch, scaring up some rabbits and a couple of ground birds that were hotly pursued for all of thirty seconds before the dogs gave up the chase. Dobermans aren’t really hunters, though they still have the instincts to pursue small game. They just don’t have a clue what to do with it if they actually catch anything.

We headed back into the house, where the dogs flopped at my feet while I did some work in the office. Then I took a shower and waited for Keith to come home.

I was checking over a list of new email reservations when he walked into the office we maintained beside the bedroom. His hair was damp from a recent shower, and when he leaned down to kiss my mouth, I smelled his wonderfully distinctive scent under the soap and shampoo. I gave him plenty of tongue, and he slid his fingers through my short but thick hair and returned the kiss.

After several minutes we broke apart with a little gasp and tried to catch our breath. He could still do this to me after all these months.

“How’s Sally?” I murmured, circling his waist with my arm and drawing him down into my lap. “Tell me she hasn’t been rustled.”

“Don’t even joke about a thing like that.” Keith wiggled around to make himself fit more snugly into my lap, and encountered my swelling cock, which made him wiggle even

more. "I know you think it's funny, but rustlers are serious news."

"I'm sure they are."

I didn't want to discuss rustlers, or even horses for that matter. I only wanted to talk about what I intended to do with Dr. Keith Anderson and what I wanted him to do to me.

"Sally and son are doing well. Now how about you shut up and kiss me like you mean it. I've been waiting all morning for this. I don't want to waste a second of our lunch hour."

I pulled his head down and jammed my lips over his open mouth. This time our tongues met, and danced, and tasted each other until we were both gasping for breath. I slid my hand up the curve of his hip and wrapped my fingers around his massive boner. He filled my hand and made me ache for more.

So I went after it. Nimble I undid his jeans and slipped the zipper down, then eased my hand inside. Keith groaned when I enveloped his fat prick with my fist and pumped him a couple of times.

I nibbled on his lower lip. "Hello, sweetheart."

"Baby."

"I want your fat pole up my ass." My mouth moved toward his earlobe. His cock jerked in my hand, and I knew it sounded as good to him as it did to me. "What do you think? Yes? No? Any comments?"

"Yes!" Keith humped my hand, then rammed his mouth down on mine, playing some serious tonsil hockey. His fingers skirted the edge of my T-shirt, shoving it up over my head.

I divested myself of it and did the same for him. Our torsos connected, and I could feel the savage beat of his heart. Sweat slicked our skin and greased us up. His ropey muscles glistened in the light coming through the bedroom window. I put him off my lap.

"Let's go to bed."

After ridding me of my jeans, he backed me up to the bed and shoved me backward, falling on top of me. I clasped him to

me, and moaned when our cocks rubbed against each other, smearing our jutting poles with each other's sweat and precum.

I loved the feel of his naked cock up my ass. We'd both been tested again before we had moved to Santa Fe last year, and now we didn't have to use condoms. I trusted Keith with my life. I knew he'd never let me down, and he had the same faith in me.

I watched him slather lube all over his massive cock. Then he slid a lube-coated finger up my ass. I thrust my hips up to engulf it, and he leaned down to kiss me.

"Ready to get fucked, cowboy?"

"Ride me, baby."

He always took his time putting his cock inside me. The angry red helmet was damned near as big around as his fist, and he knew he could do some serious damage with it. Neither one of us was into pain, so he gave me plenty of time to adjust.

Once he'd eased past the tight ring of muscle guarding my back door, I took over. I grabbed his ass in both hands and lunged up under him, pulling him down to impale myself on his fleshy tube. He braced his hands on either side of my head and began to thrust into me. With my legs wrapped around his sweaty hips, I held him close.

With each stroke he slid across my prostate, and my hunger mounted. I threw back my head and began to writhe under him.

"Oh, God, Keith, ohhh fuck baby. Harder... *Harder!*"

He began to moan my name and slam into me. He grabbed my hips, hard enough to leave the imprint of his fingers dimpled on my flesh, and thrashed on top of me.

My orgasm blew out of me in an explosion of cum. It splashed onto my chest and his, a white hot river of cream. Then Keith gave a low, guttural groan and stiffened, his back bowed as he drove his cock deep into my bowels and came. I felt his cock pulse four or five times, before growing soft and slipping out of me with a soft pop and a dribble of cum.

We lay entwined on the bed while our hearts slowed. He spread gentle kisses up and down my chest and face, finally

settling on my mouth, where he sucked on my lower lip and kissed my chin.

"Have I told you today I love you?" He pressed his mouth against my throat, his teeth worrying my earlobe.

"Hmmm, ditto."

"Want to go for a ride this evening?"

I snuggled closer, draping one leg over his hip. "I thought I just did."

He slapped my still-tingling butt. "Take Mistral and Quincy out? The two of them could use a good run."

"Sure. Before or after we go see Mandy?"

Keith groaned.

"I knew it," I crowed. "You forgot about dropping in on them, didn't you? Would you forget a pregnant mare? Noooo. But your own employee? Ha, just like a man."

"I didn't forget. I just forgot it was *tonight*."

I laughed, and he looked indignant.

"How about we go see Mandy and then take the horses out. There's going to be a full moon. Maybe I can find some secluded spot where I can take advantage of you."

"Like you don't always."

"Never."

"Yeah you do."

"Nuh-huh. Don't."

He enfolded me in his embrace. "Well, whatever you do, don't stop. Promise?"

"Cross my heart."

I turned away from him and pulled out my cell to call Darrel about when would be a good time to drop in. We arranged to come over after dinner.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Something cold and wet snuffled against my cheek. Now, I knew it wasn't Keith. His nose isn't cold or wet. Neither is his dick for that matter. Wet maybe, but never cold.

I opened one eye and found myself looking up the elongated snout of my oldest Doberman, Shadow. I tried to glare at him but only ended up with crossed eyes. He happily licked my face.

I shoved him away. That apparently was his cue to start playing. He bounced on the bed, stiff legged, his stub of a tail rotating a mile a minute. Then he was off the bed and out of the room, only to return less than a minute later with his gorilla.

Now most people get a dog like a Doberman as protection. They reason that if a burglar breaks into their house in the middle of the night, being met by a hundred pounds of muscles and teeth is bound to discourage all but the most die-hard career criminal.

Well, I don't worry about burglars either. I figure any guy confronted by a hundred-pound Doberman carrying five pounds of stuffed purple gorilla is going to stop being a problem when the guy falls down and dies laughing.

I fell back on the bed when Shadow shoved his damp treasure into my face.

"You are single-handedly destroying the hard-won reputation of Dobermans the world over," I grouched. Shadow wagged his tail and grinned around his stuffed toy. Seconds later Sleuth came along and tried to take it away from him. A tug of war on the bed ensued.

"Will you three tone it down, or I'll throw the whole bleeding lot of you outside."

Shadow perked up at Keith's voice. He tried to share his treasure with his second favorite human with no better luck. Finally I got the two dogs off the bed and out of the room. Taco followed us out, bullying the bigger dogs into chasing him

around the dog room. They were racing around when I shut the door on them. Still naked, I padded across the carpeted floor back to bed. Keith eyed me appreciatively. I felt my cock start to thicken in pure lustful reaction to that look.

Keith got up on one elbow and stared at my rapidly swelling dick.

“See something you like?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” he said. He leaned forward and touched his tongue to my leaking slit. Seconds later he put his mouth on my expanding helmet and cleaned it of precum. “Want to share it?”

I rocked my hips forward and slid my cock down his eager throat.

“No,” I said thickly. “I don’t share with anyone. It’s all yours.”

“Good,” he mumbled around my six inches. He knew exactly what buttons to push, and it didn’t take him long to bring me to a roaring climax.

Afterward he took me in his arms and stroked my damp back.

“Do we have work to do?”

Normally on surgery days when he got off early, we spent the afternoon doing bed and breakfast business. I told him about the new reservations that effectively filled up the rest of our summer. It meant we now had only the next two weekends unfilled. That really meant escalating some chores we had been putting off. They needed to be done now.

“Painting,” Keith said the word I hated. I’d known it was coming, but it didn’t mean I had to like it. “We have to paint that guest room this weekend. Can you go into town and get the paint tomorrow?”

“Done.”

“A color we agree on?”

“Yes.” I avoided his eyes, and picked at a loose thread in our handmade quilt. “Of course.”

“Todd. What did we agree on?”

I mumbled something. I could feel his gaze on me, and ignored it for all of ten seconds.

"All right. Ecu. Beige." I made a gagging sound. "*Eggshell*. God forbid we should have rooms that have *color* in them."

He pointedly looked around our own room. I refused to rise to the bait. Sure, I had gone all out in our private quarters. The walls were a gorgeous burgundy with deep green accents. The tones were picked up in the other furniture—a love seat, sofa, and ottoman—and complimented the teak desk and woodwork throughout the big room. Finally, I'd picked up a few throw pillows with splashes of brilliant yellow that added a touch of brightness to our otherwise dark room. But that was just one room out of ten. I'd had to twist his arm to let me add some attitude to the bar we'd put in just six months ago. The Crazy Coyote Cafe had been a big hit from the start, and even the locals had taken to dropping in on weekends. The big-screen TV that was always tuned to some sports event somewhere in the world probably helped. The last Super Bowl had been our best day yet.

"Didn't we agree that neutral worked best for guest rooms? That way you can't offend anyone."

I didn't bother launching into my favorite argument about how you can't offend people who have no taste, since my heart wasn't in it. Instead, I rubbed the heel of my hand over his nearly hairless chest.

"I've been thinking of names for the foal. For the AQHA and the Paint Horse society."

"Oh?"

"How about *Destiny's End*?" I circled one of his brown nipples with my index finger, and watched it crinkle and grow stiff. I licked my lips. "Or *Destiny's Road*? I like *Road*. What do you think?" I flicked my fingernail over his taut nipple. I think it grew even bigger. My eyes were riveted on it.

His mouth opened in a silent O, and I carefully drew a circle around his other nipple.

"Is that a yes or a no?"

“He’s your horse. I think you should call him what you want—Christ, Todd.” He grabbed my wrist, though he made no effort to remove my hand. “Are you trying to kill me here?”

“Kill you? No, never,” I murmured and bent my head down to take the swollen nipple in my mouth. “Just fuck you comatose.”

We finally got out of bed about thirty minutes later. Not a bad mid-morning break. Spending it with a lusciously fuckable Keith Anderson had to be the highlight of my day any day.

After a shower, we took the dogs and strolled down to the broodmare stable. Destiny’s Road was up and teetering around the big box stall after mom. His ears and his tail were in constant motion, pin-wheeling around at every sound; his big eyes tracking after every movement to try to see whatever it was that had attracted his attention. He stared goggle-eyed at us leaning over the stall door, but he didn’t try to hide behind mom.

“He’s a cute little button, isn’t he?” Keith said, and thus was born Destiny’s stable name. Button actually took a couple of steps in our direction, before changing his mind and spinning around to race back to mom. But spinning and running weren’t quite part of his repertoire yet, so he ended up in a tiny heap on the straw-covered ground.

I swear he looked indignant when we broke out laughing.

“You’ll get better at it, Button. I swear,” I told him when he finally tottered behind mom for a mid-afternoon snack.

Taking Keith’s hand, I walked out into the sun. It was a beautiful day. What more could a man want? The man of his dreams by his side—and in his bed—a successful business, and a bright future.

How quickly it could all vanish.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next day our first guests of the summer arrived four hours early. Thinking it was the delivery people with the last-minute supplies I had ordered for the first night get-together dinner, I didn't bother doing up my shirt or locking up the dogs when I hurried to answer the door. All the local tradesmen knew Shadow, Sleuth, and Taco well. A few even brought treats for the three, as though the dogs didn't get enough spoiling.

With three dogs boiling around my feet, Shadow with his stuffed gorilla, Sleuth with his sloppy grin, and Taco bouncing and weaving through their legs, I threw the door open.

"Take it—"

The couple who stood on our front veranda were not delivery people. I fumbled with the buttons on my shirt, while I nodded and made the right noises.

At least I assumed they were a couple. We aren't exclusively a gay resort, but the bulk of our advertising is done in upscale gay magazines, so it's safe to say that ninety percent of our clientele are of the fruity persuasion.

Neither one of them would have stood out on the street as definitively gay. But the one guy was almost the antithesis. Tall, he must have stood six-four at least; he appeared to be part Native American. He looked like a bulked up construction worker, all hard sinewy muscles and strong arms and legs encased in tight pants. He had silken black hair that hung nearly to his waist, tied back in a ponytail with a silver and turquoise clasp. His clothes were expensive but plain, as though having decided he wasn't ever going to be handsome, he wasn't going to waste money pursuing an impossible dream. Except for the jewelry, everything was black or gray, right down to the designer shades he wore. And he wasn't handsome. Not really. His features were too strong for that. Not that he was ugly, or even unattractive. I'd look at him twice in a crowded room. But he didn't stand out as your standard hunk material.

His partner, on the other hand, was the epitome of hot hunk. He wasn't a kid—neither of them were—probably in his late twenties or early thirties, wearing designer clothes, like he was born to them. If I hadn't been in a seriously committed relationship, I would have looked at this guy hard. As it was, Keith or no Keith, I gave him a second appraising look, and I liked what I saw even more the second time. I'm not into facial hair much, but the soft line of his trim beard, which was a shade lighter than his head and with a slight reddish tinge, suited him perfectly. His mouth was well defined, and looked very kissable, and his eyes were the most piercing blue. His body looked like it was sculpted by someone who loved the male form. He wasn't overly muscular, just smooth and perfect, right down to the nicely defined basket between his legs.

The Native American eyed Sleuth uncertainly, then took in Shadow, one eyebrow raised. "Is that thing loaded?"

I stared down at the dog, with his purple gorilla mashed in his mouth. I noticed the sexy hunk looked slightly bemused. Taco, who always elicited smiles and ahs for his antics, made an appearance. I guess it was quite a contrast, the tall muscular Dobermans and the diminutive, black and tan Chihuahua.

"That's Shadow. He likes to dress to impress. The little guy is Taco." I held out my hand. The big Indian took it first. His hands were calloused. Maybe he was a construction worker.

"Charlie Reid, and this is my husband, Tyler McKay."

"Call me Ty," his partner said.

I shook Charlie's hand, then managed to do the same to Ty's without breaking out in a sweat. The names set off bells. The newly painted, so-called honeymoon suite, booked for six nights by one Charlie Reid nearly two months before.

"From Toronto, right? Canada?"

Charlie nodded warily. This was not a guy who trusted easily.

"Ever been down this way before?"

"No," Charlie said. Ty shook his head. "But it's been on my list."

But something about the name was familiar, beyond the honeymoon suite. The face, too. Where would I have seen him before?

Sleuth took advantage of my inattention to shove his long nose into Charlie's hand. I was glad to see that Charlie wasn't intimidated. He just scratched behind Sleuth's ear. For his part, Sleuth just grinned soppily. Shadow continued to try to get someone interested in his toy.

"Mr. Reid and Mr. McKay. Of course," I said, doing my best not to appear like a total idiot. "Welcome. I'm Todd Richards, your host and the manager of *Rancho Bonito*. Your room is ready. Can I help you carry anything in?"

When I received no objections, I picked up the two larger pieces of Louis Vuitton luggage and led the two men through the recently scrubbed front reception area. I offered them the mini-tour as we went.

"This is our main common room." I indicated the large area with its adobe-fronted fireplace and numerous couches and chairs that were scattered around. There was a CD player in one corner, along with a stack of CDs ranging from pure country to my favorite, the blues, and everything in between. In the other corner beside the fireplace was a small library, full of a variety of anthologies, science fiction collections, mysteries, and travel books featuring Santa Fe and the surrounding area. The floor was covered with a variety of brightly colored throw rugs, leaning heavily on the Navajo look. I'd kept that theme up in the furnishings so that the whole thing had a familiar southwest flavor. I'd filled the walls with Geogia O'Keefe prints and had a few originals from local artists. Above the fireplace was Keith's horror—a gift from his parents that he insisted we keep in the main room. It was a genuine longhorn skull with a set of curved horns that must have easily measured six feet. I frequently tried to get Keith to consent to move the thing to the bar, but so far he was holding firm.

As usual, the skull attracted a lot of attention. Charlie ended up standing under it, his head cocked to the side as he studied the monstrosity.

“He must have been an impressive sucker when he was alive.”

Ty tucked his hand through Charlie’s and stood close enough so that their hips touched. For his part, Charlie smiled down at Ty. The smile, simple as it was, took years off his rather harsh face.

“Wouldn’t want to be on the business end of those things, that’s for sure,” Ty said.

“The only way you’re likely to meet one here is on the barbecue,” I said. I didn’t mention that Keith had started talking recently about picking up a small herd to raise organically, for our own kitchen. “Let me show you your room. Then you can freshen up if you want. I’ll give you a tour of the place later if you like.”

“Yes, I’d like that,” Ty said. Not letting go of Charlie’s hand, he followed me back toward the guest rooms.

I set the luggage just inside the door, did a quick tour of the facilities for them, and left them to get settled.

This time when the doorbell rang it was the delivery people, and I spent the next half hour putting supplies away and revising the evening’s menu with our chef Tom’s input. I let him know our guests had arrived, and they looked like hearty eaters.

Thirty minutes later Charlie and Ty appeared in the common room, and I met them there. They both looked damp from recent showers and, from the relaxed smile on Charlie’s face, I’d say they did more than just share water. Maybe they really were on their honeymoon. They were still looking at each other like the rest of the world was a mere backdrop.

“Care for a beer? Coffee? Something stronger?” I offered. “We have a full bar; you might have seen the signs for it outside.”

“Beer would be nice,” Ty said. He sat on a couch facing the fireplace, and Charlie sat beside him. Ty nestled into his arms. “Charlie?”

“Beer, sure.”

I fetched three Red Dragon Lagers, and took a seat in a chair, facing them. "So, Toronto, huh?" I tried to think of what I'd learned in my high school geography class. "That's near Detroit, isn't it? New York?"

"Couple of hundred miles north of Detroit," Charlie said. "Don't ask Ty, he'll tell you in some weird Canadian measurement, and you won't understand a bit of it."

"You mean you're not Canadian?"

"Georgian."

"An international couple." I couldn't resist asking. "So how long have you been together?"

Ty smiled at Charlie, who looked at him fondly. "A year this Sunday. Still going strong."

"Got married last Saturday," Tyler said. "A week ago."

I wanted to tell them how lucky they were. Todd and I thought of ourselves as married, but we both knew it wasn't real. These guys were. "An anniversary. We'll have to get the chef to fix up something special. What would you like?"

Charlie glanced at the longhorn skull. "How about some of that steak, Ty?"

"Steak's fine by me. You know I like my meat."

"Steak it is, then." I gestured toward the book rack where, alongside the books, there were a series of pamphlets from local tourist businesses. "Not sure how familiar you are with New Mexico or Santa Fe, but you can get an idea of what's offered in the area. If there's something in particular you want to do or see, let me know. I can usually make the arrangements, and save you the hassle. We have horses available for your riding pleasure, let either me or Darrel, our head wrangler, know. We can fix you up. The trails are well marked for riding, or hiking, if you prefer. We can supply you with a guide, a picnic lunch, binoculars for birding—there are a number of species unique to this area—whatever you need. The swimming pool's in the back—it's heated and open twenty-four-seven, though there's no lifeguard present. There are several golf courses in the area if that's your thing, and Santa Fe, of course, offers a wide variety

of sights. Like I said, just let me know. Or my partner, Dr. Keith Anderson—you haven't met him yet. We'll do everything we can to make your holiday a pleasure."

"You're married to a doctor?" Ty eyed the ring I wore on my third finger. Keith and I had traded rings six months ago, on a trip to Connecticut, where we had officially tied the knot, and replaced the ring he gave me when he came back for me after our brief split. Official in Connecticut, just not in New Mexico. Yet. We kept being told the winds of change were blowing, but sometimes those winds blew erratically. "Neat."

"Veterinarian, actually." Suddenly I grinned. "Though I agree, it's neat. He's neat. How did you guys end up together?"

"Art," Ty said. "Charlie's a famous artist, and he had a commission that involved one of my projects. One thing led to another, as they say... I let him sweep me off my feet."

"More like you tackled me," Charlie said. Amusement shone through his dark eyes. "And hog-tied me until I stopped fighting."

"Someone had to beat some sense into you."

Charlie met my eyes and smiled. I could see what had appealed to Ty. The guy was ruggedly sexy, like one of those craggy Marlboro men you used to see in cigarette ads. "I wasn't ready to accept a guy liking me that way. He was... stubborn, though."

"Persistent," Ty said.

"Stubborn. Pig-headed."

"I persevered against his narrow-minded refusal to think he should be in love with me."

"Yeah," Charlie said softly. "That he did."

"Thank God, one of us used our head."

Then it hit me.

"Art!" My mouth hung open and I looked at Charlie with new respect. "You're the one who's got the new art show downtown. What's the name of the gallery? Jesus, I was just there with Keith..."

"Moonstone Gallery?" Charlie nodded. "That's me. My show just opened. When were you there?"

"The opening. Mrs. Emanuel Hen—"

"Henry Dominguez," Charlie finished for me. "Yes, she was primarily responsible for getting me down here. My agent still claims to be shell-shocked."

I laughed. That sounded like the old battle-ax herself. "The woman's quite a juggernaut."

"Those weren't the words Hal had used. I think he used a lot of b and c words. He doesn't normally talk that way about a woman who could be his sainted mother, but she overwhelmed him."

"She rarely fails to get her way. But forget her." I leaned forward enthusiastically. "I saw your paintings. Man, they blew us away. Keith is going to be so thrilled. He should be home soon from the clinic, so you can meet him. He was impressed too, and Keith isn't easily moved by stuff like art. He said something at the time about wishing he could meet you. Now I remember, they had your photo included in the exhibit. That's why you looked so familiar. You're very talented."

"Thanks." Charlie looked embarrassed. Not used to one-on-one praise? Ty looked at him adoringly, and then confirmed my suspicions.

"Charlie hates it when people make a big deal out of him. He'd rather the paintings be the focus, not the artist."

"You're so good, it's hard not to look at both."

Ty grinned. He tucked his arm through Charlie's, and hugged it too his side. "Me, I'll take the artist any day."

The front door banged open, and the dogs erupted again, dashing for the front of the house. They soon came back, Keith's loud complaints preceding them into our part of the B&B.

"You great big daft idiot. Don't you know that purple is such a non-threatening color? Couldn't you at least come to the door with something more sinister than an escapee from the Barney zone?" He stomped into the room. "Something in black

maybe, or blood red? You are so fired as my personal security—”

He froze the minute he saw I wasn't alone. As oblivious as always, the dogs bounced around his feet, and demanded more verbal abuse. They loved it when Keith chastised them. He always played tug of war with them afterwards and gave them treats, when he thought I wasn't looking.

“Oh, hello. I didn't know there was anyone else here.”

“This is Charlie Reid and Tyler McKay. They're booked for six days, remember?”

“Reid? The artist?” Keith pushed Shadow away and told him to sit. Then he extended his hand to the pair on the couch. “My pleasure, sir.”

I stood up and grabbed Keith's hand. He pulled me to his side and put his arm around me. “I was just going to offer Charlie and Ty a quick tour of the grounds,” I said. “Want to join us?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Sure,” Keith said. “You know I never get tired of showing off the place.”

“Take the dogs?”

“Why not?”

“They don’t bother the other animals?” Ty fell into step beside me. Charlie took up on the other side. Keith slipped his arm around my waist and made it four. “I noticed a few chickens and such on the way in. Not to mention the horses.”

“No, they don’t.” I watched Shadow and Sleuth race ahead of us, rocketing across the yard, and disappearing around the broodmare stable. Taco stayed inside. The bigger dogs didn’t scare him. The same couldn’t be said about the horses. “They know better. We had a couple of incidents in the beginning, but now they know what’s acceptable behavior. Dobes are fast learners. And they hate to be punished by the people they love.”

Our path took us by the pool. I pointed out that they could exit from their room, and bypass the front of the house, to reach it. To complement the pool, Keith had added a hot tub that was on a raised deck overlooking the cool, azure water.

“Come out here at night and the stars are phenomenal,” I said. “We’re far enough from Santa Fe not to get a lot of light pollution. You can hear coyotes howl sometimes.”

“We’ll have to try it,” Ty said. I wasn’t surprised at the look that passed between the two honeymooners.

Knowing what they were thinking, I casually added, “Let Keith or me know, and we can reserve it for you for the night, and supply a bottle of bubbly. That way you wouldn’t be disturbed. You’re the only guests with us this week, so you don’t even have to worry about it being booked up.”

Charlie’s eyes darkened when he looked at Ty. I had a feeling the hot tub was going to see a lot of private parties this

week. I made a mental note to make sure the towel, condom, and lube supply was replenished frequently.

“Don’t you ever use it?” Ty seemed genuinely puzzled. “If I had something like this at home, I don’t think I could stay out of it.”

“We do on occasion. But we put it in for the guests, so we make sure it’s available for your use while you’re here.”

On occasion that speech had led to offers to share the facility. We were always very diplomatic about turning down those suggestions. I wouldn’t feel comfortable fraternizing with guests, and besides, both Keith and I were committed to leading a monogamous relationship.

Still, it was comforting when neither Charlie nor Ty made any such offers. I wouldn’t have been human if I hadn’t wondered what it would have been like. I looked at Keith and smiled. Wondered but quickly lost interest. Look at what I had at home!

Since their reservations had included full meal service, I smiled at the two of them and pointed out the huge stone barbecue at the other end of the pool. “Our chef Tom Beaudry tends to move his kitchen outside in the summer. Unless otherwise requested, he sticks to grilled meats, and a lot of cold salads. Sound good?”

“Sounds great. Are there menus available?”

“No menus, per se. Tom always offers at least two main dish choices, and he writes them up on a board in the common room, usually around one or two o’clock. You just tell us your preference, at least an hour before you want to eat.”

Ty grinned. “Now you’re making me hungry. What about breakfast and lunch?”

“Breakfast is in the kitchen between seven-thirty and nine. It’s strictly cooked to order. Lunch, you’re on your own. I’ll show you the kitchen later. We always have a lot of fresh fruit available, or cold meats, and a variety of cheeses. A lot of guests like to go into town in the afternoon. I can give you the names of several popular restaurants.”

"Lots of choices."

"Hey, this is New Mexico," I said. "Land of Enchantment. If the food sucks, how can you be enchanted?"

Charlie laughed this time. "Never thought of it that way."

We moved out of the pool area. Down a well-tended path that was bordered by lots of brilliant flowers and shrubs—we had a local gardener come in once a week—we led Charlie and Ty toward the pair of stables.

I saw Darrel in the training paddock, with one of our barrel racing prospects, putting the bay gelding, called Bound for Glory, through his paces. It seemed only natural to drift over and watch the action.

Darrel was a Texan, born and bred, and it showed in his easy drawl and quick temper. He'd been in the market for a move outside of Texas when Keith had started looking for a head wrangler for our growing stock of horses. Keith was up front with all his employees about his orientation. Once, he reasoned aloud to me, "Why lose them after the second week when they realize I'm gay, and you and I are a couple?" The revelation hadn't fazed Darrel, who was now as much a part of the *Rancho Bonito* family as Mandy and Tom were. He was incredible with the horses, and I for one was glad to have him. In fact, he was so much a part of our family that he and Mandy had tied the knot nine months ago. They were now expecting their first child.

He was running the bay through figure eights and sliding stops. Barrel racers have to maneuver fast around the drums used to mark the corners, and be able to make tight turns without losing speed or ground. Races were won or lost on split seconds. A sloppy corner or a too cautious turn and you were out of the money.

Barrel racing used to be a token women's sport on the rodeo circuit. Something for the little lady to do while the real cowboys were out getting bones broken on bulls with names like Terminator or the Duke of Hell. Then rodeo fans started getting hooked, and the prize purses climbed accordingly. With the money came the serious competition, which is why horses

now command such premium prices. As Darrel was quick to point out, no one ever got rich selling barrel racers, but we could pull in some comfortable money and get a name for ourselves. Advertising like that is priceless. Besides, I like the idea of having our name attached to some fine horseflesh.

Darrel had a couple of plastic, sand-filled drums set up on either end of the rectangular training ring. The hand-raked surface was swept every day to ensure there were no stones or cracks that might trip a horse and rider.

The bay loped past us. I knew Darrel had seen us; he touched his gray Stetson in greeting before taking his mount around the outside of the ring one more time. Flying lead changes on each inside turn, and the bay loped across the ring. I barely saw the signal, but suddenly Darrel sat back, and the young horse dropped his haunches and threw his head back, and slid to a stop in the center of the ring. Then, before he could straighten, Darrel spun him around in a tight circle, first one way, then the other. Foam flew off the bitless hackamore, and I could smell the heavy sweetness of horse sweat and leather.

"Impressive," Charlie said quietly. "I take it this is not one of the horses that's available to us for riding?"

"No, this is Bound for Glory," I said. "Darrel there is training him for the rodeo circuit. Barrel racing. He's got at least another year of training before he's ready to be sold."

"You don't ride him yourself?"

I laughed. "I wish. I couldn't do that horse justice. Good barrel riders start young, and usually have their best years before they're thirty. I'll just be happy to have our name on him as co-trainer. Someday, maybe, breeder."

Darrel waved and started jogging the bay around the ring in the other direction. I slipped my hand into Keith's and squeezed. He squeezed back.

"Come on, speaking of breeding, let's go see our newest addition. My pride and joy, little Button."

We entered the warm, rich-smelling brood mare stable, and almost immediately Sally's Mark stuck her head out of her stall and nickered at us. I grabbed an apple from a basket I had nailed to the wall, for just that purpose, and approached her. She took the apple and chewed noisily while I retrieved a halter and lead and opened the stall door.

"You're in luck, this is actually her first day outside with the new foal. It's always a treat when they first go out."

I slid the soft halter over Sally's head, and snapped on the lead. I could hear Ty exclaiming over the red and white colt when he bounced after his mother, his tiny hooves tapping on the cement floor. Funny, Ty had struck me as the big city sophisticate, who wouldn't be caught dead making mushy noises over something as uncomplicated as a newborn foal. But when I looked back, he was clinging to Charlie's arm and had the biggest grin on his drop-dead handsome face. Charlie's smile was nearly as big, though I'm not sure it was directed at the foal, so much as at his lover. It was obvious the two of them adored each other, though from the sounds of it, there had been a struggle to get to this point.

I might have envied them if I hadn't had Keith. And we'd had our own rough path to tread to get here. Did straight people have so much trouble in the pursuit of love?

Keith opened the paddock, and I led Sally in, followed by the stiff-legged foal.

"Why do you call him Button?" Ty couldn't seem to resist coming to stand beside me as I coaxed the foal around to me. Sally tugged on the lead, wanting to be off and rolling in the ground for a dust bath.

"Cause he's as cute as one." I shrugged. "Most horses have a stable name that has nothing to do with their registered name. Just something fun."

"What's his registered name?"

"Destiny's Road." I held my hand out and succeeded in getting the foal to stick his nose in my palm. Then he squealed and took off. "Kind of a heavy thing for such a little guy."

I unsnapped Sally's lead, and she took off after Button. The two raced around the outer perimeter of the paddock, kicking up their heels in sheer delight. Then Sally stopped and ponderously lowered herself to the ground, where she spent several minutes rolling on the sandy surface, kicking up dense clouds of dust. Button watched her, fascinated. Then he decided he'd had enough inactivity and took off again.

We stood on the paddock fence for nearly twenty minutes, watching their antics before Keith's rumbling stomach interrupted our interlude.

I buried my face in my hands, and shook my head at his embarrassed look.

"That, in case anyone didn't quite catch it, was the sophisticated Dr. Anderson announcing it's time to go in for dinner."

Charlie and Ty returned to their rooms after checking out the written notice Tom had posted about dinner choices—both of them went for the twelve-ounce strip loin and skewers of grilled vegetables—and I followed Keith into our part of the house.

"What do you think of the new guests?" I watched Keith change from his work clothes to his at-home-with-guests ensemble. I never tired of seeing him in varying stages of undress—though I much preferred him naked.

"He's not what I would have expected." Keith slid on a tan shirt and left it undone. His nearly hairless chest looked very tempting from where I stood. "I wouldn't have pegged him as an artist in a million years."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. What about the boyfriend?"

"Mr. I'm-Too-Hot-to-Handle? Talk about being too sexy for his clothes."

"Gee, is he? I hadn't noticed."

"Funny man. I saw the eyes falling out of your head earlier." Still bare-chested, Keith hooked one arm around my waist and dragged me against him. I could feel the heat from his crotch

burrowing into my hip. "As long as you look and don't touch, I don't care. He *is* hot."

I nipped the skin above his right nipple, and then slid my tongue around the hard nub of flesh. It contracted under my wet touch.

"Not as hot as you."

Keith held my head against his chest. "As long as we're in agreement on that," he said hoarsely. He ground his fast swelling cock into me. "How about we meet back here after supper and you show me how hot?"

"Deal."

He slapped my butt. "Now let's go take care of our guests."

I followed him out of the room.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As usual, Tom's barbecue was damned near flawless. The man should have been working in some five-star restaurant in NYC, or the Big Easy, but instead he wanted to stay in Santa Fe for his family's sake. He'd told me once that he'd had his fill of big cities during his sous chef days. Now he was more than happy to tend our trickle of guests and townies, who came out for the public spread we had been putting on every Saturday since we opened the place.

I tended the poolside bar while Keith made sure Charlie and Ty had enough to eat. Once the main meal was done, Tom vanished into his kitchen, and wheeled out the dessert tray. The four of us selected what we wanted, and I sat down beside Keith to share forkfuls in our own nightly ritual.

The air was taking on the faint, golden quality that spelled the end of the day. A breeze blew up, washing cool air over the pool and patio. The distant smells of the forest that pressed up against our land blew over our small group. Behind the stables an owl hooted. Further away coyotes howled. I saw Charlie take note of the sounds first. Of the two of them, he seemed more attuned to the natural world. That matched what I knew about them. Tyler was a city boy, and Charlie had told me at one point he lived on the outskirts of a small town in Georgia.

"I saw in your literature that your ranch butts up against some federal land. How many acres?"

"About a million and a half," Keith said. "There's some rough land out there. No roads into some of it. You ride?"

"Some. Not together though." Charlie glanced at Ty. "Would you be interested?"

Ty grinned. "Interested? You bet. Especially since we can use the hot tub after to settle all those sore muscles."

Keith glanced at me. I knew what he was thinking. Darrel would be busy tonight, like he was busy every night these days,

with Mandy, whose due date was still over a month away, but she had already had a couple of false labors. He was willing to do his job during the day, but come night he had made it clear that he wanted to be with Mandy. At least until the baby came.

So evening rides had to be conducted by one or both of us. "I don't mind taking Mistral out. Why don't you join us—I'm sure Quincy could use the exercise."

Keith didn't need much convincing. That meant another trip inside to change into jeans and a long-sleeve jacket, since evenings could still be cool this time of year. We met Charlie and Ty in the common room.

I was pleased to see that neither one of them had succumbed to the silly tourist craze that seemed to dictate dressing up in what the tourists perceived as ranch wear; usually some horrible city slicker version of chaps and boots that no self-respecting cowboy would be caught dead in. Keith and I always had to be so careful not to laugh—our guests' dignity had to be maintained at all costs—but at times it was hard.

Tonight wasn't one of them. Charlie and Ty emerged hand in hand, wearing nothing more outrageous than snug jeans and T-shirts under jackets—denim for Charlie, sheepskin for Tyler. Charlie had a baseball cap pulled down over his bound black hair. Ty was bareheaded. He hooked his thumb at Charlie's head.

"Do I need one of those?"

"Not for an evening ride," I said. "If you plan to go out during the day I recommend head gear. Sunstroke can be a nasty way to ruin a honeymoon."

Ty nodded. "We were going into town tomorrow to the gallery. I'll pick one up then."

"Borrow one of mine," Charlie said. "You know I always bring two or three."

Ty gave him a withering look. "Honey, I love you to distraction, but what you would put on your head is beyond belief. I'll pick out something myself."

Charlie met my gaze and actually smiled. "Well, I guess I got told. Suit yourself."

"Are we ready?" I asked, and it turned out we were.

After a short conference to determine their level of skill in the saddle, we saddled up Buzz for Charlie and Waco for Ty. As usual, I rode Mistral's Gold, my original American Paint horse, and Keith got Quincy. We set off toward the distant line of trees that outlined our property and led deep into federal land.

I'll be the first to admit our guests looked sharp on horseback. Charlie and Buzz had been a good choice. Buzz's black hide matched his dark craggy looks perfectly. Waco, a beautiful buckskin, suited Ty's sleek good looks. Keith looked good on anything, and I was just along for the ride.

The two of them proved to be adequate riders. We rode back into the well-lit yard nearly thirty minutes after the last traces of sun had bled from the sky. I saw Ty wince when he slid off Waco, but he gamely hung around to unsaddle, and help us brush down the four horses, before turning them out in their box stalls for the night. The last I saw of them was Charlie solicitously leading a shambling Ty back to their rooms. I suspected the two of them would be in the hot tub before long. I hoped it would be enough to sooth Ty's overworked muscles. Otherwise he was going to be sore tomorrow. Well, at least he had Charlie to dote on him.

"Shower?" I murmured to Keith as we entered our bedroom. He glanced up from stripping off his jacket.

"After you."

I grinned, and began undoing the buttons on his shirt. "What? Haven't you heard of the concept of water conservation? Besides, you owe me one, remember?"

"Owe you? Who's keeping score?"

I traced a line of kisses down his neck to his arm pit. There I inhaled the natural scent of him, which never failed to arouse me. I wrinkled my nose in mock dismay.

"You smell like a barn."

"Hmph. Like you smell like a rose garden."

He tugged at the zipper of my jeans, dragging it down around my rapidly swelling cock. He shoved my jeans down my legs, and I managed to kick them off without breaking my hold on him. I moved my mouth to what I knew was one of the most sensitive areas of his body, his nipples. I nibbled the left one, then slurped it like a tiny ice cream cone. It swelled and hardened under my busy tongue. Then I moved to the right one and gave it the same careful treatment.

Keith held my head in his strong hands, and I could feel him trembling. His heart beat strong and timpani-like under my roving lips. I slipped my hands under the waistband of his jeans and pushed them down his hips, cupping the round globes of his ass in both hands. He groaned and dug his fingers into my hair when I slid one finger into the tight confines of his hole.

I moved my mouth up to his, nipping his parted lips and darting my tongue into his mouth. His breathing was ragged now and matched my own. I ground my rigid cock between his legs and continued my assault on his ass.

He raised one leg and wrapped it around my hip, pressing himself more tightly against me.

"Come on, cowboy," he whispered. "Take me to bed." He bit at my chin and throat. "Consider that doctor's orders."

"Ah, well, whatever the doctor wants." I lifted him up against my pelvis and pivoted toward the bed. I fell sideways across it, taking him with me. We ended in a pile of arms and legs and unleashed cocks straining against each other. God this man had the capacity to make me so hot.

I fluttered my tongue over his nipple again. He shuddered under me. I tasted a trail of shivering skin down his chest, across his flat stomach, and down to his pelvis, where I buried my nose in his thick bush. He opened his legs for me, and I accepted his silent invitation. Gently I slipped one of his balls into my mouth, where I played with the loose skin and rolled the soft mass around my tongue. When I took both balls in my mouth, Keith moaned and squirmed under my ministrations. I pushed his legs apart and ran my wet mouth over the tender skin right behind his scrotum. Then I shoved my stiff tongue

against the puckered skin guarding his back channel. He cried out and thrust his ass into my face.

I rimmed him thoroughly; he bucked and writhed under me, moaning my name. His cock dribbled tiny droplets of nacreous precum, and I used it to stroke him while I plied my skills on his hole. I had him humping my mouth, trying to fuck my tongue, and then my finger as I inserted one digit into him.

His balls began to pull up, and I knew he was close. I wasn't ready to let him, so I backed off, content to lick a path up his rigid pole to his glistening helmet, and the salty droplets that kept on exuding from it as fast as I could lick them off. He tried to hump my face, begging me to suck him. Instead, I teased him with my mouth. Circling his fat cock head with my lips, cleaning out his piss slit, I had him crying my name in a mantra of blind need.

When I rose above him and pushed his legs open, he came off the bed with a shout. I eased the head of my well-lubed cock into his dark, tight channel. He grabbed my ass in both hands and drove his own up to engulf my dick. My balls slammed into his tail bone, and he clamped down on my throbbing pole. I groaned at the pressure, and abandoned the slow tease. I began to slam into him, all pretense of gentleness gone. He anchored his legs over my back, and used his strong hands as a lever to pull me into him. Our rhythm grew frantic, and his mouth slammed over mine, his tongue diving down my throat, swallowing my guttural groans. Sweat poured off us, mingling and sliding as our bodies tried to become one unit.

I felt my cum boil out of me, exploding deep into his bowels, splashing against his naked flesh. He cried out my name, and his cock thrashed and blew hot cum across his tension-riddled stomach and chest. I sagged across him, our juices and sweat mingling and drying together as we lay in each other's arms. Slowly my cock subsided and grew soft. Finally it fell out of him with a soft pop and a dribble of cum. I rolled my weight off him, taking him with me so that we lay side by side, still touching our whole length.

I kissed his mouth and throat and finally paused above his sternum, where his heartbeat slowed and returned to normal. I

pressed my lips to his rib cage and inhaled the rich, tantalizing smell of him, sex, sweat, and a musky sweetness that was entirely his own.

“Baby,” I murmured.

“Hmmm.” His lips vibrated against my damp skin.

“We really need to take a shower. If we fall asleep like this, we’ll be superglued together.”

“I can think of worse things.”

“Me too.” I wiggled to bring him closer, and our skin squelched as we split apart, and then came back together. That seemed to convince him.

Reluctantly he rolled away from me.

The shower did nothing to revive me, and when I slid back under the sheets and rolled into his arms, I was asleep almost instantly.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The public dinner that Saturday was the first of the summer season. It was booked to capacity. Tom already had his menu planned, and I spent Saturday morning with him scouring various markets in search of the perfect squab and prime rib. He threw me a stern look as we studied one butcher's offerings.

"When is Dr. Anderson going to acquire that herd he's been talking about? Give me control of my meat source, and I can guarantee the quality of food we serve."

It was an argument I'd heard from him before. It was one of the things that had started Keith talking about raising his own beef. The idea of choosing longhorns had started out as a whim, but quickly became more practical as we looked into the issue.

Longhorns, it turned out, were super hardy, produced excellent, high-grade beef on less feed than other domestic cattle, and would be an interesting addition to our miniature ranch. Darrel had liked the idea, and he knew of a boy on a neighboring farm who was good with cattle and would work evenings and weekends for us.

So I was able to answer Tom's question positively. "We've got our eyes open as we speak. As soon as a herd goes on the block—and our purchasing agent approves—we've got your beef."

After nearly two hours of haggling and scrutinizing his choices with a diligence I found almost maddening, Tom and I drove back to *Rancho Bonito*. Tom immediately headed for the kitchen, where he would spend the rest of the day working his magic. I spent the morning tending to B&B business.

Our guests had made a brief appearance for breakfast, before retreating to their room again. I made a point of reminding them of the big dinner, and they assured me they wouldn't miss it. But the better part of the day was spent in their room. The honeymoon was obviously going well. I tried

not to think about what they were doing, since it was difficult going about my business with a boner, and Keith wasn't due back from shopping until nearly four o'clock.

I spent the last hour in the stable with Button and his mother, and had the little guy eating oats out of my hand before I returned to the house in time to catch Keith in the shower. I joined him and gave him one of my patented Todd Richards quickies, which had us both clinging to each other under the drenching spray.

He kissed my upturned mouth. "You make coming home from anywhere an experience. What brought this on?"

I grinned, and told him about our amorous guests, and he hooted with laughter.

"Maybe we should specialize in gay honeymoons. What do you think? Make ourselves into the Niagara of the southwest? No waterfalls but plenty of fireworks."

"Cute, really cute."

He squeezed my right ass cheek. "Come on," he said. "Let's go check if the serving crew has arrived. I hope they don't screw up the chairs like they did last time."



The dinner went off without a hitch. We had just over three hundred guests, including a teen group we'd invited from a nearby shelter. Both Keith and I were fans of organizations that helped kids in trouble, and this particular group had always made a good impression on both of us. Vincent del Vecchio, the director, had been a good friend of Keith's parents. He was gay, and had gotten into trouble himself with some right-wing groups, who seemed to think that, because he was gay, he had an ulterior motive for helping kids. We supported him whenever we had the chance, and tonight was one example of that.

Vincent came up to us after dinner and held out his hand.

"As always, my compliments to Tom. If I could afford him, I'd steal him away for the shelter." He shook Keith's hand, then pumped mine. "Always appreciate your support, guys."

"Love to do it, Vince," Keith said.

Vincent's gaze strayed over to where Charlie and Ty stood engrossed in conversation with one of the county politicians. Ty looked absolutely enthralled, which had to be a crock, since I knew the politician, and he was a terminal blowhard. Ty had mentioned once that he was an environmental engineer, so I knew he dealt with a lot of politicians. It was obvious he knew how to handle them.

"I see you have some famous guests this time around," Vincent said. "I saw his work down at Moonstone. Very nice. Is he here to paint?"

"No," Keith said. "Honeymoon. They're Canadians. The guy next to him is his husband. The one talking to Oversmith."

"Hmm," Vincent murmured. "Almost as pretty as one of his boyfriend's pictures."

I looked at Keith and grinned. "Isn't he, though?"

"Who all did you bring tonight?" Keith asked.

"Six all together. Three new to the program and a couple you guys know—Joannie and George." Vincent pointed out the two youth shelter kids that Keith and I had met at one of the other dinners, a pair of teens who had been in the system since they were very young. Vincent touched my arm. "Come on. I'll round them up and introduce you."

It took him nearly thirty minutes to find the other four. Two of them had wandered down by the stables, technically a taboo area since we didn't want a flood of guests scaring the animals. Vincent brought the pair back looking sullen, since he'd clearly been giving them a talking to about obeying house rules. Part of me wanted to tell him to lighten up, but I knew he was right. If those kids couldn't learn to follow simple and non-draconian rules, in this kind of social setting, how could they possibly learn to fit into any setting?

But I felt a lot of sympathy. Hell, if it hadn't been for a supportive mother, I could have been one of these kids. Discovering you're gay, when you're not much more than a kid yourself, can make for a fucked-up childhood. I knew all the

statistics about the high rates of suicides among gay teens; I personally knew about the self-hatred. Vincent didn't exclusively deal with gay youth, but he saw more than his share. He got a lot of referrals too, because—despite the opinions of a few narrow-minded bigots—he got the job done. The kids in his care thrived, which is why he had our unqualified support, and the support of many of our neighbors.

“Maybe it's time to think of another group ride,” I said, loudly enough for the recalcitrant pair to hear.

One of the duo, a pudgy girl of maybe thirteen turned outraged eyes on me. Her partner, a pimply-faced boy of no more than fifteen, gazed at me owlishly, before turning to take his cue from the girl. Then his look grew hostile.

That surprised me. Usually the kids were excited at the chance to ride. What kid didn't love horses? Apparently not this pair.

“Sylvia, Donovan, what do you say to Mr. Richards's offer?” Vincent seemed as puzzled as I was by their hostility. “If you don't want to accept, that's your choice. I'm sure I can find others who would jump at the chance.”

The girl muttered something. It sounded like ‘exploiters’ to me, but when she didn't repeat it, I dismissed it as angry muttering. A kid with attitude. Surprise.

The others were visibly thrilled, and immediately wanted to know when. I thought through our timetable over the next few weeks and frowned.

“It's tight, guys. The only free time we have is right after our current guests leave next Tuesday. The new guests won't be here until Thursday. Does Wednesday sound good to everyone?”

“Not soon enough,” Joannie said, and earned laughter all around.

“Patience is a virtue,” Keith said, and received a lot of rolled eyes, accompanied by more laughter, except from the pudgy girl and her shadow.

"Patience is a crock," she snapped, and stalked back to the buffet table, where she attacked the fruit salad with vehemence. The pimply-faced boy tagged along. He nibbled on a dry cracker and didn't look at all happy.

"Quite the pair," Keith murmured to Vincent.

"They're new in the system," Vincent said for our ears only. "I'm not making excuses for poor behavior, but if you knew half of what that poor child has gone through, you'd excuse her, too. I worried it might be too early to bring her on this outing, but I wanted to show her that there's good in the world, too." He frowned. "Funny, I thought she would like it here. She seemed to be such an animal lover, when we spoke at the shelter during her intake."

"Maybe if she proves she's tough enough, we won't be able to hurt her," I said. Vincent nodded.

"Sometimes they seem to find it easier to sabotage new chances rather than give them the opportunity to fail." He glanced at his watch. "Well, it's later than I thought. I'd better round this herd up, and get them back on the bus. As usual it's been a pleasure, you two."

He shook my hand, then Keith's. In private he would have kissed us, but we were all too conscious of the others around us. No sense adding fuel to any smoldering fires.

Vincent directed Joannie and George to find the other two, and he went after his newest set of troublemakers. For all that she had seemed unhappy, when he informed her they were leaving, Sylvia was suddenly loath to go. Who could ever understand the mind of a teenager?

After Vincent and his charges finally got on the bus, Keith and I wandered through the crowd, chatting with friends and neighbors while we checked out the mood. Everyone seemed upbeat.

I spotted Charlie and Ty by the pool deck talking to a small crowd. Since Charlie seemed to be getting the bulk of the attention, I had to assume they were art lovers. Ty sipped his wine and looked smug. When his eyes met mine, he raised his glass and grinned. I noticed he didn't cling quite so closely to

Charlie in public. His or Charlie's choice? From what I had overheard, I suspected Charlie set those boundaries. Ah, well, it wasn't always easy being out in a society that couldn't seem to make up its mind if we were okay or some kind of deviant sickos. Keith and I wrestled with the same issue all the time. Everyone knew we were lovers, but knowing and seeing the physical signs—even if all it was, was a touch or a passionless kiss—was something else altogether.

The party finally broke up around ten, and the last of the guests left in a cab just before eleven. Keith and I strolled around the empty grounds, checking things out before heading in. There was nobody around. The lights were on in the honeymoon suite, so I assumed Charlie and Ty had turned in for the night. Why did I get the feeling they weren't reliving the evening highlights? I was still grinning when Keith and I entered our own quarters.

"Now what?"

I paused in taking off my shirt. "Just thinking of those two again. They're making me feel downright inadequate."

"Oh, don't," Keith breathed, running his hands up my chest and curling them around my neck. "You're perfectly adequate. I'll vouch for that."

It took me a second to process his words, and then I hit him with my shirt. "You are so dead, mister."

Keith was laughing when I pinned him to the bed. "Bad choice of words?"

"*Adequate?*" I locked his arms above his head with one hand and began to tickle him with the other. "I'll show you adequate. You won't walk for a week."

Keith tried to buck me off, but I clung to him with muscles well honed by riding horses. Under my pelvis I felt his cock grow hard. I grabbed both his hands in mine, and held them over his head. Then I brought my face down so that my mouth was less than an inch from his.

"Now that sounds like a promise," he whispered.

"Believe it, mister. I'm going to fuck you silly."

Keith's blue eyes deepened to sapphire. His head tilted up, and his mouth opened in anticipation of my kiss. I brushed his lips with mine, then drew back.

"You think I'm easy?" I asked. "Think I'm going to kiss you just like that? Maybe I'll make you beg for it."

He rotated his hips under me, and rubbed the hard ridge of his cock against the saddle of my thighs. He groaned at the pressure in his groin.

"Anytime," he whispered. "Anywhere."

"Now?"

"Please!"

I lowered my mouth to his and ate his heated cries. I don't know if he was begging or cursing. I was past caring. All I wanted was to bury my cock in his deep ass, and fuck him until we were both screaming.

"Fuck—"

The alarm shrieked from every room in the house. I was off the bed before the first ululation died down only to be replaced by another. I recognized the distinctive tone seconds before realization came over Keith's slack face.

"The stables!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

The sky glowed. I hurtled around the corner of the house and ignored the winding path, leaping over the knee-high shrubbery that lined the walk. Keith was a half step behind me. He fumbled with his cell, and I heard him shouting.

“*Rancho Bonito*. Fire. In the stable area. I don’t know—Hurry.”

He jammed the phone back into his pocket and grabbed my arm as I rounded the paddock, and almost bolted across the yard.

“Todd! The fire trucks are on the way. Any chance anyone’s in there?”

“Who—? Darrell?”

Keith shook his head, digging his heels in. “I thought he went home after the barbecue.”

“Charlie—Ty—”

Barely were the words out of my mouth before a dark shape loomed up on our right, and a half-dressed Charlie staggered into view, with Ty at his side. Ty’s shirt was buttoned up crookedly and his bare feet had been shoved into Nikes.

“What the hell?”

The fire was in the broodmare stable where Sally’s Mark and Destiny’s Road had been housed.

“The horses!” I screamed and made to bolt out of Keith’s grip. He hung on. To my dismay, Charlie seemed intent on helping him.

“You can’t go in there, Todd.”

Flame leaped out of the stable roof. Even as I watched in mounting horror, the southern end of the long, low building collapsed in a shower of sparks and glowing wood. Superheated

air blasted out of the gaping hole and washed over our upturned faces. My skin felt tight from the mushrooming heat.

Keith jerked me backward, and I stumbled and would have fallen if Charlie hadn't been in my path. He caught me and, now that I was off balance, dragged me back several feet. One of my hastily thrown-on shoes came off in the dirt. I barely noticed the ground scraping my bare heel.

I broke free and took two steps forward. But even in my daze I knew it was useless to go into the stable. I hurriedly glanced at the second stable—the one we kept the ranch horses in. It was intact, and even as I watched I saw Darrel leading Waco out of the building. Keith plunged in behind him and came out seconds later at a dead run with Quincy in tow.

I turned my mind off of thinking about Sally and Button. I couldn't save them, but I could help save the other horses. By the time the fire trucks roared into the yard, lighting up the night with their sirens and their flashing lights, we had all the horses out of the non-burning building and safely tucked away in a distant paddock, where the chaos wouldn't disturb the horses anymore than they already were.

Only then did we realize there were two other horses missing. Mistral's Gold and Bound for Glory.

Keith and I scrambled through the intact stable as though somehow we could have overlooked half a ton of horse flesh. All the stalls were empty. So was the tack room and the feed room.

"Maybe they got out beforehand," Keith said. He rubbed at a spot of soot smeared across his cheek. "They must have."

Darrel grimaced. "They were here earlier when I made my last rounds after dinner. I'm sure of it."

"You'll have to vacate the area, gentlemen." A weary-looking fireman entered the stable. He ignored our protests and hustled us out of the way. He also ignored my pleas to save the horses in the burning building. They all did. They knew as well as I did that anything that had been in that conflagration was past rescuing. They were sympathetic, but stern. Leave, or they would remove us. We left.

Someone—Charlie?—had draped a jacket over my shivering shoulders. Ty slid an arm around me and propelled me back into the house. I was vaguely aware of Keith at my side, and then we were both sitting on a brightly colored sofa, in the common room, and something cool was stuck in my hand. I raised it to my mouth unconsciously, and nearly gagged at the straight Scotch that burned a path down my throat.

I was still shivering under the thin denim jacket, so someone wrapped a throw around the two of us. Keith's normally strong shoulders were shaking where they nestled against my side.

Darrel appeared, and his ashen face told me everything I needed to know. His mouth worked silently, and for a minute I thought he was going to weep. Then he clamped his mouth shut and clasped my shoulder.

"Who would do this, Todd?" His fingers bit deep into my numb flesh. "Who?"

"What..." I licked my heat-cracked lips. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"They're saying it was arson, Todd," he said in the coldest voice I've ever heard come out of a man.



"Arson?" My voice came from a long way off. I felt sedated. Anesthetized.

Beside me Keith stirred lethargically.

"No." Keith moved, his entire body shaking. "No, that's not possible. It can't—"

"They found the accelerant. I saw the gas cans. You can *smell* it."

I realized with a pang that he was right. I had smelled it out in the yard but hadn't made the connection. Arson? Who the hell would deliberately kill our horses?

Something stirred in me, and it took me a moment to recognize it. Fury. White-hot fury engulfed me, burning as bright as the fires that had destroyed my horses. I tensed, my hands clenched into tight fists. I was vaguely aware of a flash of

pain when I heard Ty's startled yell as acid burned into my flesh.

"Jesus, the glass—"

"Get his fingers open. I'll get the Betadine."

My fist was forced open. More pain shot through my hand when something liquid splashed over my stiff fingers.

"At least there was alcohol in the damned thing. He won't get infected."

I blinked, and looked down at my lap, where my bandaged hand lay in a damp stain of blood, and drying Scotch. I had broken the glass in my hand.

"Todd." Darrel's voice was surprisingly gentle. "We're going to put you and Keith to bed now. We'll figure out what happened in the morning. Okay? I gotta get back to Mandy. She'll be frettin', wondering what's going on."

"Go," I croaked. "Tell her it's okay. Tell her..." My voice dwindled into silence. What the hell could he tell her that would comfort her?

"We'll sort this out tomorrow, Todd. Keith. Get some rest. Okay?"

We were put to bed. I felt Keith's rigid form beside me, in the bed we had shared for over a year. I stared up at the blameless ceiling. Keith rolled over and clung to me, his breath warm in my ear. I turned, not sure I wanted to be touched. Unsure how to tell him that. Then I was holding him, and I couldn't have let him go if my life depended on it. I was a drowning man, and he was the only thing keeping me afloat.

There were no tears, no more rage. Nothing. Eventually there was sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dawn dragged me out of a sleep I was strangely loath to leave. Only when I was fully awake did I remember why. I clamped my eyes shut against the pain, and opened them again to find Keith watching me solemnly.

"It's true, isn't it?" he said softly as though he hoped I would tell him it was all a bad dream. "There was a fire? The horses—"

"The horses!" I bolted upright and he followed me.

"Todd?"

"The horses, Keith," I cried. "Mistral and Glory. They weren't in the stable. They might have come back by now—we have to go look."

We threw on clothes and hurried outside. Darrel was already there. He had Quincy, Buzz, and his own mount, a leopard Appaloosa called Whiskeyjack, saddled and ready to go.

"I was just coming to get you guys. No sign of them. Terrains too rough for even 4-wheel." He patted Whiskeyjack's spotted side. "Besides, these fellas'll help us find their stable mates."

I swung myself up onto Buzz, and turned around to look away from the burned-out stable. I couldn't face looking at it yet. Keith's eyes mirrored my own despair. Grimly I followed Darrel out of the yard. We had barely moved onto the path that would take us out to federal land, when Charlie came racing toward us. He skidded to a stop, holding the cordless phone in his big hand.

"Call, Keith. It's Vincent—from the shelter? He said it's urgent. I think it has something to do with the fire."

Keith grabbed the handset and barked into it. Charlie held Quincy's reins to steady the nervous horse—all the excitement

had put the animals on edge—and soothed him with a quiet voice.

Keith's face was ashen when he handed the phone back to Charlie.

"Sylvia and Donovan, the two new kids Vince told us about? They're missing. Vince thinks they may have started the fire. He found some literature in Sylvia's room from some hardcore animal rights group."

"*They* killed Sally and Button? Whatever for?" My rage was coming back, hotter than before. Two *kids* had done this? Why?

"Are we sure the horses were in the barn?" Charlie ventured. His gaze swept from Keith to me. "Did anyone check?"

It turned out no one had.

There were still firefighters at the site of the fire. One, his face blackened and weary, came over to us when we rode toward them. His blue eyes met mine.

"This is still a hot area, sir. I'd suggest you stay clear. The fire investigators will have to go over the area before they can release the site."

"Have you been inside yet?" I asked, my eyes finally straying to the ruined shell that had been intended to hold our future breeding stock. One entire side had been leveled. I could see right through to where Sally's stall had been. Now there was nothing but charred beams of wood and a single, scorched wall supporting the opposite wall. The air reeked of the stench of burned wood, gasoline, and paint.

"Sir?"

"Two of our horses were in there." My voice broke, and I looked away for a minute. My hands tightened on the reins, and Buzz shifted uneasily under me. "Did you... Did you see any sign of... anything?"

"No, sir," the fireman said. "There was nothing living in that building when it went up. If you had horses in there, they'd been removed before the blaze started."

"By the arsonist," I said flatly.

"Couldn't tell you, sir." He rubbed the back of his neck. "The police will be along shortly. I'm sure they can address your concerns, but you can be assured no horses died here last night. You have that much at least."

Not as much as I wanted, but I felt my heart soar. Sally and her foal were still alive.

We retreated from the still-smoldering ruin. When we returned to where we had left Charlie, he was still there. He must have read something in our faces because he smiled slightly.

"Good news?"

"They're alive—"

"As of last night," Keith said. "We still don't know what happened."

"Was the fire a cover then? Someone wanted to steal the horses and—"

"The rustlers!"

Charlie looked like he thought Keith was joking. When he realized no one was laughing, he chewed on his lip and frowned. "Rustlers?"

But Darrel was shaking his head. "Doesn't make sense. If someone went to all that trouble to create a diversion, why steal only three horses, four if you count the foal? Why not take them all? From what I've heard so far, these guys are pros. This is too fucked up, pardon my French."

"Those damned kids." My mind kept coming back to the pair—what were their names, Sylvia and Donovan? Especially Sylvia. The blank hatred I had seen in her eyes...

"Kids? What kids?" Ty slipped up beside Charlie and took his hand. "What's going on?"

I told him all that we knew. It was his turn to frown.

"I remember seeing some teenagers last night, but didn't think much of it," he said. "I guess I just assumed they were with someone. But why on earth would they start a fire that

could have spread and killed us all? Is that the kind of thing animal rights groups do now?"

"I'm not sure the girl's an actual member," I said. "I think she just had sympathies. Probably not realistic ones, either. She may not even know what the group stands for. According to Vince, she's pretty scarred."

"Abused?" Charlie asked quietly.

"I don't know. Vince never got into details." I frowned. "It may be time to find out, though. I want to know who we're dealing with."

"What about Mistral and the others?" Darrel asked.

I hesitated. I wanted to search for our horses, too. But I also wanted to talk to Vincent about Sylvia. I was surprised when Charlie spoke up.

"If it's okay with you two, Ty and I can help Darrel look. You go talk to Vince. We can meet back here in a few hours and compare notes."

I didn't know what to say. "This is supposed to be your honeymoon, man. You don't have to—"

"We want to," Ty said. "Don't we, Charlie?"

"Definitely. And three sets of eyes are better than one. Go," Charlie said. "Talk to Vince."

I climbed down off Buzz, and Charlie swung up on him. Ty clambered onto Quincy. They rode out of the ranch single file. Keith and I watched them go, then hurried in the house, already talking a mile a minute to Vince, trying to figure out what was going on.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Vince paced the confines of his small, cramped office. The shelter was housed in donated space that had once been a warehouse. Walls had been put up, and rooms constructed—all by volunteers—with little real thought to who would occupy them. Vince was a pacer. He would have done better in a room twice as long as the one he'd ended up in. His office held a donated printer, a couple of filing cabinets, and a laptop that we had bought him from a fundraiser we'd held the year before.

Right now he was moving rapidly through his tight quarters, pausing now and then to hunch over his desk, looking over a pile of cheaply made Xerox-copied pamphlets. I picked up one, without saying a word, and studied it with growing distaste.

First they showed the obligatory pictures of abused and tormented animals that came from images archived twenty years ago. I always wonder, if the issue is so relevant, why they can never find any more recent footage. I also dislike the use of *cute* animals to sell their cause. As though a seal pup, with its big eyes and furry-toy look, is somehow more precious than an ugly creature. But it was the final inner page that had my blood steaming again.

"They're bragging about destroying a dozen businesses and freeing the animals—and they list livestock farms, as well as fur and research facilities. Who the hell are these people?" I flipped back to the front cover. "Warriors for Animals in Peril. WAP?" It would have been funny if it hadn't been so damned serious.

"Sounds compelling, doesn't it?" Vincent said wearily. "Imagine how it reads to an impressionable kid who's dying to belong."

I put the pamphlet down and leaned over the desk. Beside me Keith looked grim. "Tell us about these two, Vince. What's going on?"

Vincent picked up what I recognized as an intake file from his shelter. It listed what they knew about a new client before entry. This particular form looked well-thumbed.

"Sylvia von Neumann, age fourteen. Originally from St. Louis. Father was abusive; mother and father divorced when she was a baby. Mother remarried when Sylvia was two; mother and stepfather moved to Albuquerque. Biological father died four years ago without ever having contacted his family again."

"When did the abuse start?" Keith asked. He looked grimmer. Since we'd gotten involved with the shelter, we'd learned more than we'd ever wanted to about what adult people did to the children in their care. It was enough to make me reach for a lynching rope at times.

"The abuse from her stepfather? Or her father? When she was seven. Bad enough she was abused by her own father, then her mother brings another abuser into the house to complete the cycle. An older sister left home around that time—she was fifteen, what does that tell you? We haven't been able to locate the sister. Last her mother heard, she was headed for Hollywood."

I winced. A fifteen-year-old runaway hitting the streets of Hollywood, thinking she was tough, that she'd seen it all. How long would it take the land of celluloid dreams to chew her up and spit her out?

I doubted there was much left of the sister to contact. Vince believed the same. His mouth was pursed in a thin line as he continued.

"The abuse was finally investigated through complaints from the school. There were the usual signs. Bruising on the arms and back. Further investigation revealed extensive bruising on the buttocks and vagina area, after she agreed to an examination by a local doctor. The mother was non-cooperative, and complained the girl was a tramp, who had always been easy. The woman was totally submissive to her husband. She wouldn't listen to suggestions he had abused the girls. She said, and I quote, 'Lewis was always good to those girls. He bent

over backwards for them. Is it his fault they got cheeky with him?"

"Cheeky?" I tasted the foulness of the otherwise innocuous word. "She actually said cheeky?"

Keith curled one of the pamphlets around in his hand. "So it's her contention that, at seven years of age, Sylvia managed to seduce her stepfather?"

"At that time it was her father. The stepfather didn't come along until she was ten. But yes, that's her story."

"What about the other one? Donovan, is it?"

"Donovan Wright. Passive little guy. Very soft spoken and easily influenced. Best we can determine, he was sexually assaulted by a camp counselor. He actually reported it once he got home, but I'm afraid that's when his troubles started."

"Lack of belief?"

"Oh, no," Vincent said bitterly. "His parents had no trouble believing him. But they belong to a religious fundamentalist group. They believed he was a whore of Sodom and Gomorrah. Started taking him to these all-day cleansing ceremonies where he got a vision of hell courtesy of some sadistic, homophobic minister. Someone had the sense to alert child services, and they got him out before they could kill him in order to save him. Since then I understand his parents have disowned him."

"How did he and Sylvia hook up?"

"They were on the same intake group. Just fate, I think. I probably should have split them up right from the start, but I try to encourage the kids here to help each other. If they can find out they're not alone in what they went through, and they can make friends, it can go a long way toward getting them through their problems, and helping them see there's a light at the end of the tunnel."

I knew Vincent meant well, and usually his instincts are right on the mark, but in this case he had screwed up. I was almost mad enough to tell him so, when I realized that he had already reached the same conclusion, and was already flagellating himself over his mistakes. Adding to his guilt wasn't going to

get us any closer to recovering our horses or finding the missing kids.

"Any idea where they might go?" Keith asked.

"Possibly. Donovan knows this area better than Sylvia, since he grew up around here. The camp he went to was up in the Pecos Wilderness in the Sangre de Cristos. If he tried to get back there..."

There were over a million acres of wilderness, some as wild as the day people first arrived on this continent, up there. How the hell do you search that kind of area?

I studied the desk in front of me, watched Vincent's hands fuss over the intake forms. "Do we assume the horses are still with them?"

"Was any tack missing?" Vincent asked. "Any sign they planned on riding?"

"Did either of them even know how to ride?" Keith asked.

Vincent shook his thinning hair. "Donovan may have been exposed. I can't say for sure Sylvia never rode as a kid, but I don't see either of them having any real skill. Does that mean you think they're on foot?"

"Even if they managed to ride out in the beginning, I doubt they'd stay on horseback. Once you start climbing, it takes skill to handle those trails back in there. The first wrong move and you're on the ground. The horses are probably already spooked enough to keep on going. Eventually they may find their way back..."

"Minus the kids."

"At least it's summer," I said quietly. "There's no chance of hypothermia."

"But they have no supplies either, right?" Keith frowned. "What about water? Some of those areas up there are pretty dry. Worse yet, if one of them is injured..."

Vincent winced. His hand reached for his phone. "We can't do this on our own. I appreciate your guys helping out, but I have to call in the authorities."

Neither one of us had any objections. I knew Darrel and the others were looking, but they'd barely be able to scratch the surface of that huge national park. Even if we spent a week searching, we'd still only see a part of it. And those kids didn't have a week. Not to mention our horses. I was especially worried about Button. He was too young for this kind of trauma. I listened to Vincent's one-sided conversation as he called the police. Ten minutes later he hung up the phone, and looked as if he had aged about twenty years.

"They're on their way."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

We waited for the police to arrive, then arranged with them to be part of an organized search of the park area around the ranch. They would call in volunteers and meet us back at the ranch in a couple of hours. Some searchers would come with horses, others in 4-wheel drives or on foot. If they could, they would bring in a helicopter. One cop also mentioned trying to find some search and rescue dogs in the area. I almost regretted that Shadow and Sleuth weren't trained in S&R. They could have helped us, since they were familiar with the missing horses. But they didn't have the training.

Someone also suggested that Vince alert the media. This was one time the cops felt media coverage would be a benefit. Keith knew a woman who worked on the local news channel; he went off to make a private phone call. When he got back, he said a newscaster would be onsite to cover the search. Did Vincent have any recent photos of the missing children?

"Some intake pictures," Vincent said. "They're not the best, but they're only a couple of weeks old."

"Any idea what the two of them were wearing, Mr. del Vecchio?" asked a white-haired cop who had introduced himself as Sergeant Faron. The impression I had was that Keith knew the man. So, it seemed, did Vince.

"Last time I saw them, they had on jeans and T-shirts," Vince said. "Hers was pink, his black with the words *Don't mess with me* and the picture of a coiled rattlesnake."

Faron looked at Keith and me.

"Why don't you folks go home, Doctor, Mr. Richards. The search teams will start arriving anytime. Can you get in touch with the three who went out earlier? Let them know what's happening?"

I glanced at my watch. Charlie had said a couple of hours. I had to hope they would stick to that time table. "No, but our

arrangement was that they would only stay out a short while, then we would compare notes. I expect they'll be heading back soon."

"Good," Faron said. "If they come back, keep them there. We need to coordinate who's going to go where and with whom. Otherwise we risk missing sections or losing our searchers. If we keep it organized, we stand a better chance of finding the kids."

Keith and I were soon on our way back to the ranch. I was trying to feel optimistic, but one look at Keith's face, and I knew I wasn't succeeding. Vince and Officer Faron would go back to the center to gather the pictures and start organizing for the upcoming search.

Keith pulled the ranch truck into the empty yard. He reached between us and took my hand. "We'll find them, babe, I promise."

I didn't even know if he meant the kids or our horses.

I was worried about both.



Someone had been watching the time. Less than an hour after we arrived home, and thirty minutes before the rescue team arrived, Darrel, Charlie, and Ty rode back into the yard. Keith and I hurried out to meet them, and while we stripped the saddles off the horses, and brushed them down, the three gave us a succinct report.

It was unfortunately short.

They had seen and heard nothing. In turn we told them what we had learned from Vincent. All three looked even grimmer than when they rode into the ranch yard. Charlie ran his hand over his bound hair.

"So you don't think they're still with the horses? If one of them fell off..."

"They could be lying injured somewhere off the track," I said. "That's why Faron was hoping to get some dogs to help with the search. But if he can't, we have to do it on our own."

We put the three horses back in their stalls, each with fresh water, a cup of grain to help replenish them, and hay. We also did a quick check on the other two horses. One, Sweet Dreamer, was our other barrel prospect. Darrel would ride her if she had to be used in the search. I could handle Whiskeyjack in a pinch, and the other fresh horse, a chestnut gelding named Snickers, could be ridden by anyone. With an hour of rest, and the energizing grain, the other three could go out again too, but they wouldn't last as long.

"We can only search till sunset anyway. Too much chance of missing something in the dark if we keep going."

None of us wanted to think about what that might mean for those poor kids, stuck out in the unforgiving bush, alone, for another ten hours or so, in the dark.

"Of course, if your friend Vince is right, they were already out there last night," Charlie said. He took Ty's hand and squeezed it. "Let's just hope they aren't hurt."

"Although if they *are* hurt," Darrel murmured, "they'll be less likely to move around."

I knew what he meant. If they kept moving, we might never find them.

"Let's just concentrate on finding them before it gets dark," Keith said. "Don't think about anything else right now."

Tom met us in the common room. He had prepared a couple of platters of sandwiches and coffee, which raised our flagging spirits, just as he'd intended. By the time we had eaten our fill, and I'd put back two cups of strong black coffee, the first of the police had arrived.

We trooped back out onto the veranda and watched a man clad in jeans unload two saddled and bridled horses from the back of a trailer. We had hitching rails on either side of the steps, and he looped the reins over that and took the steps two at a time. He thrust out his hand to Keith.

"Sergeant Brian Rodriguez, Dr. Anderson. I knew your folks well. Sorry to hear about their accident. They were good people."

"Thanks," Keith murmured, letting Brian swallow his hand.

A second man climbed the steps. He nodded at us.

Brian shook my hand next, and then the others. He indicated the other man. "Sergeant Ralph Whittier. He's had a lot of experience in the Pecos Wilderness area. He'll be our coordinator."

Ralph made no move to shake anyone's hand. Not the social type? Or did he know who we were? I'd met a few guys over the years who were loath to shake hands once they knew someone was gay. I'm not sure if they thought it was contagious, or if they just couldn't stand to touch a hand that might have fondled another man's cock. I always figured it was their problem, not mine. In Ralph's case, if he was as experienced as Brian said, I didn't care what his attitude was. He could give me the cold shoulder from now until next year, if he helped us find Sylvia and Donovan.

And Button, his mother, and the other horses.

Others began arriving. We moved into the rarely used dining room where I cleared the big oak table and Ralph spread a topographical map of the Santa Fe National Forest. I grabbed a couple of tumblers to hold down the corners, after which we all bent over the table and listened to Ralph tell us how to move through the park, concentrating on the areas we thought the kids might have been able to reach in the time they had.

After listening to him for several minutes, I had to ask, "Do you think there's much chance of either of them being alive?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Everyone froze. I knew it was a question many wanted to ask, but were either afraid of the answer, or of appearing defeatist. I like to know what I'm facing. I held Ralph's unyielding gaze, and didn't look away when he cocked one eyebrow at me.

"I think there's a good chance they are," he finally said. He spoke slowly and with measured cadence. I began to suspect he wasn't much of a talker. "They're older and in good physical shape, from what I've been told. I gather they're also tough."

Faron and Vince arrived, and the meeting moved back outside. They passed out copies of the two intake pictures Vince had pulled from his files. Everyone studied the prints before stuffing them into shirt pockets and saddle bags. Outside there were a half dozen more horses tied up to the hitching rails and two 4-wheel drives parked in the driveway along with nearly two dozen people. I spotted the local news station's logo on a white van parked away from everyone else. One of their anchors, a lean-faced man with a melodious voice, strolled among the controlled chaos asking simplistic questions. He was followed by a cameraman with a bored expression on his face.

It irked me that they were all set to exploit our misery for TV ratings; but, on the flip-side, if they were able to spread the word about Sylvia and Donovan, and help find them, then I could live with a little exploitation.

They cornered Keith, who was not only better known in the community than I was, but was also a hell of a lot more photogenic. Not that I'm biased, mind you.

Vince hurried over to talk to them, too. Soon they were huddled in a circle.

Darrel came weaving through the growing crowd leading Whiskeyjack, Sweet Dreamer, and Snickers. A kid he had in on weekends sometimes to help during the busy season followed

with Buzz and Quincy in tow. Charlie and Ty came to stand beside me.

"We'd like to keep looking with you, if that's okay, Todd," Charlie said. "I asked Darrel to saddle us up whatever he had."

I was happy to have them. The more eyes the better. Keith moved back to my side after ditching the TV crew. He took my hand in his. Keith always amazed me with his total lack of concern over who saw us holding hands. I'm not in the closet, but there are times I feel less than comfortable flaunting my sexuality. With Keith it was never a matter of showing off; he just liked touching me and didn't care who saw it. And he did it in such a casual and non-sexual way, that to date we'd never had an overt negative reaction. Mind you, being the son of two well known and loved philanthropists certainly raised his standing in the community. People might talk about us behind our backs, but it seemed that no one was willing to do it openly. And that suited me just fine.

"Thanks, Charlie," Keith said softly, squeezing my fingers. "I can't tell you how much we appreciate this, though I don't think this is what you had in mind for a vacation."

Charlie shrugged. "Lying around all day in a hot tub can get pretty damned boring after a while. Not to mention turning us into prunes."

I glanced at Ty and felt like saying, 'Even when you've got *that* lying beside you?' but I actually knew what he meant. Even with the man of your dreams, there has to be more than just sex.

Faron stepped forward leading a lanky roan. Once he had everyone's attention, he began to lay out our plan of action.

"SUV's will take the service roads in to designated points. Vincent will be traveling with the SUV searchers. He has a cell, as well as a walkie-talkie. I have both as well. Walkers will travel with the SUVs, then be dropped off and travel back in this direction. Your job will be to search near the road. If these kids are hurt, they may be lying in a ditch, or trapped in a dead fall somewhere. You can't travel as far, but you can look in areas the riders can't get close to. Got that?"

The crowd had swelled, and nearly two dozen men and women nodded. Many of them carried flashlights, and all of them had a look of quiet determination about them. I recognized several and nodded to the ones who met my eye.

"Now in case you missed it, we're not only looking for the two children, Sylvia von Neumann and Donovan Wright, but also—four, is it, Dr. Anderson?" At Keith's nod, Faron continued. "Four horses. Or rather three horses and one foal. There's a small possibility that one of more of the children might still be with the horses, so it's important to keep your eyes open. If you spot anything, call it in. Anything at all."

More nods then Faron turned to the people who would be riding. "Stick close together. It's too easy to miss someone on the ground, who is unable to make a signal, if you're spread too far apart. It's too dangerous to keep the horses moving after dark, so head back at least an hour before sunset. Those of you without watches, stick close to someone who has one. Don't play hero; you don't do yourself, or your mount, any favors if you push the envelope. We'll just end up hunting for you. Think how embarrassing that would be."

There were a few grim smiles, and Faron signaled that the discussion was over.

"Good luck, folks, and God speed. Let's bring those kids back in one piece."

The search parties moved out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The forest trails were gloomy after our ride in the bright sunlight. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be scared teenagers fleeing from their own actions, and wondering what would happen to them if they got caught. Had they expected the fire to move so fast? Had they just wanted a diversion, while they fled with the horses they thought they were rescuing?

Don't get me wrong, I was still pissed at what they had done. Nobody endangers my horses and gets excused; but I was beginning to suspect that these two hadn't been looking to cause quite so much trouble. They were kids who had been abused by people they should have been able to trust, then further abused by a system that took too long to rescue them. No wonder they didn't want anything else to suffer. Had they transferred their own pain onto our horses, and imagined them in a life of enslavement and abuse?

I just wanted to find them and let them know the world hadn't come to an end. But I also needed to find my horses, and know they were safe, too, or I might find myself never forgiving those two. And I knew that would eat at me the rest of my days.

We kept ourselves roughly one horse length apart. Ralph had said that was optimum—you could see what lay between you, and there was a low probability of missing a human body, no matter how prone it was. Even if they were half buried, we'd be close enough to notice the disturbed earth and displaced greenery.

Of course, talking about burials made us all too aware of another possibility no one had mentioned so far. Had the kids really gone off on their own? Or had they met someone?

I quietly mentioned my fears to Keith and he winced.

“Don’t,” he said. “I can’t think of those kids back in the hands of pedophiles. That would be too much. God wouldn’t be so cruel.”

I’m not what you’d call a religious person—when you’re pounded day and night by so-called experts who tell you how much God hates you and your kind, it’s hard to believe—but I knew Keith had a quiet faith that sustained him. It had grown stronger since his parents’ untimely death, and it offered him comfort now when things got him down. He didn’t try to proselytize, but he let me know he prayed for me on occasion, when I would let my temper get the better of me and I would blow up over something stupid. His strength comforted me, so I guess his religion served us both.

Now I just hoped he was right, but sometimes God seemed pretty far away when it came to abused kids. If He was so great, why would He allow abuse to exist in the first place? And don’t give me that line about making you stronger. Kids have to be tough enough to grow up today; they don’t need to be abused to make them strong.

Whiskeyjack moved smoothly under me. His spotted neck flexed and swayed as we walked through the bush. I kept my own head moving, swinging from side to side as I scanned the ground on either side, looking for anything that didn’t look right. On my right, Keith did the same. Charlie rode Buzz on my left; he was hunched down in his saddle, his eyes glued to the ground.

The forest was alive with the rustle of passing hooves, the distant cry of birds, and the sway of overhead branches. Occasionally someone would shout out, and we would pause while the ground was searched more thoroughly. We all waited for the signal to move on, since we didn’t dare open gaps in our line. I had never actually thought about how thick and huge the Santa Fe National Forest was. One and a half *million* acres? How could we hope to cover it?

I reminded myself that we didn’t have to cover all of it, only the part the two teens could realistically have reached, in the time they’d been missing. On horseback or on foot, it made little difference. A horse couldn’t move at more than a slow

walk in here, and they frequently had to go around objects a walking human could have climbed over. So no matter how you looked at it, those kids were only going to be able to go so far.

Unless of course they had been picked up by someone in a vehicle.

Which brought us full circle to where we didn't want to go. Good going, Richards.

Above the trees, the sun was in its inevitable descent. We had maybe two more hours of reliable light before we had to turn back. We seemed to be moving too slowly. If the kids were ahead of us, moving too, we'd never catch up to them.

Think positively.

Suddenly there was a shout off to our left. I reined Whiskeyjack in and met Keith's gaze. He looked alternately hopeful and afraid. None of us moved. Our orders were to maintain position until told otherwise.

Faron came loping over to us, his roan beginning to sweat and foam with the unfamiliar exertion. "We may have spotted a horse. Does someone want to come look?"

I did, desperately. But I knew who needed to go. Both Keith and I looked for Darrel, who came forward at our urging.

"Go see, Darrel."

Darrel nodded, touching the brim of his Stetson. "Wish me luck," he said then wheeled Sweet Dreams around and trotted after Faron.

We waited a restless fifteen minutes, then twenty, watching the shadows lengthen and pool between the endless expanse of trees. Whiskeyjack tossed his spotted head and worried the bit in his mouth. I heard other restless stamping, and the occasional muttered "Easy... whoa."

Then Darrel was back. His narrow, sun-darkened face was split by a large grin.

"It's Mistral. She's okay! Faron's got someone coming to pick her up."

I wanted to cheer, but I knew it would be premature. We were a long way from celebrating. But it was a start.

Keith glanced at his watch. He frowned. "We only have another hour and a half of full light. Where's Faron? We need to move out before we lose any more time—"

Then the shout came to move on. I kned Whiskeyjack around and got him moving again. Our spirits lifting, we peered even closer at the ground, and off into the growing shadows, more determined than ever to find the others.

But no other shouts came that fading day. At last we were forced to turn back, though there were the inevitable arguments to go just a 'bit more.' It was Faron who quashed those firmly.

"You want to kill your horses, or waste our time forcing us to launch a search party for you, do it on your own time. We'll fan the walkers out with their flashlights, but that's about all we can do." He sighed and wiped his brow with a sweat-soaked arm. "I don't like giving up any more than you do, people, but we aren't doing them any favors if we start hurting ourselves. We'll reconvene back at Keith's at first light. Get an early start. I'll work on bringing a helicopter in tomorrow to extend the search. Go home, folks."

There were a few grumbles but most saw the wisdom in his words. Me, I was too tired to feel much of anything.

Back at the ranch, Keith and I climbed wearily off our horses and led them into the stable. Vince and his road crew drove into the yard as we brushed and put the horses away. The other horses would be left here for the night, either outside, in one of the paddocks, or in the few empty stalls we had. I stopped at Mistral's stall and fed her an apple. She stuck her nose over the door, and I looked her over while she ate. She didn't look any the worse for wear. When Darrel showed up minutes later, both he and Keith confirmed her surprisingly good condition.

"She looks good, Todd. A couple of scratches, nothing major. Keith can check her out more thoroughly in the morning, if he wants."

Vince met us outside and offered us a tired smile. The man looked like he'd aged twenty years. I didn't want to think what this would mean to him if this turned tragic. I couldn't think about that. I touched his shoulder, all too aware of the tension riddling his body.

"It's going to be okay, Vince," I said, and Keith echoed my words. "We'll find them tomorrow."

He nodded and climbed back into the SUV to head home. As his taillights vanished through our gate, Keith turned to me.

"We will. I swear. I won't leave those kids out there another night."

Arm in arm, Keith and I climbed the steps to our front door. I reached for the doorknob when a voice came out of the darkness.

"Has anyone ever stopped to think that those two deviants might have done something to those kids?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Keith and I froze in our steps. I didn't recognize the speaker, but I had no trouble recognizing Faron's answering voice.

"You got something to say, Roddy, say it. I'm too damned tired to play games."

Roddy. It had to be Roderick, a rancher who had a spread on the other side of Santa Fe. We never had much contact with him. I think the avoidance was mutual.

"Come on, Simon," Roderick said. "Look at them. Bunch of queers running a queer hotel out here. You heard what already happened to that one kid. He's a queer, too. His own parents booted him out. But these two and their hotel. Maybe these kids are part of the services they provide. They got places like that in other countries. I heard about them. Sex holidays." Roderick spat into the bushes beside the verandah. "Maybe they did something to those kids, and then tried to cover it up. They could hide those bodies anywhere on this pissant spread, and laugh, while they got us running wild goose chases all over those mountains."

"Like I said, you got something to back that up, you give it to me. Otherwise I got no call to harass anyone here."

"Bunch o' God damned queers, what other proof you need?"

I don't know where he got the balls, but Keith never backed down from anyone, and now was no exception. Keeping my hand firmly in his, he marched up to the two men and planted himself between Roderick and a startled Faron.

"Is there a problem here, Sergeant?" he asked. "If there is, maybe we need to clear this up right now."

"No, no problem, Dr. Anderson," Faron said, and I could have sworn he suppressed a grin.

Roderick looked ready to have a stroke. He stared at Keith's hand entwined in mine and gaped like a fish out of water.

"Then everything is all right?" Keith pressed. He edged closer to Roderick, clearly aware that his presence had the other man on edge.

"Everything's just fine, Dr. Anderson." Faron tipped his hat at us. He seemed to enjoy reminding Roderick that Keith was a doctor. "And I do want to thank you for your hospitality tonight. Sure hope we can resolve this tomorrow."

"So do I, Sergeant," I said. My gaze fastened on Roderick. "I hate to think of those two kids out there all alone."

Roderick suddenly snorted and stomped off, vanishing into the darkness toward the yard where the vehicles had been parked. Moments later we heard a truck engine roar, and gears complain as the vehicle raced back out to the county road.

Faron met my gaze briefly before settling on Keith. "Sorry about that. He's a bit of a hothead."

"I just hope he doesn't decide to share his theories with half the town." Keith sighed. "He won't be the only one willing to believe it."

"Most folks know better."

"I just don't need any trouble from the few who might want to believe him."

Keith sounded wearier than I'd heard him in a long time. I squeezed his hand, and wished I was strong enough to put my arm around him, but couldn't bring myself to do it in front of Faron.

"I'll see to it personally that nothing happens, Keith. You have my word on that."

I tugged at Keith's hand. "Let's get inside. We need to rest before tomorrow."

Faron took his leave, and I shut the door behind us before releasing a volley of curses. Keith smiled tiredly at my rage.

"Don't let it get to you, hon. The world is full of guys like him. You can't let them upset you."

"Easy for you to say."

Keith suddenly swung around and hugged me to him. "No, it's not easy. But I won't let assholes like him diminish my life. We have a right to be here, Todd. Nobody will ever convince me otherwise." He leaned down and spoke with his lips less than an inch from mine. "Come on, let's go to bed. I bet I can make you forget even that jerk."

I felt my body respond to his nearness just as it always did. His lips teased mine for an interminable amount of time.

"I'll bet you can," I whispered.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

He led me into our suite of rooms and firmly shut the door behind us. Then he backed me up until my thighs were against the edge of our bed. He began to undress me.

I helped him by skimming out of my jeans and boxers and tossing them into the clothes hamper. Then I went to work on him. When we were both naked, we tumbled into bed and lay pressed together, neither one of us rushing into anything.

Our lovemaking was leisurely, but no less powerful than when we went at it hot and heavy. I lay on top and we kissed, our cocks sliding over each other, smearing our swollen pricks with precum. Eventually he opened his legs and I moved between them. I entered him slowly, and we began a dance of thrust and parry. He groaned against my mouth, and I sucked on his lower lip, nipping at his chin and running my tongue over his teeth and gums, exploring the inside of his mouth.

The intensity grew as he began writhing under me, rotating his hips to take me in deeper. I responded by increasing my tempo.

I came, gasping his name as I blew my load deep into his hot, tight channel. Before he could do the same, I pulled out of him and slithered down to engulf his swollen cock in my wet mouth. His fingers clutched my head, and he exploded down my throat, sending blast after blast of thick cum across my tongue, where I swallowed it and wanted for more.

Finally I collapsed on top of him. He murmured soft endearments against my damp skin and pulled the comforter up over both of us.

I don't know about him, but I slept like the proverbial baby.



Predawn found us back in the stable yard, suppressing yawns and sipping fresh-brewed coffee from travel mugs with the logo of a Santa Fe golf club as we waited for the others to arrive. The horses were all saddled, thanks to the combined efforts of Darrel, Charlie, Ty, Keith, and myself. Mistral would not be used today. Keith had given her a quick once over and determined she was healthy but exhausted. She needed rest more than anything else.

Finally Faron, Vince, and the others began to arrive. When everyone was there, I noticed that Roderick was back. He threw one baleful look at Keith's back, ignored me, and kept to himself. He refused the offer of coffee. He seemed unusually tense, pacing the yard, avoiding all our neighbors, who threw him greetings as he passed. He seemed in a hurry to go nowhere as far as I could tell.

He pulled his horse out of the line and walked it over to the edge of the yard. I made a mental note to keep an eye on him during the ride. I wanted to see who he talked to and what he did. Maybe I'm the suspicious type, and Keith wouldn't have approved, but I suddenly didn't trust Mr. 'Roddy' Roderick. If nothing else, we didn't need him spreading his poison through our community, and potentially ruining our lives, and our livelihood, with his dirty innuendo. It was like the old joke "You still beat your wife?" Any way you respond leaves you looking guilty.

Just as the sun topped the eastern trees, we mounted up and headed out. Our saddlebags were filled with water and high energy snack foods. Several of us carried first aid kits and everyone with a cell phone carried it, even if there was a good chance we'd lose the signal further in. A few walkie-talkies, which had proven to be a boon the day before, were back.

Vince and Faron both had them, so that even if the cells failed, we could communicate over short distances.

As we wound our way along the path we had taken yesterday, I heard the distant whap-whap of an approaching helicopter. Faron trotted over to Keith and me.

"Got the search and rescue team down at the air base to loan us a bird for the day. They'll keep an eye out farther up the Pecos Wilderness, see if they can spot any fires or other activity." He patted the walkie-talkie strapped to the front of his saddle. "They spot anything, we can be on it like the sizzle on a steak. Don't know if you noticed. We got twenty more walkers going up in the trucks. Twenty more sets of eyes."

"I noticed," Keith said. "They said they saw the clip on the news last night. It paid off to call in the news team."

Faron grimaced. "Sometimes even those boys earn their stripes. I noticed Roderick came back. He give you boys any trouble this morning?"

"No, not me." I looked at Keith. "You?"

"Not a word. Eye daggers, but no words."

"Well, if he forgets himself, you let me know."

Keith nodded, but I said nothing. If Roddy gave us any flack, I intended to take care of it myself.

I just hoped he didn't make that necessary. We had enough on our hands without having to deal with some narrow-minded homophobe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The ride through the area we had searched yesterday went quickly. Not because we didn't look—there was no telling if those kids would backtrack or not—but because as a team we felt more confident in our ability to spot anomalies. And that's what it came down to—knowing what was familiar and being able to instantly spot what was different. It was a trick I understand astronomers use to spot things like comets. They could see the single minuscule spot of light that didn't belong in the night sky, because they were so amazingly familiar with the thousands of specks of light that *did* belong.

But by noon we were getting discouraged again. We had been riding for nearly six hours and had seen nothing that suggested the two teens had come this way. How could two people vanish so completely?

Nor was there any sign of Gloria, Sally, or her four-week-old foal. I was beginning to have a sick feeling about those three.

Less than thirty minutes later, Faron called a stop for lunch. In touch with Vince and his searchers, he told us none of them had spotted anything, either. He advised us to try to keep our line as tight as possible, so we hobbled the horses and gave them nose bags full of oats to keep them occupied in the grassless region. Then we gathered in small groups to eat our tasteless lunches and discuss the hunt so far.

I caught sight of Roddy standing on the fringes of a group of overdressed townies. He was drinking something out of a thermos, and when he finished he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before recapping it. When he glanced my way, I made sure I was looking elsewhere.

By the time he moved back to his mount, and Faron called us all back, I had made up my mind. I remounted Whiskeyjack and legged him around to fall into place within sight of Roddy. I intended to keep my eye on Mr. Roderick Black. I'm not sure why my spidey senses were so overactive in his case, but I was

going to follow my instincts. Whiskeyjack picked up on my nervous excitement and danced in place as we slowly moved forward. Eventually our pace picked up, and his restlessness fell away.

We continued to move more quickly than we had the day before. We were already past the point where we had turned around yesterday.

I held Whiskeyjack back, letting the others slip ahead a couple of feet. I could still sweep my area, but now I could also keep an eye on Roddy. For someone who had volunteered his time to try and find two missing kids, and a couple of horses, he wasn't paying much attention to anything around him.

In fact, Roddy seemed more interested in impressing the red head on the palomino mare who rode beside him. She didn't seem too interested in buying what he was selling.

After a while he let his horse drift away from the mare. Doing so took him even further from the rest of the search party. When his horse paused to grab a mouthful of leaves, he made no move to push it on. I drew rein and Whiskeyjack dropped behind the others. I kept Roddy in sight as the day waned.

The gloom of the forest helped to cover our surveillance. I don't think Roddy had a clue I was watching him. I also got the feeling Roddy was more interested in where he was going, rather than who was around him. He hunched low over his horse's neck, and urged the animal on at a pace I thought was too much, given the uneven ground cover. He clearly wasn't concerned about his horse's safety, which was another thing not to like about the man.

When he turned a hard ninety degrees from the search path, I followed without hesitation. I knew Roddy was up to something, and his actions alone told me it was nothing good. The brush in this area of the forest was thick, and offered perfect cover for Whiskeyjack and myself.

I glanced back once and realized we had put a surprising amount of distance between us and the other searchers. Did Keith even know I was missing? We'd all been so intent on

watching the ground that we hadn't been paying much attention to the other riders.

I began to wonder if I had made a major mistake. Roddy was a big man. He had to be close to three hundred pounds. Did I really want to confront this guy alone in the middle of nowhere? Worse, could he be armed? I'd never seen any sign he carried, outside of the ubiquitous rifle rack on the back of his pickup. I knew New Mexico gun laws prohibited carrying a concealed weapon, but Roddy didn't strike me as the most law-abiding person. He did strike me as a gung-ho macho type with more brawn than brains, a cowboy Neanderthal in a *John Deere* baseball cap.

Then all thought of turning back fled as I stepped past a massive three-trunked aspen tree and saw the cabin.

It was run down and had clearly seen better days—maybe back when Kennedy was president. Grey wood had buckled in places, leaving cracks that would do nothing to keep out the elements. The roof was shingled with tin that was black with nameless stains and lichens. The front step was cracked cement which listed to one side. The whole structure was so heavily concealed by dense brush, and thick trees, that I only saw it because I was practically on the doorstep. No wonder none of our aerial watchers spotted it. I was sure this was federal land, so who could have built it was beyond me.

I skirted the structure and discovered a second building in the back. This one was in even worse shape and had clearly been a small animal shelter at one time. Roddy's horse was tied to what remained of a corral and was trying to pull a few strands of sickly looking grass from around the base of the rotting cedar fence post.

I kept moving, hoping I could pass unnoticed. Within seconds I was out of sight of both buildings. I took a deep breath as I slipped back into the shelter of the trees.

Okay. Now what?

I circled back around to the west side of the main building, where I dismounted and tied Whiskeyjack to a low-lying bush. I slipped the feedbag over his nose so that he wouldn't be

tempted to call for company and alert anyone we were in the neighborhood. With a final pat on Whiskeyjack's spotted neck, I made my way back toward the mystery building.

At the edge of the clearing, I crouched behind a thick bush and studied the cabin. It wasn't until I saw a feeble light pass by one of the grimy windows that I realized Roddy was inside. He must have been carrying a candle, since the light flickered and glowed with a soft, natural light.

I waited until the light moved again and was sure Roddy had gone to the back of the building before I stood up.

A hand fell on my shoulder.



I bolted upright and twisted away from the hand, wondering if I could outrun Roddy long enough to get to Whiskeyjack. Then a body blocked my path.

"Todd! It's us."

I stared into Keith's eyes, where I saw amusement war with exasperation. Beside him Charlie and Tyler held back, their looks more sober.

"I told you I saw him ride off," Tyler said. He folded his arms over his chest.

"Yeah, you want to tell us about that?" Keith said. He grew more serious, his hand kneading my stiff shoulders. "What the hell were you thinking, going off after this guy alone?"

"I didn't—" I fumbled for words, my heart still pounding in my chest from the fright they had given me. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"That much is obvious." This from Charlie.

"Hey," I protested weakly. "He was acting suspicious, so I went along to see what he was up to."

"And it didn't occur to you to get backup?"

"Uh, no..."

"You and me, we're going to talk later," Keith said, and I knew my goose was cooked.

"Oh, hon," I started, then fell silent, knowing excuses were wasted.

"What do you think he's doing in there?" Keith asked. "Does he have our horses? Did he do something to those kids?"

"I think we need to go look," I said, trying to recover my standing by suggesting something constructive.

The last of the late afternoon light was fading above us. It gave us more confidence as we left the shelter of the forest for the shadow-filled clearing.

Avoiding the crumbling step, Keith and I approached the nearest window, the one where I had seen the flickering light. The light seemed stronger and cast a feeble path out onto the weed-covered ground around our feet. Maybe he had some hurricane lanterns in there, since it clearly wasn't on TNMP's grid, maybe wasn't even on any surveyor's map.

Keith stretched up and peered in the window. I followed suit.

The walls of the cabin were white-washed plaster board. Water stains from years of leaks had turned the white to green around the edges. An empty table was the only piece of furniture I could see inside.

I couldn't see Roddy anywhere.

I glanced over in time to see Charlie reach the other window. Tyler was close behind him. From the look on Charlie's face, I knew he had seen something. I prodded Keith, and we slid along the walls of the cabin toward our two guests.

Tyler was whispering to Charlie. He broke off when we approached. He gestured frantically at the window.

"They're in there. He's got them tied up."

"Where's Roddy? We need help—"

I pulled out my cell but wasn't surprised to find we were in a dead zone. The area was full of them. I cursed under my breath and slapped the useless device back in my belt.

Charlie looked grim. "I don't see him—"

“Shit.” Keith straightened and pressed his face against the window. His voice rose in alarm. “That’s no candle. He’s set the place on fire!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I stared in horrified fascination as flames climbed the water-stained walls beyond the dirty window. I swear I could feel its heat wash over me. Fire crackled and a dull roar filled the silence between us.

Then I saw Sylvia and Donovan tossed in the corner like so much hog-tied garbage. Their eyes bulged with terror.

When Tyler yelled, I swung around in front of Keith in time to deflect the blow Roddy aimed at his head with a claw hammer. Instead of hitting him, it glanced off my shoulder, sending a numbing pain jolting down my left side.

“Goddamned faggots! Shoulda minded your own business,” Roddy spat as he raised the hammer to strike again. “Just like them damned kids, messing around where they shouldn’t.”

I threw myself at him, but he shoved me aside. I crashed into the cabin wall, my head ricocheting off the rough wood. I grunted at the pain and fell in a heap against the wall. My head spun, and something warm trickled into my mouth, tasting of hot metal. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Charlie dart forward. Shoulders low, he threw himself at Roddy.

“Bastard!” he yelled, and I heard Roddy grunt. The hammer blow that had been directed at me went wild when Charlie’s fist slammed into his gut.

I kicked Roddy’s kneecap, and he stumbled to the ground. I rained blows down on his head, while Keith wrenched the hammer from him and flung it into a distant stand of yellow aspens. I grabbed a handful of hair and jerked Roddy’s head back. With a snarl, he swung his fist at me, narrowly missing my jaw.

Behind us I heard the crash of breaking glass and the boom of something exploding. A female voice screamed.

“Where are my horses?” I wanted to rip his hair out by the roots. “Where are they, asshole?”

Roddy glared at me. He grimaced as my grip tightened, and I lay my knee against his throat, and pressed down, watching the fear grow in his bulging eyes. It was satisfying to know I could make this guy afraid of me.

"Tell me, or I swear—"

"Todd!" Keith pulled at my arm, throwing me off balance. "Forget him. We need to get those kids out of there."

"My horses—"

"We'll find them, Todd," Keith said. "Trust me."

Roddy rolled away when I stood up. He spat at my feet, but yelped when Keith twisted his booted foot into the man's hand. I grinned.

"Let's go," Keith said.

Charlie had already reached the two teens lying helpless on the dirty cabin floor, whimpering in fear. Flames engulfed one wall, climbing across the ceiling toward us. The heat was horrendous. I could feel my face blistering, and my lungs burned. Charlie and Tyler struggled with the bonds that held Sylvia and Donovan. I rushed to help them, and together we dragged the two kids out into the refreshingly cool air, away from the flaming cabin. We had barely cleared the door when something crashed behind us and a fiery gout of flame reached for us. Sparks and heat shot into the sky, and the roar grew in volume. I watched Charlie take some of the frayed rope we had taken off the kids and approach Roddy, who was still nursing his injured hand. Charlie and Keith quickly trussed the sputtering man up, and left him leaning against a fir tree at the edge of the clearing.

I knelt beside Donovan. He looked up at me with round eyes.

"Do you know what he did with the horses?"

His plump, pimply face whitened under the soot stains, and his mouth opened and closed in silent distress.

My heart plummeted into my stomach. Oh God, was it something so terrible the boy couldn't speak? What had that monster done to my horses? I hated myself for it, but I wanted

to shake Donovan. I needed to hear the words, no matter how bad they were. Not knowing was worse.

Instead it was Sylvia who sputtered, "He brought them up here with us. I think they're out back. He was talking about taking them into Texas and selling them." She rubbed her wrists. "He's a horrible man. I never liked him."

I would have hugged her, if I hadn't already been halfway around the burning cabin. The glow from the fire lit up the decrepit structure and lent an eerie beauty to the golden aspens and dark firs that hemmed the place. Thank God it had been a relatively wet summer and there was little danger of the fire spreading, otherwise we'd all be in danger of the whole forest burning down around us. I approached the threshold and yanked open the unsecured door.

Sally's Mark whinnied at my entry, and even little Button managed a few brave squeaks before he ran to hide behind his mother. In a second stall that was little more than a couple of rotting boards, Bound for Glory was tethered. None of them had any bedding, food, or water. Clearly Roddy had been planning to move them soon. As soon as the hunt was called off, when the kids weren't found? Later today, probably. It's what I would have done.

Keith appeared in the door.

"Better move them, hon," he said. "The fire's spreading."

We scrambled out of the stable, leading Sally's Mark and Bound for Glory, knowing Button would follow his mother. Sally snorted and stamped her feet at the sight of the inferno that had fully engulfed the cabin by now. Charlie and Tyler trotted out of the dancing shadows, ringing the clearing, leading our horses. I scrambled onto Whiskeyjack, never releasing either horse. Button bounced along behind us as we moved as fast as we dared away from the fire.

Charlie had draped Roddy over the saddle of his own horse, while Tyler had taken Sylvia behind him and Keith had Donovan. I saw Donovan point to our right and we followed his lead and found ourselves on a fire road. No doubt this was how Roddy was going to get a trailer in to move the stolen

horses. It must also have been how Roddy had reached the cabin with the stolen horses. The kids had obviously stumbled on his rustling operation. He would have got here fast enough to come back in time to be part of the 'search and rescue' the next day. I despised the man more with each passing minute.

We had barely gone half a mile when lights appeared ahead of us. Within minutes we were surrounded by Faron and several of his deputies carrying flashlights and walkie-talkies. They took Roddy, replacing his ropes with handcuffs, and a female deputy stepped forward to take the kids.

I was surprised when Sylvia declined.

Shyly she glanced from Keith to me. "I want to go back with you." She moved to stand beside Roddy's horse. "After all, we helped rescue them."

I grinned back at her. She was right. All this time I'd been blaming her, and Donovan, for taking our horses, yet they'd been as much victims as we had.

Keith and I nodded at Faron.

"If it's all right with you, Simon," Keith said to him. "We'll see they get back safe. You can tell Vincent we'll be along with his kids in a little while?"

Faron smiled and tipped his Stetson. "Fine by me, Dr. Anderson. I'll be sure to let Vincent know." He raised his walkie-talkie and spoke into it.



It took us over an hour to reach *Rancho Bonito*. Word must have gone out because the yard was filled with neighbors and local media. I groaned when I saw Felicia from Channel 4. We all looked like hell, and the last thing I wanted was to see Keith's and my dirty mug plastered all over the late-night news. Thankfully Vince and Faron appeared, corralled the news people, leading them away from us.

Darrel was waiting too, and with him was a very pregnant and very indignant Mandy.

"Just what do you two think you're doing with those horses?" She crowded into my face as I dismounted. "You of all people should know better."

"Now hon," Darrel murmured. "You can't be blaming them for what Roderick done."

Tyler slid off his horse, and carefully helped Sylvia and Donovan off Roddy's mount. The boy sagged against the horse's sweating flanks.

Instantly Mandy was contrite. "Oh, you poor children. Let's get you inside—"

Keith had already dismounted and gone over to talk to Felicia. Charlie and Tyler joined them. I figured they were both media savvy enough to deal with Felicia and her crew.

I was surprised when Sylvia and Donovan approached me. Sylvia lightly touched Whiskeyjack's shoulder. "We'd like to help put the horses away." Beside her Donovan nodded.

Mandy came up behind the two kids. "You two need to come inside. Let Todd and the others take care of the horses."

"After we know they're safe." Who knew a young teenage girl could be so stubborn. "We were out there with them. We have to know—"

I saw Mandy debating whether to physically haul the two inside our place, or try to talk them into cooperating. I could have told her not to waste her time. Finally she must have come to the same conclusion. She frowned and said sternly, "Okay, Todd, you take them to see that the animals are alright. Then I want everyone inside." She winced and pressed her hand onto the mound of her stomach.

"You alright, Mandy?" I asked. She raised her pale face and said softly, "You better get Darrel."

I scurried to do her bidding. I found him and the others putting away all the newly groomed horses. Everyone was looking disheveled. But when they saw my face, every one of them became alert. I spoke to Darrel directly, "I think you better go to her. It may be time."

Darrel was gone before the words were out of my mouth, leaving the four of us to finish putting the rest of the horses away. I was pleasantly surprised when the two kids pitched in without questions or complaints. They weren't a lot of help, but they gave it their best effort. By this time even Charlie and Ty looked flagged. When we were done and the last animal was in its stall with clean water and hay, Sylvia approached me one more time. Her hair had straw in it, her face was smudged, but she looked happier than I had ever seen her in the short time I'd known her. She looked more like what I would have expected from a young, teenage girl.

"I'd like to see the baby again."

I raised my eyebrow at her, and was going to tell her not tonight, but I caught Keith's eye, and he surprised me by nodding an affirmative.

"Okay, you can see them for a minute. They've both had a long night, but I guess you have, too."

Together, Keith and I led the two kids to the last stall, a big box stall that would have housed a stallion if we had picked one up for our breeding program. Sally's Mark and Button were both quiet, but showed no signs of stress over their ordeal. Keith wouldn't let anyone enter the stall, so we had to be content to watch them through the barred door. Sylvia was too short to see over it. At her beseeching look, I picked her up and held her up against the door, bracing her against my shoulder. Charlie and Ty hung back to give the kids a clear view. I looked over and found Keith watching us. He grinned. His face was smeared as well, and there was blood on it from where Roderick had nailed him.

After a couple of minutes, I put Sylvia down and ruffled her hair. "Seen enough, kid?" I said gruffly.

"Can I come back and see them again?"

Keith answered that question, "You'll have to ask Mr. del Vecchio about that, hon. But if it's okay with him, then sure, you guys can come over. Maybe help out with the horses. Would you like that?"

Donovan nodded enthusiastically. Finally even Sylvia dipped her head once.

"Then that's okay," I said. "Now let's get you guys inside. Maybe we can round up some hot cocoa. I'm pretty sure we have marshmallows. That sound good to you?"

They agreed that it did, and followed us inside, where they huddled on the sofa together and sipped big mugs of marshmallow-laden cocoa.

An hour later Vincent came to collect the two, who, by that time, were only too happy to go home. Vincent thanked us for taking care of his charges, and agreed to bring them back later in the week, at his discretion. Once the three were gone, Charlie and Ty joined us in a beer in the lounge before calling it a night.

At last Keith and I ended up alone behind our closed bedroom door. I took him by the hand.

"We're going to have to do something for those two."

"Sylvia and the boy? We can have them over for a trail ride—"

"No, I mean Charlie and Tyler." Really, sometimes the man could be so dense. "We've all but ruined their honeymoon. Not exactly an endorsement for us."

"We'll think of something. Personally I think the two of them had fun. I don't really think they're going to call the Better Business Bureau on us."

"You think?"

"Trust me."

I grinned tiredly. "Shower?"

Before he could answer, I began to undress him. Our shirts and pants ended up in a dusty heap on the bathroom floor. I pulled him into the steaming flow of water.

Despite my tiredness, my cock rose and pressed against Keith's thigh. His mouth sought out mine, and our tongues grappled together. I groaned when his hand closed over the swollen head of my prick.

"Have I told you lately how much I love you?" he murmured against my throat. His heavy cock fit snugly against my belly.

I could never hear it enough. I bit his throat and nuzzled his ear, then I slid my mouth down his smooth chest and encountered a hard nipple, which I pulled with eager teeth. Keith moaned my name. I worked my way over to the other one, then skimmed my lips down his writhing belly, briefly dipping my tongue into his belly button. He tasted faintly of smoke and the sweat of his exertions. As I worked soap into his writhing muscles, the musky smell was replaced by herbs and his familiar scent. It was intoxicating.

Water flowed over us, warm and sensuous. Keith's fingers were entwined in my hair, and he gasped when my mouth closed over the fat mushroom head of his cock. I clamped my hands over his ass and pulled him deeper into my mouth.

Keith braced himself against the wall of the shower, his hips undulating in rising urgency. A low whine emerged from his throat and grew in urgency.

Suddenly he tugged at my shoulder. I reluctantly straightened.

"Fuck me, Todd," he said. "I want you inside me."

I hardly needed more invitation than that. I grabbed a thick bath towel and led him into our bedroom, drying us off as we went. Still damp, we tumbled on top of the thick comforter, and I immediately pressed him down, my tongue down his throat.

Keith grunted and dug his fingers into my scalp, driving his hips up to mesh with mine. Without breaking contact, he groped on the bedside table for the lube, which he generously slathered over my straining cock.

I entered him roughly; our need was too great for finesse. He clung to me, writhing and moaning, demanding harder and faster. I pulled his legs up over my shoulders, braced my hands on either side of his head, and began pounding into him. Our soft grunts and breathless words of love turned to groans and filled the room with the sound of our growing passion.

I reached between us and wrapped my fist around his thick, pulsing cock. His fingers kneaded my ass. My balls crawled up against the base of my throbbing cock. The first pulse of my orgasm left me groaning his name. Then the rest of it poured out, filling his dark channel with white hot cum.

Keith thrust his hips up again and again. I pumped his cock and felt the resultant orgasm shudder through him. He whispered my name as his body sagged back on the bed in release. I leaned down and swallowed his soft sighs. I eased away from him, my cock slipping out with a soft, wet pop.

We came back together and lay as one on top of the rumpled bed, too enervated to pull the covers up over us.

"We should check how Mandy's doing," Keith said, making no move to get up.

"Somehow I doubt they need anything we could give them. Darrel will call us if he needs us." I grinned against his sweaty skin. "Did you see the way Charlie nailed that asshole? I wouldn't want that guy getting pissed at me."

"You did pretty good yourself."

"I wouldn't let anyone hurt you," I said gruffly. I nuzzled the skin around his throat. "Not now, not ever."

"I love you, hon."

"Ditto," I said just as the phone rang.

It was Darrel.

We raced to the hospital in time to meet our family's newest addition. Mandy gave birth to Brooke Caroline Peltier at 9:35 pm. She was seven pounds, nine ounces, with a head full of wispy blond hair and a red monkey face that screwed up as she grasped my pinky finger in her tiny, perfect fist. Whatever she was, she was gorgeous. It was official now, I was an uncle. So was Keith.

Keith and I smiled at each other over the heads of the delighted parents. Our world was intact again and expanded by one. Bound for Glory, Sally's Mark, and Sally's precious foal were safely back at our ranch, our guests were snug in their bed,

and my best friend, and lover, in the whole world was here with me now, and forever.

Really, who could ask for anything more?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pat was born in Canada, which she is sure explains her intense dislike of all things cold and her constant striving to escape to someplace warm. Her first move took her to Los Angeles, and her fate was sealed. To this day she has a love/hate relationship with L.A, a city that was endlessly fascinating. *L.A. Heat* and the even darker *L.A. Boneyard* grew out of those dark, compelling days.

She wrote her first book at 17 – an angst ridden tome about a teenage girl hooked up with a drug user and went off the deep end. All this from a kid who hadn't done anything stronger than weed. She read her first positive gay book then too, *The Lord Won't Mind*, by Gordon Merrick and had her eyes open to a whole other world (which didn't exist in ultra conservative vanilla plain London, Ontario).

Visit Pat on the internet at: <http://www.pabrown.ca/>

THE TREVOR PROJECT

The Trevor Project operates the only nationwide, around-the-clock crisis and suicide prevention helpline for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Every day, The Trevor Project saves lives through its free and confidential helpline, its website and its educational services. If you or a friend are feeling lost or alone call The Trevor Helpline. If you or a friend are feeling lost, alone, confused or in crisis, please call The Trevor Helpline. You'll be able to speak confidentially with a trained counselor 24/7.

The Trevor Helpline: 866-488-7386

On the Web: <http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

THE GAY MEN'S DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PROJECT

Founded in 1994, The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project is a grassroots, non-profit organization founded by a gay male survivor of domestic violence and developed through the strength, contributions and participation of the community. The Gay Men's Domestic Violence Project supports victims and survivors through education, advocacy and direct services. Understanding that the serious public health issue of domestic violence is not gender specific, we serve men in relationships with men, regardless of how they identify, and stand ready to assist them in navigating through abusive relationships.

GMDVP Helpline: 800.832.1901

On the Web: <http://gmdvp.org/>

THE GAY & LESBIAN ALLIANCE AGAINST DEFAMATION/GLAAD EN ESPAÑOL

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) is dedicated to promoting and ensuring fair, accurate and inclusive representation of people and events in the media as a means of eliminating homophobia and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

On the Web: <http://www.glaad.org/>

GLAAD en español:

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