

out of the darkness



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Dreamspinner Press

Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Cover Art: Justin James <http://www.wix.com/qpm2010/justinjames>
Cover Design by Mara McKennen

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<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-554-8

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
August, 2010

eBook edition available
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-555-5

Prologue

TATIANA is concentrating on her technique. She's been instructed, she's observed, and she's practiced, but still... perfection eludes her. She knows she has an audience today; Robyn, Michelle, and Sara are all watching her with interest. And she's fine, not nervous at all, but then Dan appears from around the corner, looking perfect as usual, and she thinks of how effortless he makes everything seem, and it barely seems worthwhile for her to even try. But she *will* try, and she will succeed, if not this time, then the next, or the next....

She braces the handle of the shovel along her forearm and moves, and the angle is perfect, the velocity is precise, and she scoops up the entire pile of droppings in one smooth movement, no broom or second shovel needed. There's a moment when one tiny, round ball balances on the end of the shovel and threatens to fall off, but she controls it, as much with the power of her mind as with the tilt of the handle, and the ball rolls back to join its comrades in defeat. She beams at everyone as she crosses to the manure wheelbarrow and deposits her burden.

Dan is coming toward her, and he shakes his head. "I can't believe you hadn't learned that until now. What kind of an education are you getting at that fancy school of yours?"

Tat loves it when Dan talks to her like this, teases her like she's an adult, a friend. "I really don't know," she responds with a head shake of her own. "*They* seem to think it's all important...."

He snorts in mock disgust. "Some people have no sense of life's priorities." He's looking at the board, the chart that shows who's done what work with which horse, and when. "So who are you thinking about riding today?"

Tat likes that, too, that he's found a balance between giving her what she wants and supervising her. So many people would just roll

over; even though she's only fifteen, her family owns the barn, so she'll ride who she wants. Dan *asks* for her preferences, but he asks the other trainers, too, and he'll object if he doesn't agree with their priorities. He treats Tat like a regular person, someone he likes for herself, not for her money. Oops, he's waiting for an answer. She pretends that she's just been giving her choice some careful thought. "Sunshine, always—maybe a light ride up on the course, take a couple jumps but not go crazy?" Dan nods, and Tat's proud of herself. "And then Chaucer, right? Can you help us with the flying lead changes? I don't think either one of us is exactly sure what we're doing...."

Dan smiles. *Another* thing she loves about this guy—even though everything seems so easy for him, he understands that it can be hard for other people. "Why don't I bring Chaucer out for a while when you're on Sunshine? You can do some changes on her, make sure it's clear in your mind—cause she could do them in her sleep—while I refresh Chaucer's memory, and then we can switch, and you can try it on Chaucer while I cool Sunshine out."

"That sounds great, but... is it okay that I don't cool off my own horse?" She knows how important it is to Dan that everyone takes responsibility for the care of the animals.

"Tat, come on, I'm not laying traps for you. If I suggest something, it means I think it's okay." He doesn't really seem impatient. "I'd rather be riding a horse than standing in the middle yelling at you, so there's no problem."

That's excellent, then. "Okay!" She turns back to the board. "And then the rest... I don't know, whatever you need."

Dan nods. "Okay, yeah. I thought we might all do some hill riding this afternoon, give some of the up-and-comers a workout. Sound okay?"

Not Tat's favorite thing, but at least if they all do it at once, there'll be people to talk to. "Sure, yeah."

Dan grins like he knows exactly how she feels about hill riding, but he doesn't mention it. "All right, then... go get Sunshine ready." He looks at the board some more, comparing it to some papers in his hands. Tat had sneaked a look at the sheets a few times, and they seemed like gibberish to her—charts and notes and unintelligible

shorthand—but they seem to work for Dan.

She heads down the aisle to Sunshine's stall, smiles as the mare comes over to greet her. "Hey, sweetie. Ready to go for a ride?" She takes the halter off the hook on the outside of the stall, and Sunshine obligingly pushes her head into it then follows Tat out of the stall and into the aisle. Crossties, grooming, tacking up—it's all become a total routine for Tat, and she loves it. Sometimes she'll catch herself doing things automatically and remember that just a couple of weeks ago, the same things had felt strange and had required her full concentration. When she'd taken lessons with Jeff, the barn she'd gone to had really spoiled its riders, and Tat had rarely if ever looked after her horse before or after riding. She likes Dan's philosophy better, likes to think of herself as a horsewoman, not just a rider.

Robyn's taking Winston up the hill with her, and Dan comes on Monty. The big horse is excited of course, acting like he's never been outside before, but Dan just ignores him, and it's not long before he calms down. Tat's still working on that, still trying to get enough confidence that she can be on a horse who's misbehaving and not get tense. She knows that the horse will sense her nervousness and act even worse, but knowing it isn't the same thing as being able to do something about it.

She doesn't have to worry about that today, though, because Sunshine is as calm as ever. She loves to jump, and Tat knows that she'll want to go fast as soon as she's on the course, but when they're just hacking, she's as calm as Smokey. Tat hasn't admitted it to anyone, but she's glad that her brother wouldn't buy Monty for her. Sunshine is a much better fit, at least for now, and Evan's decision to buy all of the horses meant that she still gets to dream about riding Monty someday, when she's good enough. Tat knows that people had worried about Evan being the one to take care of her after their parents died, but she has to admit, he does a pretty good job. The most aggravating thing about him is how often he's right.

They get to the top of the hill and break into a gentle canter along the mowed path. Well, Sunshine canters gently; Monty wants to gallop and is fighting Dan every step of the way. Dan doesn't seem worried about it, though, just shakes his head and laughs. Winston is somewhere in the middle, not as calm as Sunshine but certainly not as

hyper as Monty.

They get to the first jump, and Dan holds Monty back and gestures for Robyn to go first. The first five jumps are quite low and not all that difficult, so those are the ones that the riders use when they're just looking for a light workout. Tat would like to do the full course every time she gets up the hill, but Dan has reminded her several times that her job is to *train* the horses, not to ruin them, so she tries to be more restrained.

After Robyn is over the second jump, Dan nods for Tat to go. She knew he'd put her in the middle. When Evan tries to protect her, it bugs her, but it's just cute when Dan does the same stuff. Even though it's pretty pointless this time—how is it any safer for her to be in the middle? Well, it probably gives Dan the opportunity to watch her and make sure she's not being reckless....

She starts Sunshine at a controlled canter; the first jump is a vertical, and Sunshine won't clear it if she's all flattened out for speed. After they're safely over, she asks Sunshine to extend a little to make up some time and then brings her back a bit for the next jump. The third one is around a twisty corner, and that's where things start to go wrong.

Tat asks Sunshine to turn a little more sharply than usual; these jumps aren't all that challenging, so Tat wants to ride them aggressively, get the most she can out of each one. But she's a little surprised by how responsive Sunshine is to her request and gets thrown off balance. As she's trying to haul herself back, one of her feet slips out of the stirrup. Tat knows she could stop, knows she should, but she's trying to ride like she's in a competition, and stopping in a competition would not be a good idea at all. So she feels around with her foot, trying to get the stirrup back, and Sunshine can't figure out what Tat's trying to get her to do and almost stops on her own, but then Tat almost gets the stirrup and kicks her foot into it, but she kicks Sunshine, too. The mare thinks it's a signal to jump, even though she's still a stride away from where she should be taking off from, but she's full of courage and heart, so she gathers herself and makes a tremendous leap, but Tat was off balance to start with and she can't stay on, and she feels herself slipping off as they're in midair, and then she's landing half on the jump, half on the ground, and she feels a horrible

thudding pain in her shoulder, and then she's hitting the ground with the rest of her body, and it's suddenly impossible to breathe, and Tat's panicking, fighting for air.

In some distant part of her mind, she really hopes that Sunshine is all right.

chapter 1

DAN feels like he's the one who fell off. He can barely breathe, he's a bit dizzy, and his mind is far away, replaying a horrible scene that he never wants to think about again. Thankfully, the need for action outweighs his shock, and then he's steering Monty clear of the spot where Tat's lying and yelling ahead to Robyn and sliding off Monty and running.

Tat's moving, and for a second he's so relieved he almost loses it again. He can remember Justin, lying there so still with Willow still half on him, thrashing and moaning and rolling, struggling to get up and then falling again... but he has to shut that thought out. Tat needs him now; he can fall apart later.

She's gasping a little, looking panicked, and he gently reaches out to her. "It's okay, Tat. Is it hard to breathe?" She nods. "Okay, try to take a medium breath—you probably got the wind knocked out of you—it's scary, I know...."

She breathes in, and he hears a little wheezy sound. "Yeah, that's good. I think you're okay." He sees how much his hand is shaking and drops it to brace against the ground beside her. He doesn't think she noticed, although she may be able to hear the tremor he's feeling in his voice. He makes himself replay the fall in his mind. "You landed on your shoulder, right?"

"I don't... maybe?" She's crying a little, and Dan isn't sure if he should acknowledge it, or if that would make it worse.

Finally, thank God, Robyn is there, jumping off her horse and hurrying over. "Oh, sweetie, are you all right?"

Dan backs off gratefully. Robyn has the same first aid training that Dan has, and she's generally much better at this sort of thing. He keeps one eye on them in case Robyn needs help and looks for

Sunshine with the other. She's standing on the far side of the jump, calmly eating some grass. Dan's still shaking, and instead of getting better, it seems like it's spreading. He tries to take his mind off it and walks over toward Sunshine. He carefully goes to her far side, where the girls won't be able to see him but he can hear them if they call, and he leans into her for a few breaths, almost gasping, trying to get her familiar horsey smell to bring him back to himself. The mare seems totally unconcerned, turning her head to look at him briefly and then returning to her snack. *Tat's okay*, he tells himself. *It's not the same. It's not the same.*

"Dan?" Robyn calls, and he jerks his head up.

"Yeah! Is she all right?" He stays with Sunshine, doesn't really need either of them to see him trembling like he's going through withdrawal.

"Her shoulder's hurt. I don't think it's dislocated, but I'm not sure."

It's pretty clear from Robyn's tone that Dan is expected to go and help her with this. He takes one more deep breath of Sunshine and walks back over. He's wearing a work shirt over his T-shirt, and he takes the top layer off. "We need a sling, right?"

"Yeah, I think so." Robyn takes the shirt from him and carefully loops it under Tat's forearm and then back behind her neck. Then she takes a closer look at Dan. "Shit, Dan, are you okay? You're gray."

Dan cuts his eyes rapidly to Tat and then says, "Yeah, I'm fine." He looks away for a second, tries to will some color back into his face. "Tat, are you okay to walk down?" He frowns. Half his brain is far away, spinning, panicking, but the other half is here, and it's a little frustrated. They should have a better system in place for these situations, maybe an ATV parked at the top of the hill, although an ATV ride could be bouncier than just walking....

"Yeah, I think so," she says, and she bravely tries to smile. "It hurts, though, Dan." She sounds like a little kid, and he wants to cry. He can't believe he let this happen.

"I know," he says soothingly. "It's just your shoulder, though, right? Not your neck at all or your back?"

“Robyn already asked me that stuff, Dan.”

“Well, now *I’m* asking.” He doesn’t mean to be short with her. Damn it, why is he reacting like this? He’s seen people fall off horses since Justin; he’s done it himself a couple times. It shouldn’t be a big deal. But this is the first time on a cross-country course, with someone he cares about getting hurt.

Tat looks a little taken aback and then meekly says, “It’s just my shoulder.”

He takes a deep breath and tries to calm himself. He knows it’s already too late to hide his reaction from Robyn, but maybe he can at least keep Tat from seeing it. “Okay, sorry. Good. Uh, I have your emergency number in my phone—that’s your doctor, right?”

Tat nods. “Dr. Sangha. Do I really need to see her?”

Dan’s pulling his phone out. “Why, is she mean?”

Tat gives him an odd look. “No, she’s not mean. She’s nice. But... she’ll make me tell Evan.”

Now it’s Dan’s turn to be surprised. “Dude, we’re not keeping this from Evan. Whether she tells him or you tell him or I tell him, he’s getting told.”

“Well, maybe not, Dan....” Tat sounds like she’s wheedling a little, and it at least makes Dan feel better about her shoulder. “He can get a bit... crazy when I get hurt. I fell on the tennis court two summers ago and just skinned my knee—I mean, I took a *lot* of skin off... it was pretty gross—but still, he was all, ‘you should find another sport, you should start swimming, or maybe do yoga.’” Tat looks at Dan with concern. “And that was *after* he’d calmed down and stopped talking about tearing up the tennis courts.”

Great. Dan wonders how this will affect the partnership plans, Evan’s scheme to let Dan buy into the business, but he puts that out of his mind for now. “No, Tat, you need to get your shoulder looked at, and it wouldn’t hurt to get the rest of you checked out too. You landed pretty hard. Do you want me to call, or do you want to?”

Tat looks like she’s debating, torn between wanting to be an adult and wanting to be looked after. “You can.”

“Okay, yeah.” Dan takes a quick look around. The horses are all

happily grazing, but he takes a moment to tie their reins in knots to keep them from falling over the horses' heads and getting stepped on. Dan's got enough panic of his own; he doesn't need the horses starting to freak out as well. His hands are still shaking quite a bit, and he can't hide it if he's holding the phone, so he turns away to dial. There's a ring, and then an efficient sounding woman greets him.

He clears his throat a little nervously. "Uh, hi. This is Dan Wheeler, I'm calling on behalf of Tatiana Kaminski."

The efficiency immediately disappears. "Oh my goodness, is Tat all right?" Dan should have known that the nurse would have fallen under the Kaminski charm.

"Yeah, she's mostly fine, she just... she fell off a horse and hurt her shoulder. We've got it immobilized, but we need to walk her down the hill, and then we thought we could bring her to you, get her checked out."

"Of course, we can get her in to see the doctor as soon as she arrives. Or Dr. Sangha could come out to the house, if you think Tat would prefer." Dan hadn't even considered that option. He's got to remember whose sister he's dealing with. Being the wealthiest family in a town full of wealthy people has its advantages.

"Uh, I'm not sure, but I think she's probably going to need an X-ray—can you do that at your office?"

"Yes, but the doctor could give her a quick examination and start on pain management before you make the drive."

"Uh, wow. Just a second, okay?" Dan lowers the phone and braces his hands at his sides, then turns to Tat. "Do you need 'pain management' for the drive to the doctor's?"

Tat gives him a strange look. "She's just in town, not all the way to the city. And it really doesn't hurt much unless I move it."

"So that's a no? We'll just get you to the office?"

"Or not even the office...." But the look on Dan's face makes it pretty clear that she can give up on that idea.

Dan looks over at the horses and tries to make a plan. "Robyn, if I bring the horses down, do you think you could help Tat?"

Robyn nods in agreement, but Tat interjects. “I’m fine, really! It’s not like I hurt my *leg*. I don’t need help.”

“Yeah, okay, tough guy.” Dan’s still feeling a little shaky, but at least he’s calmed down enough his voice is back to normal. “Why don’t you give it a try, and if you’re okay, we can pass the horses back out?”

Tat agrees, and Robyn carefully helps her up. Judging by the way Tat squeaks when she shifts her weight and the strained expression on her face, Dan’s pretty sure he’ll be leading the horses all the way down. Winston and Monty get turned out together and are friends, so Dan takes their untied reins in his left hand, and then leads Sunshine with his right. He watches her for the first few steps, but she’s not showing any sign of soreness. She’d clipped her hind legs a bit going over the jump, so he’ll have to keep an eye on them to make sure no lameness develops, but she seems okay for now. Which is good, because he really doesn’t need anything else to deal with.

They start off down the hill. Dan’s glad his hands are busy, because that gives him an excuse to not call Evan quite yet. The horses want to walk a little bit faster than the girls do, so he looks over his shoulder and says, “I’m gonna walk on ahead, and I’ll bring the truck up to meet you, okay?” Robyn nods gratefully—Tat is obviously having a bit of a tough time with the walk.

When he gets to the barn, he calls in to Devin to come and help with the horses. None of them are really all that hot, so Dan tells him to just pull off their tack and put them in the paddocks; grooming can wait for later. Then Dan grabs his keys and heads for the truck. He’s not really prepared to see Jeff standing in the parking lot.

“Hey, Dan, I was hoping to find you here,” Jeff starts. He’s grinning almost bashfully, and Dan’s pretty sure that he’d find it adorable and sexy and sweet at any other time, but right now he barely notices. Whatever Dan and Jeff and Evan are trying to create together, and however much they’d enjoyed their first night together just the day before, Dan knows that Tatiana’s health is a priority for all of them.

“Hey, man, get in. I’ll explain as we drive.” Jeff looks a bit startled but climbs into the truck, and Dan backs it up and turns it toward the hill. “Tat’s fine, but she fell off and hurt her shoulder. She’s getting a bump on her collarbone, so I think maybe it’s broken. We

called the doctor, so we've got to pick her up and take her to town."

"Shit." Jeff's quiet for a second. "You called Evan yet?"

"Uh, no, I haven't had time yet. I was gonna do it on the way to town."

Jeff nods, and then shakes his head. "Nah, I'll do it. He gets a bit... high strung about Tat."

Dan glances over. "Are you serious? I mean, I'm the one who let her get hurt...."

"Yeah, 'cause riding's only dangerous if Dan is careless. Whatever, man. People fall; it happens." Jeff pauses. "Was she wearing a vest?"

"Yeah, of course. Everyone wears their vest on the course. That's the rule." Dan knows that Michelle had been a little unimpressed with his insistence on helmets at all times and safety vests on the cross-country course, but she seemed to calm down about it pretty quick. He suspects that Robyn had mentioned Justin's accident to her, but he doesn't actually know that.

Jeff pauses for a second. "Yeah, okay, I know it's not your fault, and Evan will know that eventually, but... just for now, let me call him, okay?"

Shit. "Yeah. Okay." They reach the bottom of the hill, and Dan sees Tat, looking a little gray herself by now, being helped by Robyn. He parks the truck as close to the base as he can get it and hops out. He can help Robyn, and Jeff is pulling his phone out; Dan has a feeling he doesn't want to hear any part of that conversation. He thinks again about the partnership, wonders if he's not just out of a business opportunity but maybe out of a job as well. But he can't do anything about that now.

"Hey, Tat, rough walk?" It's Tat's left shoulder that's sore, and Robyn's already supporting her on her right side, so there's really not much that Dan can do. But Tat's crying, her face drawn with pain, and Dan remembers his own experiences with broken bones. They hurt, and Tat's not used to having hurts that aren't immediately soothed. She stumbles a little, and Robyn catches her but throws Dan a look. He understands and smoothly takes Robyn's place, then gently lifts Tat up

so she's lying sideways in his arms, her left shoulder out where he won't rub it, her face buried in his neck. Dan feels terrible; he should have sent Robyn down with the horses, and he could have carried Tat before. Just one more way he's fucked this whole thing up. "Okay, Tat, it's okay," he soothes, and he walks as carefully as he can toward the truck.

It's a four-door, thankfully, so it's not too hard to maneuver her into the back seat. Jeff is standing around the front of the car, talking soothingly into the phone, but Dan can't hear the exact words. He's not sorry. "Okay, Tat, are you all right like that?" Dan glances around. "Do you want Robyn to come along as a pillow?" Robyn raises an eyebrow at the glamorous job description, but when Tat nods tremulously, Robyn wastes no time in climbing in. She starts doing that smooth-the-hair-away-from-the-temples thing, and if there's a person on Earth who doesn't find that soothing, Dan doesn't want to know about it.

Jeff appears at his elbow just as he's about to shut the door and hands the phone over to Tat. "Your brother wants to talk to you for a second, sweetheart."

Tat makes a face and then seems to be bracing herself. She takes a deep breath before lifting the phone to her ear. "Evan, I'm fine, and it was just an accident. It wasn't anyone's fault except for a little bit mine, and Sunshine was perfect—she did just what she was supposed to—and Dan and Robyn were there, and they took care of me, and I'm fine, and Sunshine is fine, and everything's fine, so be calm. All right?" She pauses, and then holds the phone a little ways out from her ear and grimaces at Jeff, who smiles sympathetically back.

Then he turns to Dan. "I told him I'd ride along with you, okay?"

Dan nods. "Yeah, of course. Sorry." Dan isn't sure what he's apologizing to Jeff for—maybe for dragging him into this little drama.

Jeff just shakes his head and goes around to the passenger door, but then Robyn lifts her head. "Dan, are you okay to drive?" She asks it too quietly for it to register with Tat, who is still dealing with her brother, but Jeff hears and throws a concerned gaze Dan's way.

"Did you fall too?" he asks incredulously.

"No." Dan gives Robyn a firm glare. "I'm fine. We ready?" He doesn't wait for an answer, just puts the truck in gear and lets Jeff close

his door before pulling away.

He's focusing on driving as smoothly as he can, and he doesn't really pay much attention to Tat's conversation until he hears her say, "No!" in an outraged voice. There's a silence, and then, "Evan, come on...." She listens and then sighs, and Dan sees movement in the rear view mirror, glances back to see her holding the phone out in his direction. "He wants to talk to you, Dan."

Dan doesn't really want to do this here, with an audience, but he guesses he doesn't have choice. He reaches a hand back, but then Jeff is there, taking the phone out of Tat's hand and holding it up to his own ear. "Dan's driving your sister to the doctor's right now, kid. He's concentrating on the road. Why don't you talk to him later?" Jeff waits for a response and then says, "Well, if you still feel that way later, we'll figure something out." He looks over at Dan and shakes his head in a "don't worry" gesture, but Dan isn't convinced. "Okay, we'll see you at the doctor's. You concentrate on your driving, too, all right? Tat's fine."

The rest of the drive passes in silence except for Robyn's soothing words and, as they near their destination, Jeff's calm directions. Dan pulls up to the main entrance but can't park there, so Jeff gets out and lifts Tat into his arms, where she nestles just as comfortably as she had in Dan's. Robyn slides out after them, and Dan pulls away to find parking. He finds a spot and turns off the engine, but then he somehow just doesn't seem to be able to get out of the car.

It's like all the adrenaline and all the emotions that he's been trying to repress for the last hour suddenly break free, and he doubles over the steering wheel, grabbing onto it like it's a life preserver, not sure if he's getting too much oxygen or not enough, but definitely having trouble with his breathing. He thinks of Tat again, realizes that this little freak-out is just another way he's letting her down, but he can't seem to stop. He wonders for the millionth time what Justin felt, what he knew about the accident, when he realized things were going wrong, whether he'd been scared. More than anything, Dan can't stand the thought of Justin being scared.

The doctors had said that he'd lost consciousness instantly, that the damage to his brain was immediate and severe, that he'd never known what happened, but Dan doesn't know if he can believe them or if they were just saying what he wanted to hear. Justin was so quick, so

fast to understand things that Dan could sometimes never quite catch, and it makes Dan afraid that he *had* known, had felt the pain, had felt Willow's weight as it fell on him, crushed him. Dan wonders if Justin felt the blow to his head, if he had time to realize that something was seriously wrong, if he was afraid and alone and waiting for Dan to help him. But by the time Dan got there, it was too late, and maybe Justin's last thought was that Dan had let him down.

And now he's not sure if he can't breathe because of the adrenaline or because of the sobbing. He needs to pull himself together. He's in a public parking lot, and people are waiting for him, and he's letting *them* down, too, and then he thinks of his sister and how lost she'd been when their mom got sick and how much worse it must have been for Krista when their mom *died*, but Dan hadn't been there. He'd been off dealing with his own stupid crap instead of taking care of his family. And his mom herself, what had she thought about her runaway son? On top of all her other worries, he'd just heaped a little more on. Had she wondered where he was, wondered why he hadn't come to find her? Maybe *her* last thought had been of him, with all the people that she cared about gathered around her except one, her stupid faggot son who didn't care about anyone but himself, who she had done her best for and loved and tried to guide, and who had yelled at her and left her to face sickness and death without his support.

Jesus Christ, he feels like his chest is going to explode. He's still hanging on to the steering wheel, sobbing and gasping, and it reminds him of falling apart behind the funeral home, except this time he's all alone. There's no Chris or Jeff to help him. But that's only fair; why should he get help when he's never helped anyone else? But then he feels a cool hand on the back of his neck, and he tries to pull away a little, but the hand stays there, not pulling, just resting and rubbing a little, and he hears Jeff's voice.

"Shit, Dan. It's okay, kiddo. She's fine." Dan tries to stop crying, knows he's making a fool of himself, and a part of him wishes Jeff would just go away and leave him to humiliate himself in peace, but another part of him is so, so glad to not be alone. "I know, sweetheart, it's not just her. Shhhh...." When Jeff gently pulls on Dan's neck, he thinks about resisting but he can't, and he lets his head be shifted over to Jeff's shoulder. Being there, smelling Jeff's familiar scent, feeling the warmth of his neck and the cool of his fingers—that's what lets Dan

calm down a little. He takes deep breaths, lets Jeff's presence wash over him, and it's better. Dan's still a crappy lover, brother, and son, but at least he can breathe.

His sobs taper off into crying and then into snuffles. He feels like a little kid. A stupid little kid. Jeff finds a box of Kleenex under the seat and hands a few over, and Dan tries to clean himself up. He pushes back to a sitting position, and Jeff doesn't argue, but his hand trails along with Dan, staying on the back of his neck. "You okay?" Jeff sounds like it's a casual question, like Dan tripped or something.

"Yeah, sorry." Dan's voice is a kind of hoarse, his throat sore. "Shit, you should be in with Tat...."

Jeff just shrugs. "She's in with the doctor, and Robyn's in the waiting room. They've got my phone number if anything comes up, but it won't." Jeff shakes his head. "I think you were right about the collarbone. Sucks that it happened so early in the summer."

Dan groans. "I shouldn't have let her jump. Or...."

"Yeah, or what, Dan?" Jeff doesn't sound impatient, exactly, but he doesn't seem to have much use for Dan's train of thought. "She's riding eventers. If she's doing the sport, she needs to jump. Was there *anything* that could have been safer about today and still have it be eventing?"

Dan doesn't get a chance to answer, though. There's a rap on the window on Jeff's side of the car, and Dan looks over to see Evan standing there. He looks pissed off, and Dan really can't blame him.

Jeff sighs and rolls down the window. Before he can talk, Evan grits out, "Where is Tatiana, and why aren't you with her?"

Jeff looks like he's done about enough soothing of Evan for the day. "She's with the doctor, and I'm not with her because she's a fifteen-year-old girl with her shirt off. Robyn's in there."

"And you're out here? Jesus, Jeff, what if she needs you?" Evan glances across at Dan, but Dan's busy looking out the windshield, and Evan doesn't see his face. "And Dan, what the hell? This happens on your watch, and you're hanging out in the parking lot?" Evan turns back to Jeff, and now he sounds more hurt than angry. "Is this... is this your priority now? Is this more important?"

“Jesus, kid, Tat’s fine....” Jeff trails off, and Dan knows he has to step in. He can’t let Jeff take the fall for this.

“It’s my fault, Evan. I was... I don’t know... but Jeff came out to check on me, that’s all.” He still can’t quite bring himself to look Evan in the face, knows that if he did, his swollen eyes would make it immediately obvious just what Dan had been doing in the truck and why Jeff had felt it necessary to sit with him.

Evan just shakes his head. “Yeah, whatever. I need to go see my sister now. Are you coming in?” He’s pretty clearly talking to Jeff—probably wouldn’t care if Dan fell off the edge of the planet, and Dan can’t blame him.

Jeff looks torn. Dan wants to tell him to go, but he doesn’t think Evan would appreciate that in his current mood; he’d probably see it like Jeff was waiting for Dan’s permission or something. So he shrugs his shoulders a bit, knocking Jeff’s hand off his neck, and hopes that the man gets the hint. He seems to, but he doesn’t seem to like it. “Okay, they won’t need Robyn in there anymore. Why don’t I send her out, she can drive home with you?”

“Jeff, I don’t need—”

“Yeah, I know,” Jeff says. “Stay put anyways—she needs a ride.” He opens the door and steps out.

Dan turns to watch him go, just as Evan bends down to the window, saying, “We’re gonna have to have a talk about—” He breaks off when he sees Dan’s face, and Dan quickly turns back to the front of the truck. Evan doesn’t continue, and Dan tries to fill in the gaps.

“Okay, yeah. I’m sorry, man.” He knows that doesn’t help at all.

Jeff is pulling Evan along now, calling back to the truck, “Stay put, Dan.”

Dan stares out the windshield again. Stay put. He doesn’t really want to, but he’s got to accept the bitter truth that he has nowhere better to go.

chapter 2

ROBYN chatters the entire drive home. Did Dan know that Tat had never broken a bone before? How was that possible? Robyn had broken a bone in her foot when she fell off a wall at the beach at this summer house her family used to rent, and there was a boy there who used to sing all the time, and then she saw him on *American Idol* last year, but he didn't even make it to the first round. And she broke a finger one time, her friend Nicole pushed her, and they were just playing but Nicole still felt so guilty....

At first, Dan is a bit annoyed by it all. Why does Robyn think he cares about any of this? But then he realizes that his shoulders have fallen from where they were hunched, and his legs aren't shaking anymore, and... he still doesn't care about any of Robyn's stories, but maybe that's the point. Nothing she's saying is important, but it fills the air and occupies at least part of his mind and lets him relax a little.

By the time they get to the barn, he's calmed right down, but he still doesn't really feel up to going inside and dealing with Michelle and Devin. Robyn hasn't said anything, but he knows there's no way his face is back to normal. And it's okay that she saw him; she knows him, and she knew Justin. But Dan doesn't really feel like advertising his weakness to virtual strangers.

"I've still got some cleaning to do at the guest house," he says. "I'm gonna go do that now, then come down to the barn and ride this afternoon. Okay?"

Robyn gives him a searching look. "Do you want some help? I'm not cleaning your toilet, but other than that...."

Dan laughs a little. "Nah, I'm good. I only lived there for a couple weeks, and I mostly cleaned as I went. It shouldn't be too bad." He pauses. "Thanks, though. For...." He waves his hand vaguely, hoping

that she understands.

Robyn just smiles. “No problem.” She gives him a careful once-over before he leaves, as if making sure that he’s not going to fall apart again. Yeah, she understands.

He spends a couple hours cleaning the house. As he’d said, it’s not really dirty, but he appreciates the simplicity of the tasks and the chance to regroup in private. When he’s done, he splashes water on his face and looks at himself critically in the mirror. He still looks a bit off, but probably nobody will notice if they aren’t looking for it.

His phone rings just about when he’s starting to get hungry; it’s Chris. He must be phoning with information about the contract, and Dan can’t really make himself pick up the phone; he doesn’t want to explain how, once again, he’s managed to take a simple situation and make it complicated and unsure. Chris can leave a message; one-way communication sounds just about right, and for this call, Chris is being Dan’s lawyer, not his best friend, so it should be okay to ignore the ring.

When Dan’s done at the house, he finds himself strangely reluctant to go down to the barn. Horses have always been his sanctuary, but he has too much evidence to pretend that they can’t be dangerous as well. He’s not sure he wants to be reminded of them right now, and he’s pretty sure he doesn’t want to deal with any of the people he might run into. But he thinks of Sunshine and how she had clipped her feet on the jump and could be sore, and he heads out the door. There’s one responsibility he won’t shirk, at least.

He gets down to the barn and finds Sunshine in her paddock. She whickers a little when she sees him coming toward her, and it makes him smile. There are lots of great horses that don’t care one way or another about people, but Dan can’t help preferring the ones who seem to like human contact.

She doesn’t have a halter on, but he wraps a hand around her nose and asks her to follow him, and she does. He starts to speed up a little, breaks into a jog, and she keeps up with him, trotting beside him with only his hand under her jaw to prompt her. He looks back and can’t see any sign of strain in her movements. Then he takes his hand away and jogs out the side a little, trying to get a better view. She follows him, so

he really can't see any better than he could, but he doesn't think there's a problem.

She speeds up a little, and he grins. *Oh, it's like that, is it?* He doesn't know why he bothers trying, but he speeds up, too, going at almost a sprint, and he manages to get in front of her a bit. Okay, if she's toying with him, he's gonna see how far he can get. He takes off at top speed, racing across the field, arms and legs pumping fiercely, and then she's beside him, cantering easily, and she looks over as if she's wondering when he's going to start trying. Then she gives a little buck, hooves carefully aimed away from Dan, and goes.

She's still not at her top speed; there's too much bucking and head tossing and fun for her to be totally flat out, but she's galloping, and she leaves Dan behind like he's standing still. He takes a few more steps and then stops, watches her running for the sheer joy of it. She circles around and finds her friends quietly grazing and charges toward them, looking intent on running them down. She plows to a stop not five feet from them in a move that would impress a cowpony and then tosses her head dramatically. The mares all look up and then mostly look back down to their grazing, but Tulip, a four-year-old Thoroughbred, decides to join in the fun. She and Sunshine give a couple mock rearings and bucks, and then they're both off, tearing around the field.

Dan has been forgotten now that Sunshine has found a more able playmate, and he makes his way back to the fence. It has been a useful trip to the pasture; he's found out that Sunshine is anything *but* sore, and he's remembered how much he loves horses.

It's not until he's almost to the fence that he realizes that he'd had an audience. Robyn and Tat are standing by the railing, and Evan and Jeff are a little further back toward the barn, but they're all turned toward the field, watching him messing around instead of worrying about Tat. Great. On the plus side, if Tat is standing there, she must be okay.

He heads over to where she's waiting, and as he gets closer, he sees her huge smile.

"That was incredible, Dan! Did you see how fast she went? And when she was racing with you—it's like she was letting you win for a bit!"

“Yeah, for a bit. But I’ve never managed to outrun a horse yet.” He gives her a quick once-over. Her arm’s in a sling, but the rest of her looks okay. “How’d it go with you?”

She makes a face. “Broken collarbone. They said I have to wear the sling for at least four weeks, and no riding!”

He nods. “Yeah, that sucks. But it gives you some time to catch up on your theory, at least.... I’ve got some books you can borrow, or maybe we could make a list, see what you can find to buy.” He’s making a bit of a leap of faith here, assuming that Evan isn’t going to get scared off the horses entirely, but he feels like it’s justified. He’s got to say something to cheer her up. And maybe if he pretends that nothing’s wrong, it will all go away.

Tat nods, and then goes back to telling Robyn about the colors she’s thought up for the barn. Dan is a bit afraid to hear about those, so he ducks through the fence and heads up toward Jeff and Evan. He might as well get it over with.

Jeff smiles at him as he approaches, but Evan’s expression is harder to read. “I guess she didn’t get hurt, huh?” Jeff says, nodding to the field.

“No, she seems fine. She clipped her back feet, so I’ll check her tomorrow to be sure no lameness comes on overnight, but I think she’s good.” Dan tries to talk to Evan as well as Jeff. She’s Evan’s horse, after all, even if Jeff is the one who knows about the animals.

Jeff nods and then glances at Evan. “Well, I promised Tat I’d take her in for ice cream this afternoon. So maybe I’ll do that now. Unless you guys want to come?”

Dan says, “No, thanks. I’ve got work to do.”

Evan just shakes his head, and Jeff shrugs and walks down to collect Tat. He seems nonchalant, but Dan sees his worried glance as he and Tat turn and head for the car. Jeff and Evan have been together for years, so if Jeff’s worried, Dan figures there’s something to be concerned about.

Evan’s still not talking, and Dan decides he might as well bite the bullet. “So, uh... I’m sorry. I’m really glad Tat’s okay. I mean... not okay, exactly. But... she will be... and, uh... at the doctor’s, that was...

that was my fault, I just....”

Evan stares at him and then shakes his head. “Shit, Dan.” He looks down at the ground, and then back up. “You need to.... Okay, it’s not my place to tell you what you need.” He takes a moment to think. “But... It’s okay....” He stops again. “Fuck. Okay. I’m an asshole. I was worried, and I was stupid, and I’m sorry.”

That’s not quite what Dan was expecting. “Uh. No, wait. You weren’t stupid, you were mad because I let Tat get hurt. I mean, she’s your sister, and I was supposed to take care of her, and I didn’t.”

Evan smiles a little ruefully. “Yeah, that’s what I was thinking at the time.” He shakes his head. “When I was being stupid.” He casts his eyes down and then looks up at Dan earnestly. “It’s a dangerous sport. I knew that. I mean....” He looks a little unsure, then goes ahead. “I knew about Justin before I even met you, you know? So me acting like it’s some big shock.... I mean, yeah, it was a shock that *Tat* got hurt. I guess I always sort of thought, you know... you were being so careful. I thought you knew how important it was, so I could count on you to keep her safe.”

“I know, I should have—” Dan stops. He still isn’t quite sure what he should have done differently, but he knows the result. “I let you down.”

“No.” Evan’s voice is quiet but firm. He brings a hand up and cups Dan’s jaw, then looks back toward the barn. Dan’s a new addition to the relationship, and while Evan and Jeff are totally open about their status, Dan’s part is still not public knowledge. Evan would obviously like to keep it that way. “Shit, man, can we...?” He looks around, and his eyes settle on the feed shed by the parking lot. “Can we talk in there? I feel like half the world is watching us out here.”

Dan looks around. “I don’t even think the *horses* are watching us. But, yeah, okay.” He trails obediently after Evan, and he’s glad that he did, because as soon as they’re inside the door, Evan grabs him and pushes him against the wall, lining their bodies up together. He braces his forearms on either side of Dan’s head, and hovers his mouth just barely away from Dan’s.

“Is this okay?” he breathes, and Dan starts to nod, but at the first sign of vertical motion Evan’s lips are on his, passionate and

demanding, and Dan doesn't really worry about completing the gesture. He has no idea what's going on, but he really doesn't care at the moment, and he tilts his head to get a better angle as he opens his mouth to Evan's tongue.

And then Evan's pulling away, and that doesn't seem like a good idea, but his hands move down to Dan's arms and then his torso, and he's reaching under Dan's shirt, fingers finding warm skin as Evan stares at him. "Shit, Dan, this part is so easy. This just works," Evan murmurs, and then he goes in for another kiss while his hands track lower.

A shadow of reason comes back to Dan, and he ducks his head a bit before Evan gets to him. "Wait, man, is this allowed?" Evan lowers his own head enough to reach Dan's lips, and he kisses Dan in between his words.

"You mean with Jeff?"

And then they're kissing more deeply, and Dan has to make himself pull away again. "Well, *without* Jeff, yeah."

Evan reluctantly stops kissing, and his hands don't move any lower, although they stay pressed tight against Dan's skin. "Shit. I guess we never really worked that out." He leans in and kisses Dan again, but it's gentler, less urgent. More like a goodbye. Then Dan feels Evan's lips curve up against his. "We could have a vote, right now. Two-thirds majority...."

Dan laughs a little and gently pushes Evan away. If this isn't going to go anywhere, he needs some damn space.

Evan sighs. "Yeah." He walks over to the doorway and stands in it, looking out. The sun coming in catches the dust in the air around him, and it looks like he's glowing. It's beautiful. He turns his head and looks back at Dan fondly. "I meant it though, man. I know it wasn't your fault." He leaves the doorway and walks back toward Dan, looking earnest. "Look, here's what I think we should do. I'll try to be more sensitive and aware of stuff that's likely to freak you out. But... I don't know... you're gonna keep working on *not* freaking out, right? Like, in this case, I get it that was traumatic to see a fall, and obviously that would be... upsetting."

Evan looks like he knows that those words are a little inadequate,

but he charges on anyway. “So I’m not saying you shouldn’t react to *that* stuff. I’m just saying—I can be an asshole. I try not to be, but sometimes I am. If I am... you can call me on it, man. You can say, ‘fuck you, Evan, you knew the risks when you let your sister start riding, and I did everything right, so calm the fuck down.’” Evan grins a little. “I can’t guarantee that I’ll be happy to hear it, but... I bet it’d make you happy to say it, you know?”

He scrunches his face up as if the next part is even harder to say. “And you can also say, ‘fuck you, Evan, you knew the risks when you dragged me into this crazy relationship, and I’m doing everything right, so calm the fuck down on that too.’ ‘Cause you are, you know?” Evan sees Dan’s quizzical look. “You’re doing stuff right with the relationship. Jeff and me... it was our idea, and we’re running around like chickens with our heads cut off, getting jealous, and expecting things to be easy, and... you’re good. You’re great, really.”

Dan doesn’t really know what to do with all this. “Dude... I’ve gotten jealous a couple times. And I’ve got *no* right to that—I’m the new guy.”

Evan shakes his head and smiles. “Yeah, okay... and I gotta say, I *love* it when you get jealous. It’s hot as hell. But... you keep it to yourself, mostly. You don’t make it our problem.” He stops for a second. “Or... shit, is that bad? I mean... you’re allowed to make stuff our problem, you know....”

Dan squirms a little. “Yeah, I think I was pretty good at making myself Jeff’s problem this morning.”

Evan rolls his eyes at Dan’s discomfort. “Okay, so that’s *good*! And *I* can help you out with stuff like that too.” He reconsiders. “Well, honestly, stuff like *that*, Jeff’s pretty much the man—he’s like the world’s best teddy bear. But if he’s not around, I can try. Or I can try to help you with other stuff....” He looks at Dan in exasperation. “Okay, I can’t quite think of what I could help you with right now, but there must be something....” He sees Dan’s crafty look and laughs as he adds, “Something beyond the physical.”

Dan’s still leaning against the wall, and Evan shuffles in a little closer, then catches himself. “Shit. We need to get this worked out with Jeff. It’s fucking hard to see you and not touch you.”

Dan isn't quite sure how he's gotten off this easy. "So, wait, that's it? I mean... with Tat?"

Evan shrugs, but he seems resigned rather than nonchalant. "I tried to talk her out of it before she got started—like I said, I was aware of the risks. So... yeah, right now I want to line a room with rubber and fill it up with those little foam packing peanuts and make her live in there forever, but you know, she'd probably develop a foam allergy or something." He grins a little guiltily. "I'm kinda happy that she got hurt just bad enough to put her out of action for a while and maybe to teach her to be careful."

He sees the doubt on Dan's face and comes close enough to smooth the frown lines out with his thumb. "You've made it as safe as it can be, Dan. I see that. I'm... I'm sorry if me being an overprotective asshole made any of this harder for you." He leans in for just a quick kiss. "Seriously. I can't say I'm not gonna freak out again, or that I won't be totally nervous when she gets well enough to start back at it, but... I'm gonna try to keep it under control, okay?"

Dan thinks for a second. "And you can talk to me about it, right? I mean, if you're helping me, I can help you too. Right?" This time it's Evan with the inappropriate grin, and Dan can't help smiling back. "Yeah, okay, we *need* to talk to Jeff."

Evan laughs and then gets a little more serious. "But, hey, in the meantime—have you heard back from Chris? Are we good to go?"

Dan's confused again. Evan's quick recovery is great, but a little disorienting. "Uh, I don't know. I think he left a message earlier."

Evan frowns at him. "But you didn't check it? Are you not into the idea anymore?"

Dan just laughs a little. The idea that he could be anything less than thrilled at the chance to buy into the business, to be even a part owner of these magnificent animals, doesn't make any sense. And Evan was right: being a partner instead of an employee would make Dan feel a lot more secure about the romantic relationship that the three of them are trying to develop. "Yeah, I'm still into it... I just thought you might not be."

"Damn, man... I'm sorry. I... hey, Tat was telling me about Monty. She said he *acts* like everything's a big deal, but really he's

solid and steady underneath.” Dan nods in agreement with the assessment. “And she said you’re good on him because you just ignore all the stupid crap and focus on the core, and just expect him to behave when it actually matters, and he does.” Dan nods again; he’s glad Tat’s been paying attention. “So, that’s what I’m like, too, maybe. Just—I get fired up about stuff, you know? But if you can just ignore it—and, yeah, I know, I can work on calming down—but I’ll come through when it matters. Seriously.” He looks earnestly at Dan, who smiles back at him.

“Yeah, okay.” Dan doesn’t really know what comes next. He thinks about checking the message from Chris, and then thinks that maybe he doesn’t want to. What if it’s not good news? What if Chris says there’s a problem with something and Dan can’t sign? Maybe he’ll just leave it for a while. “Hey—do you still want to learn to ride?”

“What?”

“Do you want to learn to ride? ’Cause—Tat’s gonna need something to do with her time. And, you know, I’m happy to teach you, but... I bet she’d get a kick out of it.” Evan looks a little uncertain. “I could keep an eye on things.”

“Dude, Tat knows what she’s doing, and *she* just broke her collarbone.”

“Well, I’m not saying you should start off jumping. Save that for the second lesson, maybe.” Dan grins. “And you could learn on Smokey—he’s steady, and he’s got a western saddle, so you’d be pretty much welded to his back.”

“Hey, Dan?” Evan looks at him levelly. “Check your messages. Let’s get that straightened out, and then you can start trying to get me killed. All right?”

“Yeah. All right.” Dan grins. “But after... I can start trying to get you killed then?”

Evan nods resignedly. “Yeah, okay. Call.”

Dan does. He punches in the code and listens, walking outside and leaning against the wall. Evan follows him and stands waiting after Dan hangs up. Finally, he gets impatient. “So? Are we good?”

Dan looks up, and his face breaks into a grin. “Yeah, he said it

looks good.”

Evan smiles back. “Well, all right, then. I’ll call my guys, tell them to get stuff signed. Is it cool if we put Tat’s name on it? You can have a meeting with her, like, once a year, and I’ll be there as her guardian. And it’ll be one more step removed from me being your boss, so that should make you happy.”

“Sure, yeah. And, hey, if you’ve got some extra money lying around—you were right, this might be a good time to buy some horses. And it’d be another thing for Tat to work on while she’s getting better.”

Evan grins at him and loops an arm around his neck, pulling him in tight. “I like the way you think, partner.” Dan smiles back and leans in just a little. It’s been a hell of a day, but he’ll take happiness where he can find it.

chapter 3

It's still only mid-afternoon, and as much as Dan would like to spend the rest of the day hanging out with Evan, he has got things to do. And if he's being honest with himself, he has to admit that it might not be a great idea to spend a whole lot more time with Evan until they get the rules straightened out with Jeff.

Evan seems a bit oblivious to this strategy, though. He says that since he's already home, there's no point in going all the way back into town for just a couple hours. He spends about ten minutes on the phone with his executive assistant, dealing with whatever absolutely can't be put off until the next day, and then rejoins Dan in the barn. "I don't really know why I bother working; I could just get Sam to take over. She's practically running the place now."

"So why don't you?" Dan has just brought Winston in from the paddock and puts him in the crossties. He heads off to get the horse's grooming kit, but he walks backward so Evan knows he's listening for the answer.

"Why don't I get Sam to take over?" Evan sounds a bit confused.

"Well, not Sam, necessarily, but... yeah. I mean, you own the company, right? Couldn't you just sit back and live off the profits? You can't actually need the salary, can you?" Dan has the kit and returns, setting it on the ground next to Winston. Evan is standing by the horse's head, tickling Winston's nose.

"Uh, yeah, somebody else could do it. But I like to think that I can do it better... you know, I'm not just being arrogant, but... it's my family's company. Who's going to care as much as I do how it works?"

Dan nods, but isn't quite ready to let it go. "Yeah, but... who cares? I mean, you say that *I* don't spend much money, but I bet I spend a way bigger percentage of my income than you do. If you just sold

everything now, stuck the money in the bank at some crappy interest rate—you still couldn't spend all the interest, could you?" He nudges Evan out of the way for a second, giving himself space to brush Winston's face.

Evan shakes his head a little sheepishly. "No, probably not. But... I don't know, it's more than just money. It's...." He frowns a little. "It's something, but I can't put it in words. Let me get back to you?"

Dan laughs a little. "Yeah, or you know—it's not like it's a big deal. I'm just curious. Trying to understand you better."

Evan nods and smiles. "Yeah, okay." He looks at the grooming kit. "Will it bug him if we both brush?"

"What, you're gonna get your fancy clothes all dirty?" Evan has lost his jacket and tie along the way, but he's still wearing dress pants and a crisp white shirt that really doesn't look designed for manual labor.

"Dude, I can't just sit here and watch you work. I feel like a slacker."

"Trust me, man, if I ever come to your office, I'm not gonna start helping you with... paperwork, or whatever the hell it is you do."

Evan grins. "Yeah, that's right, man, just... paperwork. Filling out forms all day long." He unbuttons his shirt and pulls it off, hanging it on a hook on the wall, and his thin white undershirt doesn't do much to hide the fact that Evan clearly does something more physical than paperwork at some point in the day. Dan has the sudden urge to suggest that they bathe the horses. Or wash the barn. Or any damn thing with some splashable water.

Evan pulls out the rubber curry comb. "This one first, right?" Dan nods, and watches as Evan goes to work, glancing over at Dan to make sure that his technique is correct. Once Evan is done with Winston's neck, Dan comes along behind him with the dandy brush, flicking off all the hair and dirt loosened by Evan's efforts.

They work companionably for a few minutes, and then both look up when they hear a voice in the doorway. "Oh no! Is *Evan* going to replace me? Because he's way too big—he'll crush the poor babies under his totally excessive weight!"

Evan shakes his head. "I'm not the one eating all the ice cream, Tat."

"Oh, that's nice. Give me an eating disorder, why don't you?" Tat comes over and rubs Winston's face, then goes and gets a carrot for him.

Jeff has come in behind her, and he takes advantage of her brief absence to look from Evan to Dan. "So everything got worked out here? We're all good?"

"Yeah, we're good. I told Dan I was an asshole, and he didn't really argue with me, so...."

Jeff nods. "All right, so long as we all agree on that."

"There's some other stuff we need to agree on too," Evan adds. "We got a little sidetracked last night, but there's still some details we need to work out."

Tat returns then, feeding the carrot to Winston. Dan's watching Evan and sees him sigh a little, as if he's about to do something he's not sure about.

"So, Tat... the other day I mentioned to Dan that I wanted to learn to ride. And he said maybe you could teach me." He pauses and seems to be bracing himself. Judging from the look of glee on Tat's face, Dan thinks that's a wise thing to be doing.

"Really?" She looks from Evan to Dan and then over to Jeff, as if inviting him to share her amusement. "You want *me* to teach you? Because, you know, Evan, there are safety issues to be considered—if you're going to be riding a horse, then in order to be safe, you'll have to agree that my word is law. If Dan or Jeff tell me something when I'm on a horse, I have to do it, even if I don't like it or if I don't think it makes sense. Because otherwise, it wouldn't be *safe*, you know?" Dan thinks back to the strained, crying girl he'd carried to the truck only a few hours ago, and is amazed by just how quickly Kaminskis seem to recover from things.

Tat's not quite done torturing her brother. "Can you commit to that level of obedience, Evan?" She stares at him intently.

"Careful, Tat." Dan finishes brushing Winston's rump. "I was also trying to talk him into letting you start looking for some new horses to

buy—if you want him to go along with that, you’d better treat him right with the lessons.”

It’s lucky that Winston is a fairly calm horse, because Tat isn’t able to fully contain her squeal of delight. “Really?” She stares at Dan and then Evan, and Dan thinks that if he didn’t know the context he’d think she was mentally unstable. “What can we buy? How many? Oh my God, oh my God... could we get a mare with a foal? Or a pregnant mare? Or even just a broodmare, and then we could *choose* the daddy....”

Evan holds up a hand to calm her down, and it seems remarkably effective. Dan tries to study the posture so he can add it to his own repertoire. “Well, there’s another thing we need to talk about... business wise.” He glances over at Jeff and nods a little, and Jeff smiles his congratulations to Dan. “We’re going to restructure things a little, set this up as a partnership instead of just being owned by the Kaminski family, which means owned by *me*, for another five and a half years, Brat, and don’t you forget it.” He grins. “Dan’s one partner, and I was thinking you should be the other one—in trust, and all that, but I’d want you in the meetings where we discuss business, and you’d have to look at the numbers and try to figure things out. Sound like something you’d be interested in?”

Tat looks a little confused. “So... it’d be just mine and Dan’s? Not yours at all?”

“Well, in six years not mine at all... until then, yours in name, but I’d still be in charge. Just like I control every other aspect of your tiny little life, minion!”

Tat sticks her tongue out at him, but then grins. “That sounds excellent. But... is this all a plan to make me start caring more about business? ’Cause—okay, I’ll care about *this* business, but I still don’t think I’m gonna want to learn about how we could improve the efficiency of our carton-manufacturing factory if we moved it from Albany to Albuquerque.”

“Well, yeah, moving the factory away from our suppliers *and* our markets—I don’t want to hear about that plan, either! But... honestly, it’s mostly a plan to keep Dan caring about the business. You getting involved is just a little perk for you. One of many benefits of having the

best big brother ever.”

“The *biggest* brother ever, maybe.” She pauses for thought. “So this would mean that it would be me and Dan who would decide what horses to buy?”

Evan sighs. “Within reason. And by that I mean—what Dan says goes. But I think he’d be interested in hearing your opinions as long as you manage to express them with a little more thought and a little less screaming.” Evan sees her energy building, and adds, “And no hopping whatsoever, especially when you’ve got a broken wing. And random dances are to be kept to an absolute minimum.”

Tat beams at him. “What about hugging? Am I still allowed to hug?”

“Only carefully. And only if you start with me.” She does and then almost breaks the “no hopping” rule as she moves over to Jeff, who seems surprised but not upset to be included. Then it’s Dan’s turn, but instead of hugging him she thrusts out her right hand.

“Howdy, partner.”

Dan grins and shakes her hand back. “Glad to be in business with you, Ms. Kaminski.”

She widens her eyes in excitement and then says, “I’m gonna go inspect my domain now.”

Evan can’t let that go. “The facility is still Kaminski family property. It’s just the horses that you’re going to own more than me.”

Tat tents her hands in the “evil mastermind” gesture and says, “For now, perhaps.” Then she’s turning and scurrying outside, presumably to look at her new acquisitions.

Jeff shakes his head. “She’s still pretty hopped up on painkillers. It’ll be interesting to see how sore she is when she comes down.”

Evan waves his hand. “Eh, let’s keep her stoned. Maybe she’ll develop an addiction, and then I can get her to pay attention to our pharmaceutical branch.”

“Nice parenting technique, man.” Dan looks at the other two. “I was just gonna do some flat work on Winston, but if we’re all here—do you guys want to talk now, or...?”

Jeff glances at Evan for confirmation. "I'm free for the rest of the day, and it looks like Evan's given up on working. Why don't you ride, we'll wrangle Tat, and then you can come up to the house for dinner, maybe? The kid's gotta crash early, I would think... we could talk then."

Evan grins. "We could do more than talk...."

"At the house? With Tat home?" Dan is not at all comfortable with that idea.

"Her room's a long way away from mine, Dan."

"Yeah, okay, and what if her shoulder acts up or something and she needs to come get you?"

Evan shrugs but then looks more closely at the tension on Dan's face. "Shit, okay. Location—one more thing to talk about. We should be making a damn list."

Dan still can't get over Evan's attitude. "Do you bring people home normally? I don't mean Jeff, I mean... just casual fucks? I assumed you'd keep that out of the house."

Evan looks a bit offended. "I do!" Then his expression softens, and he ducks under the crosstie to get closer to Dan. "You're not a casual fuck, Dan. I thought we established that."

Jeff sees that this does nothing to calm Dan down. "But we are in the early stages, and we are taking it slow. So Dan's probably right, Evan. It's confusing enough as it is; we don't need to give Tat any expectations."

Evan nods. "Yeah, that makes sense. I just...." He smiles. "Damn, now I've got *two* people slowing me down when I get carried away. How am I ever gonna do stupid things at this rate?"

Jeff smiles warmly at him. "I'm sure you'll find a way." He grabs the back of Evan's neck and gives a little shake to show that he's joking. "Why don't you have dinner with Tat tonight, put her to bed, and then come meet me and Dan somewhere. My place, or his, or...."

"What about the guest house?" Dan suggests. "I'm all moved out of it now. I mean, I just got it all clean, so I'd kind of like it to be preserved as a museum or something, but it might be okay... close to Tat if she calls you, but still private... neutral ground."

“Fuck, yeah!” Evan seems pretty excited by the idea. “That’s brilliant. Convenient for everybody... well, mostly for me, but for Dan, too, if you come from work, and it’s not that far for you, Jeff...”

Dan looks warily at Jeff. “Why do I get the feeling he wants to turn it into a clubhouse?”

“Or a tree fort,” Jeff agrees.

“Yeah, it’ll be awesome! We’ll have a secret knock, and no girls allowed!” Evan’s smile gets a little dirty. “And we can have an initiation ritual. Hmmm... I wonder what we could do for that...”

Dan tightens Winston’s girth and grabs his bridle. If he’s going to get any work done, he needs to get away from Evan pretty soon. “Okay, you guys work that out, get back to me.”

“But you guys should come up for dinner anyways,” Evan insists. “We can hang out at the house until Tat goes to bed, and then take an expedition to the fort.” Dan nods in weary agreement as he finishes tacking Winston up and heads for the door.

It’s good to get back on a horse. Dan enjoys spending time with Jeff and Evan and finds himself thinking about them all the time, but... it’s pretty intense. Pretty complicated. He remembers this feeling from the early days with Justin, the sensation that things are happening too fast, that he’s being caught up in events beyond his control. He envies the way some people seem to be able to just sit back and let things happen; he doesn’t seem to have that gift.

But with a horse, especially doing dressage, things are easier. Dan’s the one in control, and if he isn’t, then his first job is to change things until he is. And once he’s established his authority, it’s just a question of making the horse understand what’s needed and helping the animal to be able to perform the required tasks. There’s nothing subjective, nothing external, really. Just Dan and a horse. It’s peaceful.

He warms Winston up then works him for five minutes, then lets the animal take a break physically and mentally. He’s still young, and he needs some time to think things through and understand what he’s being asked to do. Michelle and Robyn bring horses out, too, and when Winston’s getting a break, Dan can look at the other two and offer suggestions as needed. He knows that Jeff and Evan are sitting with Tat, watching the riders and entertaining each other, but they aren’t a

distraction. Dan thinks about how the day started and where he is now, and it doesn't really make sense. He thought things were supposed to happen more slowly in California.

Winston is working really well, responsive and yielding to his rider's requests, and Dan feels the familiar conflict. As a trainer, he wants to quit on a high note, let Winston's final memory of the lesson be of what it's like when things are going well, but as a rider, Dan wants to enjoy this for as long as he can. His trainer side wins out, and he brings Winston down to a walk and lets him stretch his neck out and relax.

It's only then that he becomes aware that the audience on the grass has grown a little. They all seem to be talking to each other fairly animatedly, so Dan can take a good look without being caught staring. The newcomers are two women and a man, probably closer to Evan's age than Jeff's. The man is blondish and thin, and both women are quite small with dark hair; they look like they could be sisters. They're all talking to Evan but seem to be including Jeff and Tat in the conversation, so Dan really has no rational explanation for the surge of dislike that runs through him. He's just being territorial where he has no right to be, he tells himself, and leans over to check if Winston is still hot. He is, but Michelle and Robyn are done working, too, so Dan rides over near them.

"Do you guys want to take them back through the pines to cool them out? I wouldn't mind getting out of the damn sun."

Michelle shakes her head. "You and your delicate complexion, Dan. How are we ever gonna make a Californian out of you?"

"Lots of sunblock, I guess." Winston is perfectly behaved as Dan opens the gate to allow the horses out of the ring, and Dan thinks, not for the first time, that he's going to be a solid eventer in a couple of years. He might not have the same fire and courage that Monty has, but he's got a damn sight more common sense.

They leave the ring from the gate opposite the barn, so they don't go near the new arrivals, but of course Robyn has theories about them and Michelle is happy to join in the speculation. Dan tunes them out almost entirely, closing his eyes and letting himself melt into Winston, trying to use the horse's senses instead of his own. He feels Winston's

neck twitch a little and guesses that he saw a squirrel or a blown leaf, something surprising but not scary. Winston's muscles tense and he swishes his tail, and Dan can tell that one of the other horses is challenging him somehow, either getting too close or not showing respect in some other way. Then peace is restored, and they walk along the path calmly. Winston's feeling good, all four legs moving like they should, his spine loose and relaxed, and he's enjoying the fresh new smells of the woods. Even Robyn has stopped talking long enough to soak up the almost eerie silence of the forest. The pine needles don't whisper in the wind the way regular leaves would, and they've fallen all along the path, creating a cushion that totally muffles the horses' footsteps.

Michelle breaks the silence with a nervous laugh. "Okay, I get creeped out in here by myself, but it's usually okay with other people. But Dan, what the hell? You've had your eyes closed for five minutes straight! It's freaky."

Robyn laughs at her. "Get used to it. He does this weird mystical bonding thing with the horses. It sounds crazy, but you can't argue with the results."

"It's not mystical," Dan objects. "I just try to...."

"*Be the horse?*" Robyn supplies. "I heard you trying to explain it to Justin one time. It sounds mystical to me!"

Dan just shrugs as he opens his eyes. "All right, grasshopper, if you don't want to learn, I won't force you."

They're coming out of the forest now, and there's just a loop around by the paddocks on their way back to the barn. Dan sees the visitors again, clearly being given a tour of the place, and when Jeff raises an arm to wave, Dan waves back. Then the riders continue on to the barn.

Winston's untacked, and Dan's just sponging off some sweat stains from the horse's back when the tour makes it to the barn. Tat is clearly thrilled to be showing people around, and Dan smiles in spite of himself. The new people are listening to her attentively, so again, he's got no reason not to like them.

"And this is Winston," Tat says, gesturing a little extravagantly at the horse. "He can be a bit stubborn sometimes, but he's getting a lot

better.” She turns and looks tentatively at Dan. “He was really good today, right?” He smiles and nods at her, and she nods back. “I thought so!” Then she turns her attention back to the guests. “And this is Dan, the head trainer, and soon to be my business partner!” The others have clearly already heard about the new arrangement, and Tat continues with the introductions. “Dan, this is Blaine—he’s been Evan’s best friend forever—and this is his girlfriend Amanda, and this is Monica. They all live in LA now, but they came up for a surprise visit!”

Dan smiles, but doesn’t stop working on Winston. “Taking a long weekend?”

Evan snorts. “Their lives are a permanent weekend.”

“Dude, we came up for your boyfriend’s grand opening show thing,” Blaine objects. “Otherwise we would be *very* busy doing... a lot of important things.”

Amanda nods. “It’s a sign of our great affection for you that we found time to drive all the way up here to impose on your hospitality without notice.”

Monica looks slyly at Dan. “Blaine’s doing a new thing—he says he’s getting in touch with the universe by living totally spontaneously. He’s a twig in the stream, flowing wherever the river takes him.”

“And you two?” Dan nods at Monica and Amanda. “Also twigs?”

Monica glances down at her fit but definitely diminutive figure. “Unfortunately not.” She leans over and snuggles under Evan’s welcoming arm. “We just wanted to see our favorite teddy bear!”

Dan fights the urge to rip her tiny, tanned arm off of Evan’s waist and find a real bear to feed her to. This is not a cool reaction on his part, and he needs to get a grip. He nods in what he hopes is a friendly way, and then moves up to Winston’s head and reaches for a lead rope. “Well, I’m just gonna turn him out now. It was nice to meet you all.”

Evan calls after him, “We’re gonna go up to the house now. Just come up whenever for dinner, all right?”

Shit. Dan might not have a rational reason to dislike the new people, but that doesn’t mean he wants to spend the evening with them. “Uh, well, I’ve got some more riding to do, and then I’ll be all dirty. I

think maybe I'll just go home and crash, you know?"

"No, man, you can shower up at the house if you want, borrow some clothes." Evan walks toward Dan while the others wait back with Jeff and Tat. "Come on, it'll be a good chance to get to know my friends. They're good people, seriously."

"Uh, dude, your clothes aren't gonna fit me. And it's been a crazy day already." Evan doesn't look convinced, and Dan is suddenly exhausted. He forces himself to say, "Why don't I give you a call when I'm done here? See where things are at?" He can always hope for voice mail.

Evan looks like he wishes Jeff had come with him to deal with Dan. "But... you're okay, right? I mean... everything's cool?"

"Yeah, sure. I'm just tired, man. It was... I mean, everything's good now, but... it really wasn't my best morning."

Evan frowns as if he can barely remember that long ago. "Yeah, right. But I mean, I should stay with them, probably, but if you're not okay...."

"No, dude, I'm fine." Dan forces himself to put a smile on his face. "Seriously. I'm just gonna ride, and then go home and get cleaned up. Get a good night's sleep."

Evan sighs. "Well, how about you do call me, okay? When you're done riding?"

"Yeah, okay, I'll talk to you then." He turns and heads out of the barn then, trying to get free of the building and all the people in it. He thinks maybe he hears Tat calling his name, but he's not sure, so he pretends he didn't hear. He wasn't lying to Evan; it's been a long day, and he needs a little time to himself.

chapter 4

DAN doesn't call Evan. He calls Jeff instead. Maybe it's a bit of a weenie move, but he can rationalize it. Evan's with his friends, he's busy entertaining. But really Dan figures that Jeff's more likely to not pick up—he ignores his phone a lot of the time—or to let Dan off the hook if he does answer. After all, Jeff had to deal with Dan's stupidity that morning; he probably isn't looking for a repeat of it at night.

He *doesn't* pick up, and Dan is relieved as he's leaving his message, but he feels a bit deflated when he's done, and the feeling doesn't impress him. Just how much of an attention whore is he? Did he really expect Jeff to get on the line and beg him to come over? Wouldn't that have made him incredibly uncomfortable? He shakes his head at himself as he climbs into the truck. He'd worked as late as he could, until it was time for the horses to go to bed, and it's pretty well dark as he pulls out of the barn lane and onto the driveway. He's tired, and he's driving slow, so he's got lots of time to stop when he sees Lou run out in front of the truck. She stops in the middle of the drive and stares at him, and for a moment it seems that she's challenging the truck itself. Then her tail wags happily, and a few seconds later Jeff strolls out from a path in the trees.

He walks over to Dan's window. "Sorry about that. She's not smart about cars." He snaps his fingers and she trots over, jumping up to put her front paws on the side panel of the truck to greet Dan. He thinks of the Mercedes convertible he'd seen in the barn parking area; he wonders how the folks from LA would feel about Lou's claws on their paint. He gives her ears an extra rub as a proactive reward.

Jeff's watching him closely. "Are you running or just going?" He somehow makes it clear that either reaction is totally fine, and he's just curious.

“Uh, just going, I think. I mean, I’m tired, but I’m not... panicking, or whatever.”

Jeff nods. “Yeah, okay. It’s not that bad up at the house, if you want to give it a try. They’re good kids, and Blaine treats weed the way most people treat wine; apparently he’s got a charming little sample down from Canada, and they’re gonna have a ‘tasting’ once Tat’s gone to bed.”

“Musky and alluring, with just a hint of skunk?”

“Something like that, yeah.” Jeff smiles lazily, looking like he’s already indulged. Then again, he *always* looks like he’s already indulged.

“So if it’s so great up there, what are you doing out here?” Dan asks softly. “Lou’s always been happy to walk herself.”

Jeff’s smile is a little regretful. “Yeah, you caught me.” He rubs his jaw a little, then leans down and rests his elbows on the bottom of the window. It brings his face closer to Dan, and it makes it hard to keep from kissing him. “I just start feeling a bit old around them all. You know? They’re all so smooth and new and happy, and I’m....” He shrugs down at himself, as if indicating his clear deficiencies.

“Are you insane?” Dan supposes it’s not the most tactful response, but what the hell? “Do you honestly think you being older than them is anything but a damned gift?” Jeff leans back a little, looking almost startled by Dan’s vehemence. “Shit, man, you’ve got... you’re....” Dan laughs ruefully. Words have never been kind to him. Instead, he reaches out and hooks a hand around Jeff’s neck and pulls him back toward the window, bringing his head halfway into the truck so Dan’s mouth can find his, and Dan puts everything he can’t say into the kiss. It’s gentle but passionate, warm and then hot. When he finally lets Jeff up for air, they’re both smiling a little, and Dan gently runs a finger over Jeff’s lips. “You’re so much more.”

Jeff nuzzles in a little, rubbing his stubbled cheek over Dan’s, and presses a few little kisses near his ear. Then he pulls back, and Dan lets him go. “You think maybe you could come back to the house with me, remind me of that now and then?”

Dan nods slowly. “Yeah, if you want me to, I can.”

Jeff looks surprised and touched. “Nah, I’m all right. Thanks, though... for saying you would.”

“Are you sure? I mean, it’s not like they’re dragons or something. I can go up if you want me to.”

Jeff smiles warmly at him. “Nah, I’m fine. I was just feeling a little sorry for myself. But, damn, something seems to have cheered me right up.” He gently runs his fingers over his lips. Then he stops. “Hey, I came out here this morning for a reason. Got a little sidetracked, somehow....” He raises his eyebrows as he thinks of all the things that had distracted him. “Are you gonna make it to the opening tomorrow? We were gonna suggest that you ride in with Tat, keep her company, but I guess maybe the other three will do that now.” Jeff shrugs. “But that was just an excuse to make you feel like you were needed... really, I’d just like you to be there for you.”

“Jeff, man, I don’t know anything about art, or about that sort of... scene....”

“Nah, it’s not a scene. It won’t be a big thing, really; you’ve probably already met half the people that’ll be there. It’s... it’s not a big deal to anyone but me.” Dan isn’t sure if Jeff is aware of just how devastating his shy smile is. The man could ask Dan for a kidney right now, and there would be no argument.

“Yeah, okay. Uh... what am I supposed to wear?”

“Dude, it’s an art show. You should come naked, let them all see something *really* beautiful.”

“Yeah, okay, and what’s the next option?”

Jeff laughs. “Anything, really. Evan’s coming straight from work, so he’ll be dressed for business, and my agent has some sort of suit picked out for me. But, honestly, there’ll be people there in jeans too. And Evan’s gonna stay the whole time, but I know it’s not your thing. Most people will just pop in for maybe an hour? Visit a bit, have a look at the paintings, then head out.”

“Okay, yeah.” It still doesn’t sound like a good time, but Dan can manage it. “And, hey... I do really want to see your stuff, your paintings. I mean... it’s interesting. I’m interested. I just don’t think I’m gonna have anything intelligent to say about any of them.”

“Nah, it’s art. It’s not about intelligence—although if it was, you’d have no problem, Dan—but it’s more just about impressions, or feelings. Just look at them and let your mind go, see where it takes you.”

“So, art’s kind of like an acid trip?”

“*Good* art is.” Jeff’s voice is warm and rumbling, and Dan really wants to haul his ass into the truck and drive them somewhere private. They have *got* to get the rules worked out! Even if it turns out that Dan isn’t allowed to be with them one at a time, it’ll still be better than not knowing, better than wondering if he’s letting opportunities pass him by for no reason. And if he *is* allowed... but he’d better not let his mind go there.

“Okay, then, you’ve convinced me. I’ll be there. Is any time better than another?”

“Not really, I don’t think. Just whenever’s good for you.”

“Yeah, okay. You better get back up to the house now. If they’re all stoned before you get there, they’ll be even more annoying.”

Jeff winces. “Yeah, good point.” He calls Lou back from whatever she’s investigating in the forest and then leans in and gives Dan a quick kiss. “We’ll see you tomorrow night, then.”

“Yeah. And, you know, good luck, or break a leg, or... whatever it is for art.”

Jeff laughs gently and waves, and Dan heads home.

Not shockingly, there’s no food in the apartment, and Dan has a brief pang of regret for the dinner he might have had at Evan’s. But overall, he’s glad to have a little time for himself, so he calls for takeout before climbing into the shower, and by the time he’s out and dressed, the food has arrived. He ordered a lot so that he could have leftovers for a few days, and it’s a good thing, because it turns out he’s starving. He doesn’t have a scale, but his clothes are starting to fit a bit looser than usual, maybe. He needs to remember to eat.

He stuffs himself and then stumbles off to bed, and when he wakes up the next morning there’s a cold panini for breakfast and some actual pizza to take for lunch, so he won’t have to listen to Tat nag him about the frozen kind. Not bad.

He raids his bookshelf before heading to work and drives up to the house instead of parking at the barn. It's still pretty early, he realizes, and he doesn't want to wake up the whole house with the doorbell, so he skulks around a little, looking for any signs of life. He sees Tia, the housekeeper, through the kitchen window and climbs up on the deck to knock on the French doors in the breakfast nook. He wonders belatedly just how tight security on the house is, and whether he's just given some poor guards a heart attack thinking that he was trying to break in.

Tia greets him with a smile. "Did you come for breakfast? The rest aren't up yet, the lazy creatures, but you can keep me company while I cook."

"Oh, no, ma'am, I already ate. I just wanted to drop some books off for Tat. She seemed to be feeling pretty good yesterday, but if she goes off the painkillers she might not want to move around a lot." He holds out the grocery bag he'd filled from his shelf. "Some of them are pretty old, but they're all good."

Tia accepts the bag with enthusiasm. "Oh, how sweet of you! I was *just* trying to think of ways to keep the little monkey still for a day or two." She glances through the bag and gives Dan a crafty look. "Do you suppose you could pick one or two of them? I could help you make an assignment of some sort up. She really does better with a little direction."

"An assignment?" Dan doesn't really think he's the one to be teaching anybody anything. Not from books, at least.

"Well, the books alone are lovely, and they'll keep her still as long as she's hurting." Tia sets the books on the table and bustles around the kitchen as she talks. "But I think it might be best if she stays still a little longer than that, gives herself a chance to really heal. And I don't think Evan or I will have much luck convincing her to do that, but you...." She laughs a little. "Well, *you* could probably just tell her to sit still and she'd stop breathing until you told her differently. But it might be a bit more pleasant for her if she felt like there was a purpose to it."

"A purpose." Dan is totally out of his depth. He can see Tia's point, but he has no idea how to make up an assignment. He wishes he'd just left the damn books by the front door. They would have

figured out who they were for. “Like....” He grabs the first book. *Equine Lameness*. An assignment? Okay, yeah, maybe.... “Like, I could describe some symptoms, and she could diagnose the problem?”

Tia looks up excitedly. “Yes, that would be excellent! Could you do that?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess.”

“Let me just get you a pen and paper....” Tia scurries over to a little desk in the corner and finds a pad of paper and a pen. Then she catches herself. “Do you have time now?”

“Uh, sure, yeah.” He sits down at the table and starts writing. He leaves a sheet of paper in each of the books, some with questions or projects, others just with suggested chapters or points about which horses to think about while reading. He barely notices when Tia brings him a cup of coffee, and he’s literally halfway through a bagel covered in cream cheese before he realizes he’s eating. He’s got a couple of books for which he can only say, “Read the whole thing—it’s excellent,” but for most of them he’s able to give some pretty concrete tips on how Tat should focus in. It’s kind of fun, really.

When he’s done, he replaces the books in the bag and returns the pad and pen to the desk. Tia smiles at him. “Thank you. I think that will really help.”

“Well, I broke her, I guess I can help fix her.”

Tia raises her eyebrows at him. “Oh, you control gravity now? I had no idea I had such a powerful man in my kitchen!”

There’s a shuffling sound in the doorway. “I had no idea you had *any* man in your kitchen, Tia. Are you giving away my breakfast?” They turn to see a groggy-looking Blaine, still in sleep pants and a T-shirt.

“Early birds get the worms, Blaine,” Tia responds. The two are obviously comfortable with each other, but that makes sense if Blaine is Evan’s best friend. What doesn’t make sense is that Dan’s never heard about him before now.

Blaine smiles at Tia, but his eyes sharpen a bit when he turns to Dan. “Hey. I’m glad you’re here—it saves me a trip to the barn.”

Dan tries to look like he cares about saving Blaine's time. "Yeah? What's up?" He prays it's not going to be a request for a trail ride or something. Some people have trouble understanding the difference between a calm pleasure horse and a high-spirited eventer.

Blaine glances over at Tia, then back at Dan. "Come outside with me for a second, all right?" He's already on his way to the French doors. Dan's tempted to figure out an excuse to stay, but he tells himself to stop being contrary. He was on his way out anyhow.

"Thanks for the coffee and bagel, Tia," he says, and she just waves him away. He goes outside and sees Blaine standing by the railing, looking off over the pool toward the distant ocean. Dan goes and stands near him. "So, what's up?"

Blaine doesn't turn around. "I went looking for Jeff last night. We were being a bit obnoxious, and he took the dog for a walk, and I went after him to apologize. Bring him back."

Dan wonders just how obnoxious they were being and why Evan hadn't been the one to go. But he doesn't know why Blaine's telling him any of this. "Okay...."

"But when I found him, he was already talking to somebody. Well"—Blaine drags it out, makes it clear that he's making a point—"he wasn't really doing that much talking."

Oh. But still, why does Dan need to explain himself to this clown? "Okay...."

"Okay? That's what you have to say?" Blaine sounds pretty pissed off. "Do you really think it's a good idea to be fucking around with your boss's boyfriend?"

"Thanks for your concern, man, I'm touched."

"Fuck you. Does Evan know?"

Dan's tempted to walk away, but he forces himself to see the situation from Blaine's perspective. The guy's trying to be a good friend. "You should ask Evan."

"I should...." Blaine seems a bit taken aback. "Seriously? What, you *want* to get caught? Do you think Evan's gonna dump Jeff over some fling with a slutty stable boy? 'Cause it's not going to happen, man. I don't know what game you're playing, and I don't know why

the hell Jeff's going along with it—" Blaine pauses and looks Dan up and down with a sneer on his face. "Well, okay, I know why he's going along with it; I just thought he had better sense than that."

That's nice. A lovely way to start the day. "Dude, seriously. Talk to Evan or talk to Jeff if you want. I've got nothing to say about any of it. Not to you."

"Not to me? What the hell does that mean?"

"What do you think it means? I don't know you from a hole in the ground; I get that you're trying to look out for your boy, but you're talking to the wrong guy. I don't owe you any explanations."

"I'm just trying to give you a chance to keep things from getting messy." Blaine sounds a little less sure of himself than he had been.

"And I'm touched by your kindness. But, seriously, I don't have anything to say. Talk to Jeff or Evan."

Blaine stares at him for a second, and then wags a finger. "Don't think I won't."

Dan returns the gesture mockingly. "Don't think I care." And he turns and heads down the stairs off the deck.

He's about halfway to the end of the house when he hears a voice calling his name from the deck. He half turns and sees that Blaine has been joined by one of the girls and a shirtless Evan. Evan sees Dan turn and waves his arm, beckoning him back. But there's no way on earth Dan is going to stand there and chat with Evan while Blaine stares at them. He taps his watch, indicating that he has no time, and calls back, "I'll see you tonight."

Evan looks like he's thinking about coming after Dan, but then Blaine says something to distract him, and Dan is able to continue on to the barn. Robyn and Michelle are already riding, and he feels a bit guilty about his late start until he remembers what time he'd gone home the night before.

He sets up some jumps and takes Monty out. One of the challenges of training eventers is that the horses can get confused about the different styles of jumping that are required to complete a cross-country course and a stadium-jumping course, and Monty's been getting a bit reckless with his stadium jumping lately, apparently

deciding that if the jumps collapse anyways, it's okay for him to be sloppy with his hind feet. It's a bad habit but it isn't fully formed yet, and Dan needs to get to it before it is. They work together for a while, and if Monty hasn't gotten any better by the end of it, at least he hasn't gotten any worse. Some days that's all a trainer can ask for.

Dan's just walking him around the ring, cooling him off, when Evan's car pulls to a stop on the driveway next to the fence. Evan's the only one in it, Dan notes with relief, and he walks the horse over to say hi.

"Hey, man..." Evan is already talking as he climbs out of the car. "Blaine was being a bit cryptic about something this morning. There were other people around, so I didn't drag it out of him, but... was he okay with you on the deck?"

Dan laughs a little. "He's a pretty protective guy, huh?"

Evan groans and covers his eyes with one hand. "Jesus, what did he do?"

"Nah, you can't really blame him. He saw me and Jeff kissing last night, and he wasn't impressed. Apparently I'm the slutty stable boy who's here to steal your man." Dan grins a little. With a bit of distance, he can see the humor. "At least I wasn't the gold-digging whore trying to get my claws into your money."

Evan looks mortified. "Shit, man, I'm sorry. Jeff said he ran into you, but he didn't mention that Blaine was there. Wait... why the hell were you making out in front of Blaine?"

"Dude, he was lurking. Obviously we didn't know he was there."

"Yeah, shit, okay. Jesus... was he a total ass about it?"

"Uh, from his perspective, I'm sure he's a fucking hero. From mine... a bit obnoxious, maybe."

"Yeah, that's a pretty good description of Blaine in general, really. I'll talk to him, get him to back off."

Dan smirks a little. "Don't worry about it, Evan. Seriously, I don't give a good goddamn what he thinks, and it was kinda fun watching him get all worked up. So, if you wouldn't have told him anyways, don't bother doing it on my account." Then something occurs to him. "Might want to warn Jeff, though. Blaine seemed pretty disappointed

about his taste in pretty-boys.”

Evan winces and shakes his head. “I just left them at the house together. Jeff has about a two-hour tolerance for Blaine at the best of times.” He pulls his phone out. “I’d better call. You’re sure you’re cool?”

“Evan, I’ve been called a slut by better men than him.” Dan knows that’s not exactly what Evan needs to hear, but it’s fun to say. “Better women too.”

“Damn, you’re in a good mood. Maybe I’ll get Blaine to stick around, be an insulting asshole on a regular basis.”

Dan grins, and then gestures to Monty. “I’ve got to keep him moving. I’ll see you tonight though, yeah?”

Evan nods, and is dialing his phone as he climbs into the car.

Dan finishes the day with no further interruptions except for an excited phone call from Tat, thanking him for the books. He heads home at a reasonable hour and cleans up, then spends a long time staring at the meager contents of his closet. He talks to Justin’s photo a bit, too, but it’s a lot lighter than usual. Dan tells him about Blaine, and both Justin and Puppet-Chris agree that the guy’s a bit of a douche, and then Dan tells them about the art show, and how he’s going to be totally uncomfortable but really kind of wants to go anyways. Most of the conversation is just in his head, but occasional interjections are spoken out loud. Dan thinks it’s somewhere between quirky and weird, but probably not all the way to crazy. He hopes. At least talking to Justin’s photo makes sense in that it’s as close to talking to the real Justin as Dan can get. Having a conversation with an imaginary friend who just happens to be a puppet who looks like Dan’s actual best friend—that’s a bit harder to justify. It’s just Dan’s bad luck that the puppet is such a good listener and gives such good advice. If he wasn’t so useful, he’d be easier to give up.

Dan pulls out the green shirt that Justin had given him and looks at it consideringly. He’s got dark gray dress pants; maybe those and the shirt....

His phone rings about seven o’clock, and he sees that it’s Evan calling. Probably checking whether he’s backing out. Dan’s happy that he’s already dressed and ready, so he’s got evidence of his commitment

to the event. But it turns out that Evan has something else on his mind.

“So, I tried to talk to Blaine a bit, and he was a total ass about it,” Evan begins. “And Jeff thinks it’s funny, and you seemed to think it was funny this morning... so do you mind if we just let it ride? I mean, he’s a big talker, but he’s not going to take a swing at you or anything, so it should all be pretty harmless.”

Dan snorts. “You guys are weird friends.”

“Yeah, we used to be a lot closer. He’s just ridiculously loyal, you know? We’ve really got nothing in common anymore, but....”

“Dude, you’ve got to stop feeding him. I know it’s hard, but it’s only fair—he needs to find a full-time owner.”

“Nah, he’s not that bad, really. I mean, he’s got a good heart, and he tries. He just really doesn’t understand how my life has changed, you know?”

“He doesn’t understand your sudden interest in starting up a threesome with a slutty stable boy?”

“Jesus, man,” Dan can almost hear Evan’s wince. “That’s what you said earlier. Did he use those actual words?”

“I don’t know, something pretty close. Or maybe those exactly....”

“I don’t know if you should be more insulted about the ‘slut’ part or the ‘stable boy’ part.”

Dan just laughs. “Dude, I’ve been each of them at some points in the past, and I’ve been both together sometimes too. He’s not wrong about the character, just the timing.”

Evan doesn’t speak for a couple beats. “Well, then, I guess neither one is really that much of an insult. I’ve been a slutty party boy....”

“Cocktease bar boy....”

“Pretty-boy college kid....”

“Twink cabana boy....”

There’s a pause, and then Evan says, “An honest-to-God cabana boy? Like, with a tan and tight shorts and everything?”

“Not much of a tan, really. But the shorts, for sure.”

“Jesus, that’s hot.” Evan sounds like he’s ready to drag Dan off to a beach right now. “Do you still have the shorts?”

“Fuck no! I was just a kid. Only did it for a couple months.”

“Shit, and I missed it. Someday, you and me are gonna have to have a talk, figure out just how many of my sexual fantasies you’ve actually already fulfilled.”

“Dude, someday you and me and Jeff are gonna have to have a talk, figure out just when I’m allowed to start working on the fantasies you’ve still got outstanding.”

“Okay, and that brings us to the second reason for my call!” Evan sounds excited. “Can you stick around after the show tonight? We can go to Jeff’s....”

“What about your guests? Won’t they miss you?”

“Nah, I already told them tonight was all about Jeff. They know what a big deal it is for him.”

“Okay, and I guess that’s question number two. Are you sure you guys don’t want to celebrate alone? I mean, I don’t want to intrude.”

“Dude, a big emotional talk and then hot sex.... The first one is Jeff’s perfect night, the second one is mine. Put them together, and we’re both happy as damn clams. We absolutely want you there. Jeff was the one who suggested it.”

“Well, yeah, okay, then. So if I come by the gallery a bit later? Like, ten, maybe?”

“Sure, yeah. Or come earlier and hang out. Jeff’s worried that no one’s gonna show, and I think he’s full of crap, but just in case he’s right, it wouldn’t hurt to have some warm bodies around. And, hey, if it’s really quiet we can put you in some shorts out on the street and you can offer free daiquiris to anyone who’ll come inside.”

“Don’t make me regret telling you about that.”

“No, man, you haven’t *told* me about it yet, you’ve just *teased* me with it. You won’t have *told* me until I know every damn detail, until I can smell the coconut oil and feel the heat of your sunburned skin....”

“Fine, don’t make me *refuse* to tell you about it.”

There's a pause. "Dude, my lips are sealed. Now shimmy your pretty little ass into some tight pants and come down and flirt with me in front of Blaine. It'll be fun for everyone but him."

"Yeah, all right. I'm gonna get something to eat, and then I'll come down. It's probably about an hour drive?"

"Little less, maybe. So we'll see you in... well, given the crap you eat, probably an hour and five minutes?"

"You'll see me when you see me, big boy. Talk to you later." Dan hangs up the phone and looks at himself in the mirror. His pants fit right, maybe even a little loose, so Evan can just perv on someone else's ass. He heads to the kitchen and grabs a slice of cold pizza, then another for the road.

He's not really sure what he's getting into at the gallery, but he's as ready as he'll ever be.

chapter 5

DAN takes a minute to collect himself before he crosses the street to get to the gallery. He doesn't know San Francisco very well at all, had to follow MapQuest directions just to find the place, but he can tell he's in pretty trendy part of town. Lots of galleries and boutiques, and little design-oriented specialty shops. There are cafes, too, although they're closed now, and bars that are just starting to come to life, filling up with bored-looking yuppies sipping drinks that Dan can just about guarantee are overpriced. It's a nice place to visit, but he wouldn't want to live there.

The gallery is in a two-story building, a sort of split level, with a wide central staircase going up half a flight to the top floor, flanked by two narrower stairways going down to the lower floor. The show is obviously upstairs, with two large doors propped open to welcome people, and Dan sees a couple walking up the stairs. They're dressed a lot better than he is, the man in a suit, the woman in some sort of flowing pants with a sleeveless top. Dan hangs back, suddenly reluctant. He feels under-dressed, under-prepared. He takes a minute to brace himself, and then hears a voice from behind him.

"Dan? It's Dan, right?"

He turns, and sees two of the people he'd met at Evan's barbeque the week before. He hunts wildly for the names. "Jason? And, uh... Liam, right?"

Dan remembers that he'd liked Jason, while Liam had been a bit distant, but on this night Dan's ready to hug the guy because he's wearing ripped jeans and a stretched-out T-shirt. Granted, Dan's pretty sure that these are *artfully* distressed items of clothing, with a sort of rent-boy-chic look, but he doesn't care too much. The guy's still wearing jeans, so Dan wins.

Jason gives him the same warm smile that Dan remembers from the barbeque. "That's right! Are you heading in?" He nods at the stairs.

"Oh, yeah, I was just... yeah." He smiles and starts up with them.

The gallery is an almost industrial space, with dark wood plank floors and stark white walls, and peaked skylights that must let in a lot of light in the daytime. Right now, the lighting is fairly subdued, with spotlights from the ceiling highlighting the paintings on the walls. Dan is barely inside the door before a girl in a dark skirt and white blouse holds out a tray to offer him a glass of wine, and he takes one, more from wanting something to do with his hands than from actually wanting a drink. He looks around, wondering what comes next, and then Jeff is there, draping a warm arm around his shoulders.

"Hey, Dan, glad you made it," he says softly, and then he keeps his arm where it rests as he reaches his other hand out to Jason and Liam. "Guys, thanks for coming." He chats with them a bit, giving Dan a chance to look around. He's not sure what's going on with the public display of affection; he assumes it must be for Blaine's benefit, but he can't see the guy anywhere. Maybe this is just... Jeff. Dan relaxes a little, lets his shoulder fall against Jeff's, and he feels Jeff give his arm a little squeeze in appreciation.

The gallery isn't packed, but there are quite a few people there. Some are looking at the paintings, others just standing in little groups, visiting. It's pretty laid back, really. Jason and Liam are moving away now, smiling at Dan, although he notices that Liam looks a little puzzled, presumably by Jeff's arm placement. Then another couple appears in the doorway, and Jeff turns to greet them, his arm still around Dan. This is getting a bit odd, now. Surely these people are wondering where Evan is; Dan is starting to wonder that himself. He gently disengages himself from Jeff's arm and smiles when Jeff turns to him. "I'm gonna look at the paintings?"

"Oh, yeah. Okay." Jeff seems a bit bashful, and Dan is reminded that this is the man's first show. It must be a little nerve wracking.

"Is there a good place to start, or just...?"

"They're clustered a bit, but I don't think it really matters which cluster you start with." Jeff glances over at the new arrivals, then back at Dan. "I could come with you, but my agent wants me at the door."

“No, that’s fine. I’m fine.” Dan decides to start by the door and work his way around the room.

The first painting is of a vegetable garden. Dan isn’t sure of the style—the brush strokes are really obvious, giving it a textured feeling. Dan figures that must be on purpose, and then remembers what Jeff had said about just letting his mind go, trying to feel the painting rather than understand it. He gives it a try, but he doesn’t really get much. It’s vegetables. In a garden. The colors are nice, maybe.... A woman Dan doesn’t know moves beside him and gives him a polite smile before turning her attention to the painting, and Dan moves on.

The next one is a bit harder to figure out. He wants to call it abstract, but he’s not really sure what that means. He can see parts of what it’s meant to be. There are trees, he’s pretty sure, and a lake... or maybe that’s the sky. And there’s some dark stuff. He tries to just let his brain go, but it doesn’t really know which direction to go in. Puppet-Chris suggests that they should have actually taken some acid before coming, and maybe that would have helped. Dan has to admit that it probably wouldn’t have hurt. He’s beginning to get a bit desperate; he’s going to have to say *something* to Jeff about all this, and he really has no idea what. He looks around the room, but there’s still no sign of Evan. Great. He’s really going to....

And the next painting erases all those thoughts from his mind. It’s got the same obvious brush strokes as the vegetable bed, and some of the same weirdly unclear stuff around the edges that the landscape had, but at its center, there’s a horse. And Dan isn’t a preteen girl, he doesn’t moon around over pictures of ponies, but... *this* horse. It’s jumping, although Jeff hasn’t painted the jump, and it looks like it’s coming out of the picture at an angle, as if Dan is standing just off to the side of the jump and the horse will brush by him in one more stride. The horse is reaching, really pushing itself, and Dan can feel the power and strain in the muscles, the surging joy of the jump, the savage beauty of a creature doing what it was created to do. He has no idea about the technical merits of the piece, but he can absolutely understand what Jeff was talking about when he said that the art was about feelings. There’s an intensity and passion about it that he finds almost mesmerizing.

“Guess I shouldn’t be surprised that you like this one,” Evan’s

voice says from over his shoulder. Evan's standing close behind him, and Dan leans back a bit, not enough to be obvious, just enough for a little brush of contact. He doesn't even realize he's done it until he feels the solid warmth of Evan's body.

"Okay, but, damn... wouldn't everyone like this one?" Dan still doesn't want to look away.

"It's pretty powerful, all right."

"Does he just paint from his imagination, or does he use models, or photographs, or...?"

"Usually he tries to look at whatever he's painting. Like, that vegetable garden was at this painter's retreat that he dragged me to."

"You loved it," Jeff rumbles from behind them both, and Dan can feel Evan's body shift a little, making room for Jeff. Technically speaking, they're all standing a little too close for traditional small talk, but Dan hopes that some allowances are made for artists. Or billionaires. Probably not for slutty stable boys....

"I loved the *food*," Evan clarifies. "And it was fun getting to watch you paint, for about the first hour. After that I was just bored and getting in everyone's way."

"What about the horse? Did you have a model for it?" Dan asks. He finally tears his eyes away from it, turning to look at Jeff and putting a little more distance between them as he does.

Jeff smiles his shy smile. "Hokey as it sounds... I saw it in a dream. I woke up and painted the general idea, and then I looked at some real horses to get the details right." He looks at Dan as if deciding whether to continue. "It's my most recent one—I did it just after we came back from Kentucky. After the funeral."

Dan just nods. "Yeah. That makes sense." It does. The painting reminded him of Justin since he first saw it. The intensity and passion, the *rightness* of the horse doing what it's doing....

Jeff smiles a little sadly at him, and Evan looks almost startled and turns back to look at the horse. Jeff's agent comes over then, shepherding him back toward the door to greet more people. Judging by how busy Jeff's being kept, Dan supposes the opening must be a success. Or maybe it's only a success if the paintings get sold. He's still

not totally clear on the mechanics of all this.

He senses a shift in the room's energy, and turns to look at the doorway. Blaine, Monica, and Amanda are standing there, posing regally as they accept the attention they pretend to ignore, full of the unconscious arrogance that comes from being young and rich and beautiful. Evan moves over to join them, as well he should, and Dan forces himself to look away. He doesn't want to look at the horse any more, not until he's got his bubbling resentment under control, so he moves on to the next piece.

It takes him almost an hour to finish his circuit of the room. He makes polite, noncommittal small talk with a few people, finishes his glass of wine and declines another, and doesn't find any other paintings that affect him nearly as much as the horse did. There are some that he really likes, though. Jeff seems to be good at capturing the emotions of both people and animals, and there's a great series of Tat playing with Lou, the girl's whip-like delicacy contrasting with the dog's sturdiness. Dan looks at it closely and decides that if someone didn't know Tat, they wouldn't recognize her from the paintings. It's more the characteristic postures and gestures that he's seeing, not her face. And he supposes that Lou probably isn't too worried about violations of *her* privacy.

He looks around, sees Jeff deep in conversation with an older man who's gesturing animatedly at one of the paintings, and decides against joining them. He thinks about going back to the horse, but then he sees Evan. He's talking to Monica, and she's standing really close to him. That would be fine, except that Evan is leaning into it, and then he reaches out and twirls a lock of her hair around his finger, and there's a level of intimacy in the gesture that makes Dan's stomach flip a little.

Dan looks back over at Jeff, but he's oblivious to the little drama and seems to be really enjoying his conversation with the other man. Dan looks around a little wildly to find something with which to distract himself. He wishes he still smoked so he'd have an excuse to go outside. As usual, as soon as he thinks about smoking he gets a craving, and he wonders if any of the businesses in the area would be so gauche as to sell Marlboros; he kind of doubts it. He decides to go outside anyway. Maybe he just needs a little fresh air. Or maybe he can find someone to bum a cigarette from.

He regrets his decision as soon as he gets through the doors. Blaine and Amanda are already out there, standing on the stairs and looking down at the street. And the bastards are smoking. They both give him strange looks, so obviously Blaine has shared his suspicions with his girlfriend. Great. It's not so much fun to make fun of the guy when Dan's outnumbered and when he's got his own worries about who's flirting with whom.

But he can't go back inside without looking like he's running away from them, and he can't keep going down the stairs without abandoning Jeff, so he stakes his claim to the opposite side of the wide staircase and takes a few deep breaths. He can smell the burning tobacco, and he can't decide whether to find some fresher air or try to breathe more deeply in order to get as much nicotine as possible. His subconscious chooses for him, and he fills his lungs with the secondhand smoke.

He hears a throaty female laugh from the other side of the stairs. "Do you want one all for yourself?" Amanda offers, holding out a pack of cigarettes.

Dan would have been sorely tempted if it had been someone else offering, but he's able to resist this offer. He really doesn't want to owe any of them any favors. "No, thanks. I quit a few years ago."

She just laughs again. "Me too," she says, and she takes a deep drag. He can almost taste it. He asks himself what he's got against her, exactly. She's dating an asshole, but he should be sympathetic about that, not angry.

Blaine drops his half-smoked butt and grinds it out, and then nods between Amanda and the doorway. "Let's go back in; Evan will be wondering where his friends are."

Amanda just looks at him, and then takes another drag. "You go ahead. I'll be in when I'm done." She gestures with her cigarette.

He looks like he might be about to argue, but then he just shrugs and heads in. He's ignored Dan completely. What a loss.

Amanda is watching him appraisingly, and she holds out her cigarette. "Just a drag?" She invites. "I've got gum; nobody ever has to know...."

Dan shakes his head. He doesn't care what other people know. "Thanks, but I'd better not. Slippery slope, or whatever."

She nods and takes one more drag before crushing the cigarette under the toe of her shoe. "Good for you." She smiles a little. "So, how do you like working for Evan?"

"It's fine. It's pretty much the same job I've had for years, long before I knew who Evan was."

"Is that right? And did you have the same level of... involvement... in the personal life of your previous employer?"

Dan smiles a little. "Actually, yeah, I did. Bit of a pattern with me, I guess." And he *understands* that they're just being protective, but that doesn't mean that he has to like it. "It's sort of my thing. I'm too lazy or maybe too stupid to keep a job in the regular way, so I just fuck around, earn my keep on my knees. The horses are just a cover for my real passion—whoring." Okay, maybe he's laying it on a little thick, but he's had enough. "Lucky for me, my employers are too stupid to see through me, and they just sit back and let me take advantage of them. Evan and Jeff, damn, they're so naïve and trusting. Hardly even a challenge for a hustler like me." Dan's been leaning against the railing, but now he pulls himself upright. "Hey, I hear you and Blaine are rich too—what'd'ya say, wanna have a turn?"

Amanda stares at him for a couple beats, and then her face cracks into a smile. "Damn. You're a little touchy. Good for you."

"Yeah, my personality is here for your approval."

She holds up her hands in surrender and then nods her head down the street. "Hey, let me buy you a drink?"

Dan frowns at her and nods back toward the gallery. "There's free drinks inside."

"Nah, there's free *wine* inside. I want a damn *drink*." She walks over to him and loops her hand through his arm playfully. "Come on, a gold digger should never turn down a free drink... and if you need any more tips on the subject, I can introduce you to my mother. I'm sure she's got lots to share."

Dan is baffled. Amanda puts a gentle pressure on his arm, and he moves forward, letting her lead him down the stairs. At the bottom she

looks both ways, then at him. “I don’t know this area. Do you?” At his head shake, she shrugs and gestures with her head at a bar across the street and a few doors down. “There?”

“I guess, okay.”

She beams at him like he just recited a sonnet, and they continue on their way. The bar is crowded when they get to it, but there’s no line and no cover, so Dan isn’t complaining. They make their way to the bar and don’t say anything until the bartender has come by and taken Amanda’s order for a double vodka and Dan’s for a Wild Turkey. Then she turns to him and smiles. “So what are your intentions toward our Evan?”

He frowns. “Okay, stupid speeches aside, what have I said or done to make you think I have any damn *intentions* toward Evan? I mean... Blaine was worried about me and Jeff, originally.”

She throws her head back, and her laugh sounds genuine. “Blaine? Blaine hears hoofbeats and thinks ‘zebras’! Jeff’s a big boy, and he can take care of himself. Evan, on the other hand....”

“What, Evan can’t take care of himself? Seems like he’s doing a pretty good job to me.”

Amanda looks at him consideringly. “Yeah, I guess maybe it does... maybe he can.” She tries another direction. “Blaine said you shut him down pretty hard this morning. That’s good. Blaine only respects people who stand up to him.”

“Yeah, ’cause it’s really important to me that I have Blaine’s respect.” Dan takes a sip of his drink. Who the hell do these people think they are?

“Well, maybe it isn’t... but maybe it should be. Blaine is Evan’s best friend, and it seems like you’re interested in spending some time with Evan—surely it’ll be a lot more pleasant for everyone if you two can get along.”

“Really? I’ve got to tell you—I’ve been out here for a while now, and you’re right, I’ve spent quite a bit of time with Evan. And I’ve never heard him even mention Blaine’s name. So I don’t actually think it’s going to put a serious damper on my life if Blaine doesn’t like me.”

Amanda looks a little sad. “What friends *have* you heard Evan

mention? Other than Jeff, who does Evan hang out with that doesn't work for him?" She shakes her head. "Maybe Evan hasn't talked about him, but that doesn't mean that Blaine's not important to him."

Dan doesn't really know what they're supposed to be talking about it, but if this is it, he's about done with the conversation. "Okay, fine. Blaine's important to Evan. Is that... is that my business somehow? I mean... what are we doing here?"

Amanda gives a mockingly scornful look. "We're drinking! Duh." And she takes a big swallow of her vodka.

Dan lifts his glass and knocks his drink back, then sets the empty glass on the bar. "Okay, then, I'm done."

"Well, you can just be a gentleman and wait for me to finish, all right?" For the first time, she sounds a little sharp. She ruins it by sighing almost immediately. "Just... just wait for a second, all right, Dan?"

He doesn't know what he's waiting *for*, but he stands quietly. After a minute she smiles at him and starts talking. "Evan was the brightest star in the sky when we were at school." She glances over at Dan. "We all went to high school together. Did you know that?"

Dan just shakes his head. "Like I said, Evan's never mentioned any of you."

"Yeah, okay." She looks a little sad. "Well, he was... something else. Just so warm and happy and at peace with himself. I mean, most people struggle a bit with their sexuality, right? Most bisexuals, at least, but Evan barely blinked. It was all great—it just meant more people for him to love." She smiles in reminiscence. "He was just golden. Like he was favored by the gods. Everything worked out for him." She stops and takes a long drink. "I was with him when he found out about his parents. We'd all gone to Stanford together, and we were sitting around one night, drunk and high and happy, and he got a phone call... and it was like the light just went out of him. Like it was the first time he'd realized that the world could be a hard place."

She looks at Dan as if she's expecting a reaction, but he doesn't really have one, so she continues. "That was about five years ago, and ever since then... he works so hard, takes the whole weight of the world on his shoulders, even though he doesn't have to. I mean, Tat

could go to boarding school—lots of girls do. I did, and so did Monica. But no, Evan was raised at home, so Tat has to be as well. And the business—Evan never had any interest in it, never had any plans to pursue it, but now he works at it all the time. It's... it's hard to see, you know? To see that golden child turn into...."

"Turn into a grown man?" There's a part of Dan that feels for Evan, for that loss of innocence, but.... "That's the big tragedy? That he keeps half an eye on his sister, with the help of the world's best housekeeper and the world's most understanding lover, and a staff of whoever the hell he needs? And that he has a damn job? That he's taken some responsibility for himself and his family?" Dan shakes his head. "He made it to twenty-two years old before he realized that the world could be a hard place, and you expect me to feel *sorry* for him? Jesus Christ, are you serious?"

He steps away from the bar. "Evan's fine. He loves his sister, and he likes his life. If this little speech was about to build up to some warning about how you don't want to see him get hurt again, you can save your breath. I'm not trying to hurt him, but he's a grown-ass man, and he can take care of himself, and he doesn't need a bunch of people wailing and crying about how he's less than he used to be." Dan leans in a little closer. "Maybe you need to consider the possibility that he's *more* than he used to be." He steps back again. "Now if the *lady* wants an escort back to the gallery, she'd better knock back her damn drink, 'cause I'm heading out."

Amanda just stares at him.

"Not coming? Well, it seems like a pretty safe street, but I'll tell Blaine where you are. He can come and carry you home if you want." He turns to go, but she grabs his arm, and when he turns back to look, she silently tips her glass and finishes her drink and then hops off the bar stool.

"Damn," she breathes. "You could make things a little bit interesting, couldn't you?" And she hooks her hand through his arm and lets him lead her back into the night.

chapter 6

DAN and Amanda walk back to the gallery in silence. Dan's a bit tense, but Amanda seems happy as a clam. He's having some trouble figuring this woman out, but he tries not to let it bother him. She'll be gone soon enough.

When they get back to the gallery, it's even more crowded than when they left. Dan can't see Jeff or Evan, and he can't seem to find anyone to take Amanda off his hands. For her part, she seems perfectly content to stay with him. Great.

He's looked at all the pictures, and it's too crowded to wade back in just for a second look. That seems to leave conversation as a way to fill the time. He casts a doubtful glance at Amanda. Does he really want to try that again? But Amanda doesn't give him a choice.

"So, Dan, tell me about *you*. Evan said you moved out here from Kentucky. Is that where you're originally from?"

He's aware that this is a perfectly suitable topic for small talk, but given the context, it feels like the start of an interrogation. Still, he's already been pretty rude, and that didn't get rid of her, so maybe it's time for a different approach.

"I lived there for quite a while before coming here. What about you—if you went to the same high school as Evan, does that mean you're from the Bay area originally?"

She smiles charmingly. "That's right! Although my family lived right in the city, not out in the sticks like Evan's. My mom still lives here, only... about a ten-minute drive, maybe?"

"But you're staying with Evan instead of with her?"

Amanda looks like maybe she's not so enthusiastic about having the questions turned around. "Well, Evan's is where the party is!"

“Yeah, of course.” Dan thinks he got just the right amount of mock understanding in those words. “But it’s your mom’s place? Is your dad not around?” This is getting pretty personal, he knows, but hey, she can always walk away. Or at least let go of his damn arm.

“No, Daddy lives in New York now. With his new family.” There’s enough honest bitterness in her tone that Dan decides to change the topic a bit. He doesn’t want to be a total bastard.

“And you and Blaine? How long have you guys been together for?”

Amanda wrinkles her nose. “Forever, off and on.”

Dan nods, and then decides to actually make the conversation interesting. “And Evan and Monica?”

Amanda shoots him a look. “They used to be pretty tight. But... not so much anymore. You know—not since Jeff.”

“Oh, yeah? And how does she feel about that?”

And now it’s Amanda’s turn to go on the offensive. “Why, are you concerned? Thinking maybe she’s moving in on your territory? Tell me, Dan, is there honor among thieves?”

Dan’s whole body stiffens. “Did you just call me a thief?” he asks quietly. He can’t say why this is the insult that’s going to push him over the edge, but he’s like that sometimes. He takes things for a while, and then he stops.

Amanda’s face is blank. “It’s a figure of speech.”

“Yeah.” Dan uses his free hand to lift her fingers off of his arm, and then he steps away, working his way through the crowd. His patience is used up, and he doesn’t really feel the need to keep Amanda company anymore. The room is getting hot. Dan has no idea where Jeff *or* Evan has gotten to. The night is not going too well. He’s pleased that he got to see the horse, but other than that, he wishes he’d stayed home. He tries to remind himself that this night is about Jeff, not about him, but how does that help? Jeff’s been busy with other people all night and now he’s disappeared, so it’s not like he needs Dan to be there.

Dan remembers Evan’s plan for the three of them to get together after the show and checks his watch. There’s an hour and a half to go until the official closing, and he somehow doubts that things will shut

down immediately once the clock hits the designated time. He's already feeling tired and sort of discouraged; he can't imagine he's going to be feeling a lot better after a couple more hours of this. He decides to look for Jeff or Evan, see if he can talk them into postponing the rest of the night.

The gallery is essentially one large room, but there are some partition walls in the middle sections, giving more wall space to hang paintings on, so it takes a while for Dan to be sure that neither Jeff nor Evan is there. It doesn't take him much longer to notice that Blaine and Monica are gone as well. He sees Amanda talking to someone on her cell phone and thinks that he could always call if he has to. But it seems a little pathetic. They've apparently left without bothering to let *him* know, so he doesn't really think he needs to go to any great extremes to hunt them down.

He heads for the front door and sees Jeff's agent on the way. Dan can't remember the guy's name, but they've been introduced and the guy's in sales, so he must be good with remembering people. Dan decides to give it a try.

"Hi," he starts when he catches the man's eye. "I was just looking for Jeff to say goodbye. Do you know where he's gotten to?"

The agent looks a little frustrated himself. "I have no idea. His mother arrived, and he just stepped outside to talk to her because she doesn't hear well in crowds, and then... he's just gone!"

"His mother?" There's another complication. "I didn't know she was coming—doesn't she live out of town?"

"She's down from Seattle. Apparently it was a surprise."

"Yeah, okay." So Evan's off somewhere with Monica, Jeff's off with his mom, and Dan is stuck here, waiting for them to get back? That doesn't sound quite right. And surely Jeff will be busy with his mother after the show, so their original plans will need to be changed, even if Evan *does* make it back. "Uh, would you maybe be able to tell him that I left? I'm Dan."

"Of course, sure." The agent rolls his eyes. "If he ever bothers to come back himself."

Dan nods and heads for the door. Out of the corner of his eye he

can see Amanda trying to work her way through the crowd toward him, but he really has no interest in any further conversation with her. He's taken about all the insults he's interested in hearing from Evan's friends. He feels temporarily bad for leaving Jeff on his big night, but he reminds himself that he doesn't really understand how these two run their relationships; Evan should know what's going on, and he seemed to think it was fine to leave. Dan wonders what happened to the lighthearted "make Blaine insane" plan for the evening.

He walks briskly once he gets out of the crowd; he's not even sure that Amanda was trying to get to him, and he has no reason to believe that she'll put much effort into following him, but he'd rather not take the chance of her catching up. He's had enough. He's busy trying to put the whole night out of his mind when he glances in through the big glass windows that front a bar he's walking past, and sees Monica and Evan. They're sitting beside each other on a long bench, and Evan's arm is around her shoulders. Her whole body is turned toward him, and they're smiling at each other, and Dan reminds himself not to jump to conclusions. Then he tells himself that even if he does jump to the conclusion, it doesn't mean that Evan's doing anything wrong, since he and Jeff have an open relationship and there have been no new rules established between the three of them. None of this really helps, though. He doesn't so much feel jealous as he feels... defeated. He really doesn't understand what they want him to be, but he's pretty sure he can't be whatever it is. He's just not the right person for this sort of uncertainty.

And maybe they've realized that too, he thinks. Evan certainly seems to have lost interest, and Jeff... well, Jeff's understandably preoccupied. There's no telling what he's thinking. Dan reaches his truck and climbs in, then pulls out into the street. Traffic's lighter than it had been on the way in, and he makes good time. He checks his watch and decides to give Chris a call; he needs a voice of sanity, he thinks. But when he fishes his cell phone out of the glove box, it doesn't have a charge. Of course.

He turns on the radio and tries to find something to distract him, but nothing really works, and by the time he's almost home he knows he's not going to be able to get to sleep. So he parks the truck in his spot but doesn't bother going upstairs. Instead, he heads straight downtown. It's still a couple hours before closing, so maybe he can find

something to distract him at the Fireside. Something or someone.

He heads inside and finds a seat at the bar. He thinks about getting drunk but decides against it—he's not in total control of himself as it is, so he really shouldn't make things worse. He has to live in this town, so it would be good if he didn't make too much of a fool of himself. He orders a beer. There's a band, but they're nowhere near as good as Ryan's, and a quick scan of the crowd doesn't show anyone too tempting. He's reconsidering his decision to not get drunk when he feels somebody brush up against his arm and then move in to stand a lot closer than the crowd in the bar demands. Dan turns and sees Evan standing there, staring at him.

"What happened to you, man? You just ditched us?" Evan sounds pretty angry, and Dan almost thinks about apologizing. Then he remembers what happened.

"What are you talking about? You guys were busy. I went home. That's not ditching, it's just leaving."

"Without telling us you were going?"

"Dude, I couldn't *find* you." Dan scowls a little. "And what are you doing here, anyway? Shouldn't you be with Jeff on his big night?"

"Yeah, I should, but he sent me to find your deserting ass. We had plans for after the show... remember?"

"I figured the plans had changed. I mean, isn't Jeff's mom gonna be staying at his place? And you've got Monica to keep you busy."

Evan shakes his head. "Yeah, Amanda told me you'd be pissed about that."

"Pissed? No, man, I'm just—"

"You're just getting the wrong idea. Amanda followed you out of the gallery; Jeff couldn't get through to your phone so he called hers, and she had a message for you. And she saw what you must have seen through the bar window—she said it looked pretty...."

"It looked like none of my business, Evan." Dan digs the heel of his hand into his eye socket. "Look, man, I don't think this is going to work for me. I appreciate the offer, and I'll talk to Jeff about it, but... I'm really not up for the drama. It's just—it's too complicated." Evan

looks like Dan's just kicked him, and Dan tries to explain better. "It's hard enough with just two people, man, and I'm not... I'm not good at this shit normally, and I'm still... I'm still pretty fucked up about Justin, you know? I just... I'm not saying you guys aren't hot, or that I don't want you, I just... I can't do it."

"No, wait." Evan looks a bit panicky now. "You're just.... Okay, I was being kind of bitchy. I can see why you left. It's no big deal—no harm, no foul, right? Let's just back up a few steps...."

"Evan, no, it's not about tonight."

"Well, yeah, it is, because before tonight everything was good, right? So—I mean, Jeff's mom, you can't blame him for that, so it's got to be me and Monica, and... we used to date, yeah, but we've just been friends for a long time. We were talking about you, a lot of the time.... She was concerned, I was trying to tell her how great you are, and how I think this could really work...."

"No, man, it's... yeah, okay, it's kind of about tonight, but it's about me, not you. I thought I could do it, and then I realized that I couldn't. I just... I don't know, maybe it's my peasant blood coming through, but I just... I like things simple, and... secure, you know?" He shakes his head regretfully. "And you guys... you're neither."

Evan frowns at him. "But... we haven't even decided what we are. I mean... it can be just the three of us. That's good, that's great. So... that's secure, right? I mean, as secure as any other relationship." He shifts a little closer. "Amanda told me she came on pretty strong, pretty aggressive. She said you gave as good as you got, but... you know, she enjoys that shit. If you don't, that's cool, you don't have to spend time with her. Or, you know, we can avoid all of them, avoid everybody, until we get stuff figured out." The woman sitting next to Evan shifts a little, and he seems to become aware that he's having a pretty personal conversation in a pretty public location. "Look, Dan... come outside with me, okay? Can we just talk about this?"

Dan really can't say no to that, so he finishes his beer in a gulp and stands up to follow Evan out of the bar. When they get outside, Evan looks around a little, and then says, "I left my car at your place. I just came over here on a hunch when you didn't answer my knock. Can we go back there? Just to talk?"

Dan looks at him regretfully. “Okay, my timing sucks. I say I don’t want drama, and then I go and cause it. This is a big night for Jeff, and he wants you there. Why don’t you head back....” He looks at his watch. “Shit. By the time you get there....”

“He wants us *both* there, Dan.” Evan’s voice is quiet, but firm.

“Dude, three months ago he didn’t know who I was. Three months in the future I’ll just be a hazy memory. It doesn’t matter whether I’m there or not. It matters that you’re there. I... I don’t know what you were thinking, following me out here.”

Evan flares up at that. “Well, if you’d have answered your damn phone I wouldn’t have had to!”

“The battery’s dead, that’s all! Jesus, I don’t want the sort of life where a cell phone battery is a big fucking deal!”

“And I don’t want to go back there and have to tell Jeff that it’s over, that you quit without even giving us a chance to figure out how to make it work! You’re so concerned about his big night—be concerned about how that’s going to ruin it!”

“So don’t tell him! Just tell him I’m tired, and that we can talk tomorrow, or whenever his mom leaves.” The fight goes out of Dan. “Shit. I *said* it was bad timing.”

Evan comes over closer, and Dan knows he shouldn’t let it happen, but he does. He’s so tired of being confused.

“You’re wrong, Dan. He’s not going to have forgotten about you in three months. And I won’t have, either.” Evan puts a hand on Dan’s jaw, tilts his face up a little so they’re looking straight at each other. “And I don’t think you’ll have forgotten about us, either.” He smiles gently. “I know it’s scary, man. It’s scary for us too. But... we’re trying.”

Dan pulls his face out of Evan’s hand. “You think I’m not *trying*? You think I’m just a quitter? Fuck you, man, I’m trying.”

“Yeah, I didn’t mean it like that.” Evan shakes his head. “We need Jeff for this. He’ll make this make sense.”

“Yeah, or just make me *think* it makes sense.” Dan smiles ruefully. “That’s what happens, you know. When I’m with you guys,

everything's great. Possibly just because all my blood's in my dick instead of my brain, but also... I don't know, you're both pretty fucking persuasive. But... when I get some time to think about it all, or when I talk to people you know, or see you with your friends... it stops making sense, man."

Evan looks like he's thinking, and then he lifts his head and beams at Dan. "Well, that's the answer, then! It'll be Operation-Dan's-Never-Alone. Jeff's got to be at the gallery off and on, but I can take some time off or work from home or something. Fuck, like you said, I could get Sam to run the place... and I can learn about the horses, and help keep Tat from going totally mental—good work with the books, by the way—and when you're too tired to ride anymore, we can go in and visit Jeff. And his show closes in a couple weeks, so if you're still in this stage then, he can hang out with you full time while I go back to work...."

"Whoa, hold on! I'm not... I don't need a babysitter! Or a... cult leader, or whatever the hell that would be."

"I think we'll call ourselves 'companions'," Evan says with a sly grin. "You know, like in *Little Women*, when Jo spent time with Aunt March."

Dan can't just let that go. "*Little Women*? Are you shitting me? I can't think of a way you could be any more gay."

"Maybe if I stopped sleeping with women... and, holy shit, that's what I'm gonna be doing, right? If it's just you and me and Jeff?" He shakes his head. "That will make me quite a *bit* more gay!"

Dan can't let that go, either. "Okay, we need to talk about that. I mean—if you guys want a threesome, and you like sleeping with women... wouldn't it make more sense for you to find a female third?"

Evan stares at him. "Now, you see, this is what I find fascinating about you. One second you're running away, the next you're offering to get a sex change, just for my pussy-loving pleasure? It's sweet, man, but maybe you could find a middle road of moderation."

"Okay, psycho, you can't just make a joke out of everything I say. It's a good question!"

"Nah, Dan, it's not." Evan leans closer again. "You keep saying

we want a threesome, like it's some sort of independent thing. That's not what we want." He brings his hand back up to Dan's jaw. "We want *you*, Dan." Then he looks at his watch, and goes from tender to businesslike.

"Okay, the Operation starts now. I'll have to call Jeff, brief him on his responsibilities... and you're right, we've missed the official end of the party, but it really looked like it was going to stretch on a while. Let's go over and get my car, and we'll give him a call. His mom's pretty old; she'll probably be ready to crash pretty soon, so maybe he can put her to bed and sneak out, and then we can have our talk at your place or at the club house." Evan has his phone out and he's walking briskly as he's talking, every bit the high-powered young executive in the manner if not the *content* of his planning.

Dan just trails along with him, feeling slightly dazed. He could object if he wanted to, but he thinks of Blaine's "twig in the stream" idea. The guy's a bit of an ass, but maybe he's not all wrong. Maybe Dan needs to stop trying to steer and stop worrying about where the river's taking him. Maybe he's so tired because he's fighting against the current. Dan winces at the thought of ever having to admit to Blaine that he was right and decides to try to find a way to follow the philosophy without thinking about whose idea it was. Besides, he's pretty sure it's Buddhist or Zen or Tao or something. It's definitely not pure Blaine.

Evan's off the phone now, and Dan realizes that he hadn't listened to a single word the guy had said. Okay, there's serenely detached, and then there's catatonic. Dan needs to work on being the former not the latter.

They get to Evan's car, and he holds the passenger door open for Dan. He's about to rebel, but then he thinks of the twig and lets the river wash him right inside. He sees Evan's confused look and realizes that the guy was expecting an argument, and Dan grins a little to himself. He thinks of those bugs that look like twigs, right until they pounce on their unsuspecting prey. Maybe that's what he'll be.

Evan circles around and gets in the driver's side. "Jeff and his mom have already left the gallery, and they're on their way to his place. You and I are gonna pick up some supplies and then go to the guest house to meet him. All right?"

“Supplies?” Dan asks innocently.

Evan smirks happily. “He suggested a bottle of wine and maybe something to eat. But if we’re going to the house anyway, we might as well start stocking the club house up....” His face twists a little, briefly. “Remind me to change the security clearances, check who has access to that place. Sam probably already removed most people when you were living there, but... better safe than sorry.”

Dan nods. He closes his eyes and tries to find the same sense of calm he gets when he’s riding. It’s not the same with a car, though, so he reaches over and rests his hand on Evan’s thigh. It’s pretty much the least sexual contact the two of them have ever had, despite the location and the context, and somehow Evan seems to recognize it for what it is. He takes one hand off the steering wheel and drops it gently down on top of Dan’s, and they drive on together through the darkness.

chapter 7

WHEN they get to the farm, Evan drives right up to the main house. He pulls up near the front but a little off to the side and looks over at Dan.

“Okay, man, normally I’d say you could come in or you could wait in the car, but the Operational Parameters dictate that you come in.”

“The Operational Parameters...? Evan, are you playing soldier? First you’ve got your club house, and now you’re going on missions—aren’t you a bit young for a second childhood?”

Evan just grins at him. “Up and at ’em, recruit!”

By the time Dan’s got himself unbuckled and out of the car, Evan’s already bounded over to his side, and as Dan stands up, he finds himself eye to chin with a whole lot of Kaminski. He tilts his head back a little, and Evan’s still smiling at him, but the mood has changed a little. One of Evan’s hands goes to Dan’s neck, the other to his waist, and then Evan’s kissing him hard, pushing him back against the car with his body, pulling him forward with his hands. Dan starts to resist a little, more out of surprise than actual objection, but he remembers his new philosophy and makes himself relax, lets his body soften and mold to Evan’s.

Dan can feel Evan’s lips curl up in an appreciative smile, and then there’s no more room for expressions as Evan presses forward into Dan’s mouth, hard and aggressive and hot. Evan takes his hand from Dan’s neck, and without the support his head goes back a little, and Evan seems to approve, pushing forward until Dan’s head is bent back over the roof of the Cherokee, and only then does his mouth leave Dan’s, trailing down over his exposed neck. Dan feels Evan’s hands at his belt and lifts his head, only to have Evan’s mouth push it back down.

“Evan, fuck, we’re outside, anyone could...”

Evan pauses only long enough to say, “The trees block the view

from the house. And it's a security camera blind spot—trust me.” He sucks a little on Dan's neck, hard enough to bring the blood to the surface but not enough to leave a mark.

“Jeff,” Dan manages to gasp.

Evan brings his mouth up to hover just over Dan's. “It was his idea.” Then he runs his face down Dan's body as his hands finish with Dan's belt and easily work his button and fly open. Dan gasps a little as Evan eases his pants and underwear down, and the sound turns to a moan when Evan takes Dan's cock in his mouth and goes to work. No teasing, no subtlety, just heat and wet and suction and crazy little tongue rolls that have Dan's hips bucking forward within seconds. Evan brings an arm up to keep Dan still while the hand of the other arm is running all over Dan's stomach and his chest and his ass and his thighs and his balls.... Dan has a feeling that this could be over embarrassingly quickly.

He starts trying his usual orgasm-delay techniques, but then he catches himself. He knows that Evan gets off on a little pain, and that Jeff gets ridiculously tender when he's turned on... maybe it's only fair that they find out that surprise outdoor blowjobs are Dan's thing. Or at least *one* of his things....

He moans a little and brings a hand down to Evan's head, nestling his fingers in his hair, trying not to grab on when Evan responds to the encouragement with even more enthusiasm. Dan lets his shoulders relax as he leans back over the roof of the car, and he looks up at the stars and wonders just what is going on in the universe to bring him to this place with this guy at this time... and then Evan tightens his lips just a little bit more, and Dan stops thinking about anything coherent. He brings his free hand down to Evan's face, feels the stretch of his mouth, feels the tension in the muscles, feels his own cock pushing in past Evan's hollowed cheeks... and then it's just sensation, whiteness crowding out his vision as his orgasm surges through his whole body, and he throws his head back so hard it bounces a little off the roof, and he feels Evan swallowing around him, one of Evan's arms looping around his ass and pulling him forward, pulling him even deeper into Evan's warm, soft mouth....

Evan seems to know just when it's over, when it's too much for Dan to have any more stimulation, and he gently releases Dan's cock

and slides his body up next to Dan's, so Dan is leaning with his back against the truck, and his side nestled in against Evan. When Dan opens his eyes, Evan is there, leaning his head on his hand, braced on one elbow against the roof of the car. He's looking at Dan fondly. "Jeff was right, as usual."

Dan can barely find the strength to respond. "About what?" he manages, and he brings his closest hand over to play a little bit against Evan's chest.

Evan leans down and kisses him gently. "He said the Operation was a good idea, but that we'd probably need to do more than just hang out." Another kiss. "He said you think too much, and we need to help you turn your brain off." This kiss is a bit deeper, a bit wetter, and Dan can taste himself in Evan's mouth and remembers that Evan hasn't gotten off yet. "He said sex is always good for that." Evan grins a little. "Of course, I already knew all that. But what he said that I needed to be reminded of was how fucking beautiful you are right after you come." His hand smooths over Dan's face, gently tracing his features. "All that tension gone, no more frowning, no more worrying..." Evan grins again. "We should just Botox your entire face, man, and you could look like this always. But then I'd have to lock you up, keep anyone else from seeing you, 'cause this face... I like it being just for me and Jeff."

Dan rolls himself over so that he's leaning on his side, too, mirroring Evan's posture with his head on his hand. "Yeah? Is there anything else you'd like to be for just you and Jeff? Anything I could do for just you right now?" He brings his free hand over to Evan's chest, wraps his tie around his fist and pulls a little, and Evan comes willingly, his mouth hot and hard against Dan's.

"Oh, yeah, man, there's a lot you could do," Evan murmurs between kisses. Then he reluctantly pulls away. "But we should get down to the guest house." He grins. "Or base camp, maybe we can call it." Dan just shakes his head a little. "We should be there when Jeff shows up."

He reaches down and unwraps his tie, then bends over a little to find Dan's pants and pull them back to a more dignified location. He only does the fly up halfway, though, and ignores the button altogether as he grabs Dan's hand and pulls him along the walkway. They make their way to a set of French doors, and Evan enters his code into the

keypad. The lights inside turn on automatically, a soft glow illuminating a masculine-looking bedroom. There's nothing too outrageous, nothing to proclaim that this is the private lair of an incredibly wealthy man, but Dan notices that the bed is oversized, and looks... incredibly soft.... He frees himself from Evan's hand and stumbles toward it, collapsing face down on the brown suede comforter. It puffs up around him as he sinks into it, and Evan's laugh sounds like it comes from far away.

"Damn. I like the look of you in my bed." He crosses over and puts one knee on the mattress beside Dan's body, leaning over to run a loving hand from Dan's head all the way to his feet. "Okay, I'm gonna make a brief exception to the Operational Guidelines. You can stay here while I put stuff together." He bends over and kisses Dan's temple, then whispers with his lips pressed against Dan's skin. "No overthinking allowed in there, okay? Be cool." He pulls himself up and starts moving around, collecting who-knows-what from who-knows-where. Dan hears Evan leave the room, and then it seems like no time has passed before warm lips are being pressed to his temple again.

"Dan, man, you need to wake up. You had a little nap, but Jeff's almost to the guest house, so we should get going."

Dan struggles back to consciousness. "I had a nap?"

Evan laughs softly. "About a half hour, maybe? I left you as long as I could. I called Jeff, and he was still at his place, so I got him to call here when he was leaving. That was about five minutes ago."

Dan pushes himself up a little and notices that the comforter has been folded over to serve as a blanket for him. He's usually a light sleeper. "Man, your bed...." He glances over at Evan. "Is there a carbon monoxide leak in here or something?"

Evan just laughs again. "I'll have them check for it. But *I'm* not sleepy, so...."

Dan makes it to a sitting position. "You hypnotized me with the blowjob, and then you made my brain listen to you when you told it not to think."

"Yeah, that's the secret to my business successes too. Hypnotic blowjobs." Evan reaches out a hand, and when Dan grabs it, he's hauled to his feet. He's still so sleepy that he stumbles a bit, but Evan

catches him and gives him a second to steady himself. “Man. I *am* gonna get them to check for carbon monoxide. You were *out*.” He smiles happily. “You look just as sweet when you’re asleep as you do after you come. But you were talking a bit. Are you a sleep talker?”

Dan’s blush hits him like a fever. “No!” He looks down quickly, and then mutters, “Why? What did I say?”

Evan’s obviously delighted with the reaction. “Just a lot of stuff about my huge dick and how I’m the best you’ve ever had... you know, nothing I don’t hear all the time.” Dan punches him almost reflexively, and Evan yelps a little before admitting, “Nah, not much that I could understand. Something about rolling the windows up?”

Dan shakes his head. “Huh. Was it raining?”

“I didn’t even run any water. Come on, man, we’ll get you therapy later.” Evan pulls Dan out to the driveway and holds the passenger door open for him again.

“Evan, I’m not gonna bolt on the way to the guest house.”

“Dude, you cannot be trusted. Get in.” Dan thinks of the twig and climbs in, watches Evan carefully shut the door after him. There had better be more sex soon, or his peaceful philosophy is not going to last.

They drive quietly down to the guest house, and when they get there, Dan makes a point of getting out too quickly for Evan to come around and open the door for him. Evan just grins like Dan did a cute trick and grabs his hand again to lead him up the stairs to the porch. Evan’s got a gym bag slung over his shoulder, and for the first time Dan wonders what might be in it. He doesn’t really think they’re at the stage for toys, so he’s really just hoping for something to eat. And maybe lube.

He doesn’t find out right away, though, because they just have the door open when headlights shine against the house and a car pulls in beside Evan’s. Jeff looks a bit tired when he climbs out and maybe a bit worried, and Dan feels guilty, wondering how much of each of those is his fault. But he smiles when he sees them, and Dan thinks maybe he can take at least a little bit of the credit for that, so it helps.

Evan and Dan wait in the doorway, and when Jeff comes up to join them, they all cross the threshold together, and it’s a bit awkward,

but it's kind of nice too. Jeff hasn't really touched either of them yet, which is unusual for him, and Dan decides that sometimes twigs at least roll a little in the water, and he reaches a hand out for Jeff's face, moves forward and kisses him. It's just a hello, nothing too steamy, but it's Jeff, and Dan figures it's just as well he that he already came earlier so that he has a prayer of lasting a while if they start up again. Which he very much hopes they do.

When Dan steps back, Evan takes his place, another kiss that's warm rather than hot. Then Evan nods in the direction of the kitchen. "Drinks? Food?"

Dan's stomach rumbles audibly in response, and the other two look a little startled. "Tat *said* you were getting skinny. You been starving yourself, man?" Evan smiles as he speaks, but his eyes rake down Dan's body appraisingly.

"Dude, right now *you're* the one who's starving me. What've you got?"

Evan nods toward the kitchen, and when they follow him there he sets the bag on the counter and opens it up. He pulls out a bag of Cheetos and a bag of chips, a few paper-wrapped lumps that Dan suspects are cheese, and then a loaf of bakery bread and a box of assorted crackers. There's also a bottle of wine and a bottle of Wild Turkey, which Evan waves at Dan. "Don't say I don't pay attention, man." Then he gestures at the food. "We can make a list, figure out what else we need. This was just what I could find lying around." He looks at Dan. "See anything you want?"

Dan smiles lazily. "I see lots of things I want, man, but let's start with the food." He leans over and unwraps one of the packages of cheese, and by the time he's done, Jeff has found a knife to cut it with and Evan has opened the crackers.

"We could put some on the bread, melt it in the toaster oven." Jeff suggests. Evan nods, but now that he's got food in his sights, Dan isn't sure he can wait that long. He wonders if he uses up all of his patience working with the horses so that he's got none left for his personal life. Jeff starts cutting slices of cheese, and Dan reaches over and grabs a few. He's hungry *now*, damn it.

Evan shakes his head and opens both bags of chips, and they're

enough to keep Dan away from Jeff's work, at least.

As soon as his mouth isn't full, Dan says, "Sorry I missed the end of your show, man. I looked for you to tell you I was going, but...."

Jeff just nods. "S'all right. I was surprised by how busy I was, really. And then my mom showed up...." He looks over at Evan. "You really didn't know about that? Usually she tells you everything."

Evan laughs. "Yeah, and then I forget that it's a secret and tell you. After I wrecked Christmas last year, she swore she was never going to tell me anything again."

Jeff nods. "I just didn't think she'd be able to stick to it. She likes to share."

Dan is a bit more concerned. "Dude, you wrecked *Christmas*?"

Evan shrugs. "'Wrecked' might be a little strong. Just... apparently some people like to be surprised by their presents, you know?"

"Anyway, no big deal." Jeff smiles at Dan. "Sorry for abandoning you—it seemed like you were okay."

"Yeah, dude, contrary to Evan's insane plan, I am actually able to spend time on my own. I don't need to be babysat."

Evan shakes his head darkly. "No good comes of you being unsupervised."

Dan doesn't respond. He'll fight it when he has to. For now, he just wants more cheese.

Evan is looking after drinks now, pouring wine for himself and Jeff then looking questioningly at Dan. Dan looks from the wine to the bourbon then nods at the bourbon. Wine's fine, but at this time of night, he prefers the hard stuff.

Jeff has covered three slices of bread with an assortment of the different cheeses and puts them on the little tray for the toaster oven. Then he goes back to the counter and cuts several more slices of cheese, lifting his eyes slyly toward Dan. Dan grins and his hand shoots out to collect his treat. He wonders if stick bugs eat cheese. If they don't, they're missing out.

Evan and Jeff settle onto the stools around the breakfast bar. Now

that the task is taken care of, it's a bit awkward. Do they dive right into a big conversation or more small talk, or...? Puppet-Chris suggests they just jump right to the sex, and for once Dan completely agrees with him. Except that he doesn't want the cheese bread to burn.

"So...." Jeff's rumble fills the room, and he's looking at Dan in a way that makes it hard to not return the gaze. "Evan said you were a bit... discouraged... earlier." Okay, apparently they're jumping right in.

But Dan doesn't know what to say. He can't deny that he was, and he can't pretend that he didn't have good reason to be. But here, in this cozy kitchen with these two warm, beautiful men, he can't really imagine walking away. He begins to think that Evan may have a point with his constant-contact strategy. They're both still waiting for him, so he crams three pieces of cheese in his mouth. Ha! He can't talk with his mouth full!

But the bastards wait him out. He chews until the cheese is a liquefied mess that he doesn't even want to swallow, but they're still staring at him, so finally he chokes it back and reaches for his glass to rinse the over-chewed taste out of his mouth. And maybe to give him a little courage.

"I feel a bit better now," he ventures, and Evan rolls his eyes.

"We waited that long, and that's all you're gonna give us?"

"Well, fuck, man, what do you want me to say? Nothing's changed. When I'm with you guys everything's great, but sooner or later I have to go back to reality, and... things aren't so good there."

"Okay, but what are we supposed to do with that?" Evan sounds frustrated.

"What are you supposed to do? How the fuck should I know? I mean, if I knew, I'd just do it myself, right?" Dan's a bit frustrated too. "I mean, maybe there's nothing *to* do. Maybe this is one of those things that's great in principle or that works under laboratory conditions, but just doesn't transfer to reality."

Jeff steps in. "Maybe we just need to focus on the positives. Things work when we're together. That's great, right?" He looks from Evan to Dan, and they both nod in cautious agreement. "So... Evan's plan is insane, but maybe it's not wrong. Let's just spend a lot more

time together. Let's make this"—and he gestures toward the three of them—"as strong as we can before we expose it to the outside world." He frowns a little. "It's going to be a bit tricky, I guess, especially this weekend—Evan's got guests, and so do I...."

Evan jumps in. "My guests weren't invited. They can entertain themselves, and they can do it in some way that *doesn't* involve harassing Dan."

Jeff smiles at his vehemence. "And my mother says she's prepared for me to be busy, and that she's fine on her own, but I should spend at least some time with her." He looks thoughtfully at Evan. "We could try to figure out shifts, so that I'm with Dan when you're with your friends, and then trade off...."

"Okay, wait." Dan thinks it's time to clear this up. "You started off sounding fairly normal—spending time together, okay, we can try that. But you've slipped into psycho-Evan-land now. You aren't going to figure out fucking shifts, that's insane! I can and will be by myself sometimes." He looks from one to the other. "There will be no *shifts*."

The other two exchange glances. "Okay, maybe 'shifts' isn't the right word," Evan tries.

"It's not the right *idea*, you freak!" Dan's laughing a little now. He can't help it. "Okay, let's just stick with the simple version of the plan. I chill out, you chill out, we spend some time together but don't push it on spreading the relationship outside of our little bubble. S'all right?"

"Is that enough?" Jeff asks. "I mean, I wasn't there, but... Evan was pretty freaked out by whatever you said earlier. Is this going to be enough to keep that from happening again?"

Dan rubs his neck. "I don't know. But I'm gonna kill one or both of you if you try to keep me from ever having any time to myself, you know? So at least this has a chance of working without bloodshed." He looks over at Evan sheepishly. "I'm sorry about earlier. I mean, I meant it at the time. And I still... I don't know, I still sort of mean it."

Evan's nod is slow and pensive. "Yeah, that's why... okay, yeah, twenty-four/seven coverage might be a little extreme, but I'm not kidding about you not doing well on your own."

Jeff breaks in before they can restart the argument. “Dan, I don’t have much to go on, but... you and Justin. From the sound of things at the funeral, he came on pretty strong at the start, and you had some doubts. But you guys got past that, right?” Evan shoots Jeff a look as if he doesn’t think it’s a good idea to bring up Justin, but Dan’s actually okay with it. He and Justin *had* gotten past this crap, and Dan wants to remember every good thing about that relationship that he can, wants to remind himself to hang on to every lesson he learned.

“Yeah, we did.” He takes a long pull from his glass and passes it over when Evan twists the bottle open for a refill. “I don’t know... I don’t think *I* did a damn thing. I just... I guess I just didn’t run. He... Jesus.” Dan thinks for a long second, and then reaches for his cell phone before he remembers that it doesn’t have a charge. “Can I borrow someone’s phone for a second?”

Evan looks a little startled but he hands his over, and Dan has to struggle with his memory for a second. He’s so used to speed dial. Finally, he figures the number out, and dials. It’s the middle of the night, so Chris must have been asleep, but his voice is alert and clear, although he does sound a bit more formal than usual. He must not recognize the number on the call display.

“Dude, did Justin have some sort of battle plan back when we were starting?”

There’s a pause. “Hi, Dan, it’s good to hear from you. No, really, any time, day or night, just give me a call. Yeah, things are going well here.”

“Yeah, sorry about the time, great that things are going well for you. Did Justin try to keep me from ever being on my own?” Dan refuses to look at Jeff and Evan until he’s gotten to the bottom of this.

There’s another pause. “Can I ask why you’re asking?”

“You can ask whatever you want to after you answer the question. Did he?”

“Uh... okay, I think ‘battle plan’ is a little strong... but he may have... noticed?... that you were pretty happy about the relationship when you were with him, and that you sort of... faded out?... when you weren’t.”

“So all that crap about moving in together right away and working together... he was just trying to keep me from bolting?”

“No! I mean, he was trying to keep you from bolting, but he moved in with you because he wanted to live with you. It’s kinda circular, really. He loved you, so he wanted to be with you, and he loved you and wanted you to not bolt so he wanted to be with you....” Chris pauses. “Okay, that’s not really a circle. But you get the idea.”

“Jesus.” Dan doesn’t think of himself as someone who follows a lot of patterns in his life, but it seems like this might be one.

Chris sounds a little concerned. “Dan? What’s going on out there?”

“Nothing! Well, not nothing. Lots. Just... still working on the Jeff and Evan thing, and, you know, they seem to think it would be a good idea if I didn’t spend a lot of time on my own....”

Chris laughs. “They’re figuring you out, Danny! Better be careful; knowledge is power. But, hey, it could be good. Justin was kind of running off his feet trying to keep up with you. Two of them could be just what’s needed. Maybe they could set up a schedule, have shifts....”

“You bastard, did they call you?” Dan almost hisses.

“What? No, why?”

“Nevermind. I’ll call you tomorrow.” Dan hangs up the phone and turns to see both Evan and Jeff looking at him curiously. He’s more than happy when the toaster oven buzzes and Jeff goes over to check on the bread. He pulls them out and leaves them on the counter to cool a bit and then turns and looks at Dan again.

“So?” Jeff inquires. “Sounds like Justin had a similar strategy?”

Dan nods reluctantly. “Sounds like maybe.”

Evan’s not quite satisfied with that. “Why’d you think we called him?”

“Hmm? Hey, is that bread ready? I’m still hungry.”

Evan smirks a little as Jeff finds plates. “Dude, you used my phone—I’ll hit redial if I have to. Why did you think we called him?”

Jeff has paused in his dishing up, apparently also interested in the answer. Dan frowns a little bit, looks at the floor then up at Evan. “The fucker said you should set up a schedule and have shifts. All right? Is that what you wanted to hear?”

Apparently goofy dances are a Kaminski tradition, and Dan has to really work not to smile at Evan’s victory celebration. He makes it until he looks over at Jeff, who is manfully trying to keep a straight face, focusing on cutting the cheese bread into totally precise triangles. He looks up and sees Dan watching, and the corners of his mouth twitch a little. He slips the bread onto a plate and puts it in on the counter, then walks around behind Dan and hugs him from behind. They watch the rest of Evan’s celebration together.

chapter 8

BY THE time Evan is calm enough to eat, the bread has cooled down enough to be edible. Evan manages to stop smirking by filling his mouth with food, and they eat companionably for a minute or two. Then Dan decides to get a few more things sorted out.

“Okay, so... we’re gonna spend time together—but you two *and* Chris can go fuck yourselves, there’s not gonna be shifts—and we’re not gonna go public anytime soon. But, uh... is the twosome thing okay? And what are the rules about other people?”

Jeff glances over at Evan and then grins a little. “If we’re spending this much time with you, we’re really not going to have any *energy* for anyone else.”

Dan shakes his head. “No, we’re not spending *that* much time together. I’m still gonna work, and you’re both still gonna work, and honestly, it probably wouldn’t kill me to make some actual friends out here, other than the people at the barn.”

Evan looks a little concerned about that. “Well, where would you make friends?”

“I don’t know. Some of Ryan’s friends were cool; I could give them a call, maybe....”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Evan objects.

“Well, that’s not gonna be your call,” Dan responds. “You’ve got an ex-girlfriend staying at your damn house. You don’t get to tell me I can’t hang out with people that I met through I guy I barely dated. No.”

Evan looks chastised, but he regroups. “But wouldn’t it be better if we could all *share* some friends? I mean, we don’t want to have three separate groups of people to try to spend time with....”

“From what I’ve seen of your friends, they’re all yours, man.” Dan shakes his head. “And, honestly, do you ever see this going that direction? I mean, are we ever going to have to worry about spending time with each other’s friends?” He looks at Evan. “You’re in the public eye, man, and like it or not, your reputation matters to your business. Being involved with *one* guy is bad enough. What are people gonna say if they find out you’re involved with two?”

Jeff frowns at him. “So how do you see this playing out?”

“Well, I don’t know. I mean, that’s one of the problems I’ve got. I figure it’s gotta stay you two as the public couple. And then... I don’t know, I just....” He looks around the guest house. “I just hang out here, like a genie in a bottle. I don’t know.”

“That’s really not how we saw it,” Jeff says, sounding concerned.

“Yeah, okay, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t make sense. And, honestly, I’m sure all of your friends are great people or whatever, but I’ve met some from both sides, and there’s no one there I’m really *dying* to see again. So... I don’t mind not having to hang out with them and make small talk and pretend to be interested. It’s really not a hardship for me to not be included in that part of your lives.”

“So, what, we’re just sex?” Evan sounds a little upset.

“No. Sex and hanging out and... I don’t know, eating?”

“Fuck buddies?” Evan practically spits.

Jeff looks back and forth between them. “Okay, I think we’re getting a bit ahead of ourselves. We can negotiate all this stuff later, when we see how things are going. For now, are you guys good with... ‘twosomes are fine, as long as the third is always welcome’? And Dan, both Evan and I would like to try it with just the three of us. Does that work for you?”

He hesitates. It’s a big step (a logical step, Puppet-Chris whispers, and Dan has to agree) for Evan and Jeff to take with each other, but it’s a fucking *huge* step for Dan to take with two guys he barely knows. Who are already pretty seriously involved. So recently after the end of his last relationship.

Evan and Jeff are looking at him a bit apprehensively; he tries to smile. “Yeah. Okay, but... you know, I’m not promising anything.

There are still some serious... issues... with this working out to be something that's gonna last for any length of time. If I meet somebody that I think I could be good with... I mean, I promise that I'll let you know, I won't sneak around or whatever, but... you know...."

Evan stares at him. "Seriously? That's... that's the level of commitment you're giving this? I mean... we're okay until something better comes along? You're doing us the fucking *favor* of letting us jump through all these goddamn hoops and put up with all your crap? Seriously, man?" He looks over at Jeff, as if looking for support.

Dan hadn't meant it that way, but when he thinks about it, he can see where Evan's coming from. "Shit, no! I mean... I don't mean that I'm... fuck." Now he's the one looking to Jeff for help, but Jeff isn't really looking back. "I just... okay, yeah, that was a shitty thing to say. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't just a shitty thing to *say*, man. It's a shitty way to *think*. I mean, are you into this at all?" Evan is starting to look less angry, and more hurt, and Dan likes that even less.

He looks down at his hands for a second. "Yeah, I'm into it. I am. I just... it freaks me out, you know? I... I was with Justin for a long time, and... I really loved him." Dan doesn't want to break down, doesn't want to make this another thing that's all about him. But Evan deserves an explanation. And Jeff does, too, even if he isn't demanding one. "It's scary, you know? I don't... I don't know if I really *want* to feel that way again."

Evan looks like he's listening, at least. "But with some other guy, you might? You said you wanted to keep your options open for other guys."

Dan doesn't really want to look either of them in the eye. "Yeah. It's just... it's easier to say that, but, you know... I don't really think that's too likely. I think...." He takes a deep breath. "I guess I just want to leave the door open to bolt again. Shit."

There's silence for quite a while, and Dan waits, wondering just how much he can expect these guys to put up with. He wonders if he's finally pushed them too far.

Jeff is the first one to speak. "There's never any guarantees, right? We've got a plan to deal with the bolting, and for the rest of it... we've

just got to see what happens.” He leans over and rests a comforting hand on the back of Evan’s neck, rubbing gently, and after a few moments Evan visibly relaxes into the caress. Dan figures that he’s gotten off the hook once more and wonders if the talk is over. If it is, he has his own ideas for ways to help Evan relax. Then he thinks of another area that should probably be discussed.

“Uh, while we’re at it... I don’t want to bottom.” Judging by the surprised looks he gets, he probably should have built up to that a little. “I mean, I will, but... not right away. It’s... I dunno....” He’s wondering if it would have been easier to not talk about this and just refuse to do it when the situation arose. Or just grit his teeth and do it. But he’s into it now. “I just... I don’t know, it’s... not easy for me.” He should probably clarify that. “Psychologically.” And now he sounds insane. “I mean, you know, emotionally, or whatever.” Insane and incoherent. Excellent. Very smooth. Why doesn’t he start having a conversation with Puppet-Chris, make the evidence of his mental deterioration that much clearer?

They’re both still staring a little, and then Evan snickers. Now it’s Jeff and Dan’s turn to be surprised. Evan grins. “We can ask each other before every new thing. Like in those date-rape PSAs: ‘Sweetie, may I now remove your blouse? Thank you. Darling, I would now like to place my hand beneath your brassiere... do you consent?’”

Dan rolls his eyes a little, but he’s got to admit he’s impressed by the Kaminski resilience. “Okay, I also don’t want to cross dress.”

Jeff looks him slowly up and down. “Well, that’s a shame. I could absolutely see you in one of those little ass-tickler skirts....” And the man’s growl is so effective that Dan has to seriously consider his own preferences. But he decides to spend less time thinking, more time doing, so he pulls himself up off of the stool and puts a little slink in his walk on the way over to Jeff. Evan is watching with considerable interest, and Dan gives him an inviting smile before turning all of his attention to Jeff.

Jeff has already loosened his own tie and undone his top button, so Dan undoes the next button and brings his fingers to the one beneath it before pausing. “For me, the sexiest thing about clothes is getting them the hell off.” He slips the button through the buttonhole, and looks to Evan to be sure this is an okay development of their evening’s

plans. Evan grins enthusiastically and comes around behind Jeff, flipping his collar up so he can keep the tie around his neck while Dan continues to undo the buttons. Dan sees the plan and grins. "Jeff, Evan and I still feel kinda bad about missing the end of your party. Maybe you'll let us make it up to you?"

Jeff smiles. "I guess maybe I could let you do that."

Dan has all the buttons undone now, and he brings his head forward to kiss Jeff's chest as Evan slips the shirt off and drops it on the ground. Dan sees Evan's hands snake around Jeff's bare torso, and he gently catches one with his teeth, then sucks the index finger into his mouth. Jeff is looking down, and he groans a little at the sight. Dan releases the finger, and then reaches around to grab hold of Evan's shoulder, guiding him up so their faces meet over Jeff's shoulder. He's standing between Jeff's spread thighs, and he leans his whole body into Jeff's. He gives Evan a quick kiss, then murmurs, "How much teasing does it take to turn the pussycat into a tiger?" Jeff can hear what they're saying, and he huffs out a strained little laugh.

Evan kisses Dan back, making it sloppy and loud next to Jeff's ear. "I'm not sure, but I'm all for finding out."

Dan nods. "Bedroom?" And Evan nods, grabbing Jeff's tie like a leash and pulling him to his feet. He grabs the bag of supplies on the way, and Dan appreciates his efficiency. Dan trails along behind until they reach the bedroom, reaching out a few times to run his fingers along Jeff's back or down along his hips. Once they're through the door, his hands reach around for the buckle of Jeff's pants while his mouth works on the back of Jeff's neck and his body leans forward and rubs. Evan is doing something with the bed, pulling the sheets back, it looks like, and then Dan can feel Evan in front, claiming Jeff's mouth, and Evan's hands reaching around to nestle between Dan's stomach and Jeff's back, rubbing them both. Evan's hands go a little lower, and Dan's hips tilt forward, chasing the sensation.

Dan gets the belt unbuckled and Jeff's pants undone, and then Evan's taking over, easing Jeff's clothes the rest of the way off. Dan slides down to deal with his shoes and socks, and then Evan pulls Jeff toward the bed. Dan can almost see Jeff's reaction, the subtle loss of power that comes from being the only naked person. He still doesn't look exactly vulnerable, but he does seem a bit... aware. Evan lies back

on the bed and pulls Jeff on top of him, and Dan has another of those moments when he's not quite sure what he's doing. They look good together; they look right, and Dan doesn't really see how he fits in. Physically or emotionally. But he makes the effort, pulls himself out of his head, and just lets himself watch for a bit. If nothing else, at least he's got good porn.

Evan and Jeff are just making out, but Jeff is working away on Evan's clothes. His tie and shirt are undone and pushed off of his chest, and then Jeff sits up and scoots back a little, straddling Evan so he can undo his pants. Dan sees the opportunity and takes two big steps to get to the bed, then swings a leg over so that he's straddling Evan, too, behind Jeff. He takes a second to undo the top buttons of his own shirt and pull it over his head. The power imbalance was interesting, but he wants skin on skin. He reaches around and finds Jeff's cock, jacks it slowly while his other hand runs down to find Evan's pants undone but not yet off. Jeff seems to have given up on the task, his hands reaching back to grab hold of Dan's still-clothed thighs. Dan finds his way inside Evan's underwear, and as his hand wraps around Evan, he revels in the feeling of two cocks in his hands, different shapes, weights, even different textures, but both so strong and hot and alive.

Evan groans and pushes up into the friction, and Jeff leans forward again, lining up so that Dan's hands are right next to each other, and he takes the cue, wrapping one hand around both of them and stroking, a tight grip but a slow movement. He brings his other hand back to undo his own fly. The pressure is getting to be a little much.

For a while, there's nothing but quiet groans and the gentle sounds of skin against skin. Dan takes a bit of a break in order to pull Evan's pants the rest of the way off, and Evan obligingly lifts his hips to help. While Evan's at it, he shrugs out of his shirt. Now Dan's the only one with any clothes on, but instead of making him feel like he's in control, it makes him feel like the other, the extra. He fights the urge to give in to the feeling and wonders whether he's been sabotaging the relationship all along, letting himself wallow instead of kicking himself in the ass and getting over it all. Puppet-Chris's victory dance is strangely reminiscent of Evan's, and Dan has to work to get *that* out of his mind as well.

“Dan, you with us?” He looks up to see both of them peering at him, Jeff curious and Evan apprehensive.

Evan pushes Jeff back a bit so he can sit up, and he leans forward and wraps a hand around the back of Dan’s head, pulling him forward. Evan gently kisses Dan’s temple and whispers, “No more thinking in there, at least for a while.” He leans back and looks at Dan. “Do you think it’ll work without the blowjob?”

Dan grins slyly. “Well, if it doesn’t....”

Jeff looks confused but not upset by their in-joke. He nods at Dan’s pants. “You’re a little overdressed there, cowboy.”

“Yeah, I was just noticing that myself.” He stands up and shrugs his pants down his hips, then bends over for his shoes and socks. When he looks back up, both men are still watching him. He raises his eyebrows. “See something you like?” He moves back to the bed, stands there as both of them put their hands on him, as Evan’s mouth goes to his chest and Jeff’s to his lips.

But this was supposed to be about making *Jeff* crazy, he remembers, and he reluctantly pulls himself away to go back to his spot over Evan’s legs. He grinds forward, and his cock finds the cleft of Jeff’s ass. Jeff stiffens a little, then relaxes, and pushes back into Dan. Evan notices, and raises surprised eyes to meet Dan’s. “He usually tops, man. If you’re gonna do it, you’ll have to go slow.”

Dan nods and swallows nervously. He’s *definitely* gonna do it, if Jeff is going to let him. He sets up a bit of rolling rhythm with his hips, and leans forward to whisper in Jeff’s ear. “Are you sure?” Considering Dan’s earlier declaration, he really doesn’t want to push someone else’s limits. But Jeff nods and turns his head for a kiss. “Are you just trying to make me look bad?” Dan asks with a smile, and Jeff smiles back as he shakes his head.

Jeff brings one hand up to caress Dan’s cheek and says, “I don’t think there’s much that could make you look bad.”

Dan just shakes his head at the compliment and gets back to the business at hand. He pitches his voice low and kisses Jeff’s neck and shoulder between sentences. “So, how do you want to do it? Do you want me in you while Evan sucks you off? Or do you want to fuck Evan at the same time?” Dan lets his voice indicate that he’s open to

other options as well, but Jeff's sharp inhalation at the second item in the list has made it pretty clear what he wants. Dan looks over at Evan, who looks more than happy with the plan. "Is that good with you, Evan? You could be on your back, so you could see his face as I slide into him."

Evan smiles. "Jesus, for someone who said he wasn't sure of the mechanics of this, you're picking it up fast." He kisses Jeff deeply and then says, more to Jeff than to Dan, "I definitely want to see his face."

Dan nods and reaches over to the bag Evan's tossed on the end of the bed. It's almost empty, but there's lube and condoms, and he really doesn't think they need anything else. He tosses a couple of condoms up on the bed near Jeff and keeps one for himself as he grabs the bottle of lube. He squeezes a little onto his middle finger and lets it warm up before bringing it to Jeff's hole, running all around the edges and teasing, but not slipping it inside. He'd thought about using his mouth, but he's really only comfortable with that straight out of the shower, and he's good with his hands; he can make this work.

Jeff's leaning forward over Evan, kissing and rutting up against him, and he seems almost unaware of Dan's actions, at least until Dan teases a little bit inside and then pulls back out. Jeff's back arches a little, and Dan's not sure if it's enjoyment or if he's tensing in anticipation of a greater invasion. Either way, Dan goes back to working the outside, and when he pulls his finger away for a little more lube, Jeff leans back as if his ass is seeking Dan's warmth. Dan's reminded of working with dressage horses, teaching them to *want* the contact with the bit, making them relax into it and accept the guidance.

As soon as the new application of lube is warm, Dan's fingers are back, this time one sneaking inside while the other keeps up the gentle massage of the rim. His other hand runs all over Jeff's back and thighs, and he leans forward a few times for a quick tug on Jeff's still achingly hard cock.

By the time Dan's set up a rhythm with his fingers, reaching in for a quick brush and then pulling out, reaching in and pulling out, Jeff's rocking back into it in time. Dan glances over and sees Evan, seemingly entranced by the expression on Jeff's face. Dan kind of wishes he could see it, but he likes the view from where he is as well. He lets another finger work its way in, not every time, just occasionally,

enough to keep Jeff off balance and guessing. He can feel Jeff's breath coming faster and a bit jerkily, and he wonders if he'll actually be able to do this, if playing with his ass is all it's going to take to make Jeff lose control.

He doesn't want to let Jeff ground himself by focusing on anything but sensations, so he keeps his fingers busy while he reaches for the lube bottle and passes it to Evan. "Can you prep yourself, man?" he asks. It's not exactly romantic, but it'll get the job done. Evan grabs the bottle with enthusiasm, one hand reaching down, the other running over Jeff's face like a blind person trying to recognize someone.

Jeff adds a little downward grind to his backward thrusting, rubbing himself off on Evan's hip, and Dan reaches out a hand to lift him up a little. "Careful, now... you don't want to come before you're inside him, do you? And I don't want you in him until I'm in you."

Jeff almost growls. "So get on with it, then."

Dan grins at Evan. Jeff sounds close to the edge. Evan smiles back, and his free hand is stroking Jeff's face now, a gesture that would be soothing at any other time, and Dan pushes all three fingers in hard, finding the bundle of nerves and working it relentlessly. Jeff's back arches and he groans raggedly, pushing back against Dan's hand.

"Yeah, that's almost it, Jeff, you're almost there. I just want to hear you roar, man, I want you to be a tiger...." Dan grabs a condom and rips it open with his free hand and his teeth, then reaches around to roll it onto Jeff's cock. He strokes it a few times while he's there, hard and in rhythm with his fingers against Jeff's prostate.

Evan's eyes are wide and dark, and he pulls his legs up part way, looking to Dan for guidance. "Yeah, man." Dan agrees. "But don't let him in yet. Just tease him, let him feel how good it's gonna be, how tight and hot and wet, but you keep control, don't let him in until he's ready. Can you do that, Evan?" Evan nods and grins a little wickedly, and reaches down to replace Dan's hand on Jeff's cock with his own. Dan feels Jeff tense as Evan guides Jeff's cock to his ass, and Dan's ready for him when Jeff's hips try to snap forward. One hand stays on Jeff's hip and holds him back, the other hooks around inside Jeff, and pulls on him from there. Jeff groans at the new sensation, and his breathing is more like panting now.

Jeff groans again. “Jesus, Dan, please....”

“No, sweetheart, I don’t want you to beg.” Dan takes his hand off Jeff’s hip long enough to grab another condom and rip the wrapper open. “You hear that, Jeff? I’m ready for you, I want to fuck you so bad.” He smooths the condom on one handed and grabs the lube, using his teeth again so he doesn’t have to take his fingers away from Jeff’s ass. He smooths the lube all over his cock and brings it forward to just touch Jeff, just beneath where Dan’s fingers disappear. “I just want to know that you want it too.” He leans forward a bit and nips at Jeff’s shoulder blades. “We’re not making love here, Jeff. This isn’t one of your artsy cuddle fests.” He bites again, a little higher this time, a little harder, and Jeff arches his back again and swears. “If you want us, man, you need to take us. Evan wants you, man, he wants you hard and fast, wants you to slam into him and make him feel it. And Jesus, Jeff, I can barely stand it back here, I keep thinking of you fucking yourself on my cock, the way it’s gonna feel to know that every time you pull off of me you’re gonna be driving into him....” Dan pulls his fingers out and lines himself up, letting the tip of his cock just begin to push in. “Just do it, Jeff, come on, just....”

And then Jeff does it. The sound he makes is more like a gasp than a roar, but Dan doesn’t think to complain. Jeff slams forward into Evan, and Dan moves with him, keeping himself lined up and then leaning forward so that when Jeff pulls out, he’s impaling himself on Dan. And the sound is more like a roar then, but not of pain—or not all pain—and Jeff is driving forward again and then back, and he’s gasping for air and for control and for sanity, but his body won’t let him stop. He doesn’t last long, of course he doesn’t last long, and when he plunges into Evan and stutters and stops, Dan leans forward and fucks him through his orgasm, hard and fast and intense.

Jeff collapses on Evan’s back, and Dan would be more than happy to keep things like that, Evan providing a useful support, Jeff’s body all loose and hot after his climax, but it isn’t really fair to Evan, so Dan reluctantly pulls out and then guides Jeff to do the same. Jeff collapses on his back off to the side, and Dan strips off his condom and looks at Evan. Evan grins back, and Dan grabs another condom and rips it open, and rolls it on as he’s reaching for the lube. “Flip over, man. Elbows and knees, with your face over there so you can kiss Jeff.”

Evan obeys readily, and Dan shuffles over a bit and pushes in. It's good, being where Jeff had just been, Evan still tight but not *too* tight, and Dan wishes that they didn't need condoms, wishes that he could feel himself slipping in Jeff's come. But this is good too—great, even—and he moves almost gently, not wanting to jar Evan out of the warm, sloppy kisses with Jeff.

But it's not long before Evan pulls away from Jeff and looks back, grinning. "So who's having a cuddle fest now, dude?" Dan responds immediately, his next thrust so hard it actually jars Evan's knees along the bed a bit, and he changes his angle a little and sets up a punishing rhythm. Evan's not kissing Jeff anymore. He's got his head buried in Jeff's neck, and Jeff's arm is wrapped around his head as if he's comforting him, but Evan is still pushing back into every thrust, and when Dan reaches around he's still rock hard. He gives a few strokes with his hand, but then Evan lifts his head, and gasps, "Just your cock, Dan. Make me come with just that," so Dan brings both hands back to Evan's hips. He only hopes he can hold out long enough to give Evan what he wants.

He's beginning to think he's going to have a problem with that, is just calling up images of rotten hamburger to help calm himself down, but then Evan's low grunting sounds escalate, and he pulls his head up from Jeff's neck and pushes back a little, bringing his ass further up in the air as he bites at Jeff's chest. Jeff isn't soothing him anymore, he's just holding his shoulders, trying to keep him in place, and finally Evan comes, arching his back and gasping for air, splattering thick white ropes all over Jeff's chest.

Dan lets himself go then, a few final thrusts and then release, his fingers clenching into the skin of Evan's hips but no sound escaping from his mouth. After a few moments, Evan lets himself collapse forward, and Dan stays behind, feeling suddenly exposed and almost chilled. He pulls the condom off and ties it, then looks around for the one he'd used before. He finds it and Jeff's. It's funny how it's sort of gross to pick it up once it's off the body, even though it was perfectly fine while it was on. But he scoops it up anyway and gets up to throw them all out. He goes in to the bathroom and gets a washcloth, then wets it and brings it back out. He passes it wordlessly to Jeff, who mops up a little, making Evan move a tiny bit with a petulant groan.

Dan holds his hand out for the washcloth to be returned, but instead Jeff tosses the cloth on the floor and catches Dan's hand in his own. "Come back to bed, Dan."

Dan pulls away a little, wondering where his clothes have gotten to. "No, man, there's not really room." It's not a lie; the bed is a king size, which is lots of room for two people but pretty tight for three, especially when they're all good-sized men.

"We'll make room, Dan. Come on, now... don't make me wake Evan up."

Dan sits reluctantly on the side of the bed, and then spies his underwear jumbled up with his pants. He reaches over and pulls the boxer briefs on, and that's a little better, at least. He decides to try again. "Actually, I had a nap earlier, and it was really good, so... I'm not all that sleepy."

Jeff's frowning at him in confusion. "I don't get it, man. How can you be so comfortable, so... confident when we're actually going at it, and then turn into... this... as soon as we're done?"

Dan knows what Jeff's getting at, but he decides to be offended anyway. It's easier. "Well, shit, I'm sorry 'this' isn't good enough for you." He's about to go on, but Jeff just raises a hand.

"Don't do that, Dan. There's room for you here, and we want you here, but if you'd rather be somewhere else, I guess that's your choice." Jeff reaches down and grabs the sheets and comforter from the foot of the bed, and pulls them up over himself and Evan. "Either way, could you hit the lights, please?"

Dan stands up and crosses to the doorway. He finds the light switch and flips it down, and the room sinks into darkness. There's a definite part of him that wants to go back to the bed and snuggle in, but in addition to his claustrophobia, he now feels like there's an element of pride involved, like he'd be letting Jeff win. So he heads out into the hallway and pulls the door shut behind him.

He'd really like to go home, back to the apartment, but he doesn't want to go back in to collect his clothes, and he drove out to the farm in Evan's car; the truck is still in town. He swears a little as he pushes the door to the guest room open. He's got the bed that he slept in for weeks here, but it's full of other people; and he's got the bed that he's been

sleeping in lately, but it's miles away. So he's heading for a third bed. That doesn't really make sense. Puppet-Chris is not impressed, but Dan isn't sure whether he's mad at Dan or at the situation. Probably Dan.

Dan leans against the door, looking in at the bed, and then the door to the master bedroom opens and Evan staggers out. He's wearing his underwear and squinting in the bright light. He manages to focus on Dan, and he drags his hand along the wall as if for guidance as he walks over and then takes Dan's hand. Evan leans in and presses a long, soft kiss to Dan's temple, and then tugs gently on his hand. Dan wants to tell him that the hypnosis thing was just a joke, but he realizes that he's following behind Evan, his feet apparently deciding that they're in charge.

When they get to the bedroom Evan pauses for a second inside the door; Dan realizes that he's letting his eyes adjust to the darkness. Then Evan's on the move again, shuffling over to the bed and then turning and nudging Dan in. He's a bit reluctant, thinks maybe Evan should go in the middle, but then Jeff lifts up his arm, bringing the covers with it, and Evan guides Dan into the warm cave underneath the blankets. Evan follows and pushes Dan over onto his side, facing Jeff, so that Evan can spoon in behind him, nuzzling into Dan's neck.

Dan's vision adjusts to the dark enough to see that Jeff's eyes are open, watching him. He looks down a little, not that there's anything to see, but then Jeff's hand comes out and tilts his chin up, and Jeff leans over and kisses him gently. "Sleep tight, Dan," he whispers, and he closes his eyes.

Dan closes his eyes, too, and listens to the sounds of the other two breathing. He tries to relax, but it's still a long time before he drops off to sleep.

chapter 9

IT'S not easy to wiggle out of the bed the next morning without waking either man, but Dan manages. He didn't get a lot of sleep, but there's no way he's getting any more with the sun shining in through the window and Jeff softly snoring beside him, not to mention that Evan's body is radiating heat like a nuclear reactor. He manages to find his clothes without too much noise and gets dressed in the hallway. He's still without a vehicle, but when he sees Evan's keys on the kitchen counter, he decides to take a chance. If he just nips home for a shower and a change of clothes, he'll probably be back before Evan even knows he's gone. And if he isn't, he really doesn't think Evan will mind. He hopes.

He's on his way out the door, keys in his hand, when he hears Evan's sleepy voice. "Dude, you're gonna steal my car?"

Dan rolls his eyes a little. "Curses, you've caught me. This whole thing has been building up to me trying to get my hands on your piece-of-shit Cherokee."

Evan grins. "Give me two seconds to put some clothes on, I'll come with you."

"No, man, the babysitting idea is not a good one. Seriously."

"Dude, I'm not worried about you, I'm worried about my car. You don't seem to respect it for the fine piece of American craftsmanship that it is. Besides, if I'm not allowed to babysit you, then you're gonna want your own wheels out here. If I drive you in, you can drive your truck back out."

That actually makes sense. "Yeah, okay, then. Put some clothes on. If you're good, you can buy me breakfast."

Evan looks shocked and then checks his watch. "Oh, shit, we might be able to make it...." He stampedes up the stairs, yelling. "Jeff!

Wake up! Dan's taking us to Carla's for breakfast!"

Dan has no idea what's happening. He goes out to the porch and sits in one of the big wooden chairs, his feet up on the railing. It's still a bit cool out, and he can see the tracks where some animal or another has walked over the dew-dampened grass. If he's got to wait, he can think of worse places.

It's only a couple minutes before Jeff and Evan come tumbling out the door of the house, both looking rumpled but happy. Evan is practically bouncing. "This was a brilliant idea, Dan!"

"Yeah, thanks. What are we doing?"

"Dude, breakfast at Carla's! We're not usually awake early enough to beat the line up, but if you're gonna be all insomniacidal, we might as well get some benefit from it."

"Insomniacidal? Is that me killing you when you wake me up from a nap?"

"Dude, you have got to get rid of that hostility before we get to Carla's. If she senses negative energy, she won't let you in. Seriously. Blaine has never eaten there—she won't let him."

They're down the stairs and piling into Evan's car now, and Dan's beginning to get a bit worried from his spot in the back seat. They're pretty clearly all wearing the same clothes as the night before, none of them have showered.... He guesses there's no actual sign on their foreheads saying that they spent the night together, but everything short of that has been taken care of. "Uh, maybe you could drop me off at my place. I really should shower...."

Evan shakes his head and looks at Dan in the rear view mirror. "Nah, there's no time, and you look good."

"Yeah, uh...."

Jeff turns around then. "Dan, you've got to stop thinking that we're stupid."

That's a bit of a surprise. "What? I don't think you're stupid."

"Well, naïve, then, or unaware. We know what it looks like, and we don't care. Do you care what people think?"

"Uh, okay, not for me, no. But you guys—you've got friends and

family to worry about. There's Tat, if nothing else."

"Tat practically set us up!" Evan objects.

"Okay, well maybe you guys aren't naïve, but don't tell me *she* isn't. What if people bug her about it?"

"Dude, she's Tatiana Kaminski. She's used to people talking behind her back, and I don't think anyone's likely to say anything to her face." Evan glances back over his shoulder. "She might not seem it, but she's tough. And she'd beat the crap out of you if she knew you were using her as an excuse to not be seen with her big brother."

Dan doesn't have much more to say. He's got enough worries of his own; he can't take on everyone else's too. Or so he tells himself as he worries.

They pull up in front of the diner, and Evan almost jumps with excitement. "There's no line! This is excellent. Dan, you need to wake us up early every Saturday from now on."

Jeff is standing behind Evan, so Evan doesn't see him as he shakes his head pleadingly at Dan.

"Seriously, Evan, is the breakfast *that* good?"

"It really is, man! The other meals... really not that great." He looks around furtively as if to make sure that nobody heard that. "But the breakfasts are amazing."

Jeff nods in support this time, and the three of them head into the diner. They're greeted at the door by a tiny Asian woman in an old-style waitress uniform. She looks them over carefully, and then beams at them. "Welcome to breakfast, come on in." She reaches for menus, and then glances back. "Just three of you?" At their nods, she leads them to a booth by one of the front windows. Every other seat in the place, Dan notices, is taken, and the place is bustling with servers and kids and general pandemonium. He glances at his watch—it's not even eight o'clock yet.

Jeff sits in one side of the booth, and Evan slips into the other. Dan wonders how they'd react if he pulled up a chair and sat at the end, but Puppet-Chris tells him not to be petty, so he slides in next to Evan, since he's on the closer side. Evan grins happily, and Dan notices that neither he nor Jeff has bothered to look at the menu. Dan looks

inquiringly at Jeff. “Already know what you’re getting?”

Jeff nods, and Evan jumps in. “Breakfast special, man. All you need to know is how you want your eggs and what kind of toast. Everything else is taken care of.” Dan had been thinking waffles rather than eggs, but Evan seems pretty damn sure.

Their server, a middle-aged woman who fits every diner-waitress stereotype Dan can think of, bustles over with three cups of coffee. “Ready to order?”

Evan nods, and they all give their orders for the breakfast special. When the waitress leaves, there’s a not-altogether-comfortable silence. Without the passion of the night before or the frantic rush to get to the restaurant, they seem to be a little uneasy. Dan takes a moment to try to analyze their breakfast orders; they’d all gotten wheat toast, but ordered their eggs different ways. Is there some cosmic significance to Jeff’s “poached,” Evan’s “scrambled,” and Dan’s “over-hard with the yolks broke”? Maybe just that Evan and Dan are both grossed out by eating slimy things. Which makes Dan realize that Jeff hasn’t blown him yet, and that Dan hasn’t seen him use his mouth on Evan, either. That had better not be something missing from his repertoire, because just the thought of those eyes looking up at him, with his lips wrapped tight around....

Evan breaks into his thoughts with a giggle, and then turns to Dan. “Seriously, Dan, do you *ever* bottom? ’Cause you are the toppest son-of-a-bitch....” Jeff laughs, either at Evan’s words or Dan’s frantic attempts to shush him, and the tension is broken. It’s sort of reassuring to realize that Evan’s mind had wandered back to the same place Dan’s had. Roughly.

But Evan’s looking at him like he expects an answer. Dan glances around to be sure that everyone else is wrapped up in their own conversations and concerns. Then he shrugs and almost whispers, “Like I said, I do sometimes.” Then he thinks for a second, and has to admit, “But I’m not exactly laid-back about it.”

Jeff’s looking at him affectionately. “I bet you aren’t.”

They’re all a little startled when a white-blond head appears at the end of their table. It’s right at table height, so all that’s visible is the hair, but then the head tilts back and shows a jam-smeared face. Looks

like a little boy, but... Dan leans over a bit to check out the clothes. Jeans and a T-shirt with a truck on it. Not totally conclusive, but what is these days? The kid is watching him warily, but not going anywhere.

"Hi, buddy," Evan tries, but the kid has apparently fixated on Dan. Dan looks around for a parental figure, but doesn't see one. The kid shyly extends a closed fist in Dan's direction, and he extends his own hand in some trepidation. The kid obviously wants to give him something; Dan just hopes it's not partially chewed egg. He puts his hand out flat, and the kid opens his fingers. A tiny plastic horse falls onto Dan's palm. That's a little startling.

He picks the horse up with his other hand and shows it to Jeff and Evan, who both look interested. Dan pretends to inspect the horse carefully, then offers it back to the toddler, who takes it with a sudden smile that prompts an almost involuntary mirror on Dan's face. "Nice horse, little man." The child looks critically at the horse, then nods in agreement.

Another child appears now, a couple years older. Dan cranes his neck to see if he can find a source for this one, but he seems similarly independent. The newcomer looks at the younger child. "You're not supposed to bug people."

Evan jumps in. "No, it's fine, he wasn't bugging us. Just... visiting."

Apparently taking that as an invitation to do a little visiting himself, the older child smiles. "I'm Brian. He's Todd."

"It's nice to meet you both." Evan seems to be pretty genuine in this, and Dan wonders if the guy wants kids, or if he's still too young to even think about all that. All the possible complications.

Despite Evan's attention, Brian seems just as fascinated by Dan as his brother was, even ducking down a little to look at Dan's legs. Dan shoots a questioning look at his tablemates, but they both shrug in bemusement.

Dan decides to try the direct approach. "What's up, buddy?"

Brian grins in a friendly way. "You're not a horse."

Dan really doesn't know where this is going, but he shakes his head in solemn agreement. "Nope." Brian doesn't seem like he's going

to offer any more information, so Dan continues. “What made you think I might have been?”

Brian looks over to a table in the corner, and Dan decides that he’s found the source of the children, a woman in a flowered sun dress and a man in jeans and a T-shirt. They’re leaning over a little, talking to a couple at the table next to them. Brian says, “Mommy said you were a horse trainer, and then Daddy said it looked like you were the one who got rode hard last night.”

It takes Dan’s brain a bit to process that, and by the time he’s done his smile seems frozen on his face. Brian doesn’t seem to notice, though. “If you’re not a horse, what does that mean?”

Dan sits up a little, not leaning over to talk to the kid anymore. “You know what you should do? You should go over and ask your dad to explain that to you, buddy.” Brian gives him a questioning look, and Dan nods. “Yeah, off you go. And don’t forget to take Todd.”

The kids wander off, and Dan makes himself busy adding milk and sugar to his coffee. He doesn’t really think there’s anything he could say that would make the situation clearer to Jeff and Evan. If they don’t want to worry, that’s their choice.

When he’s done with his coffee, he looks up to find both of them looking at him. Evan starts. “Okay, the thing is, it’s a small town. People will talk for a while, and then they’ll get over it. Seriously, we would not be the weirdest thing around here, not by a long shot.”

Dan just nods and takes a drink of his coffee. He wishes the food would hurry up so he could get the damn meal over with and get the hell out of the restaurant.

Jeff takes a turn. “The same thing could have been said about a man and a woman having breakfast together.”

Dan nods again, and then the food arrives, like an answer to his prayer. He has to admit that the meal is pretty impressive, both in quantity and quality, but he’s having a bit of trouble enjoying it. He guesses that maybe he does care what people think; he’s not looking for anyone’s approval, but he wishes they would just mind their own business and leave him alone.

He cheers up a bit when he gets to the home fries. They’re cooked

just right, with some sort of seasoning that he's not familiar with but would definitely like to taste again. He looks up and sees both Evan and Jeff playing with their food. That's a shame, considering how excited Evan had been. "These potatoes are really good," he ventures, and Evan's head jerks around.

"Yeah, they're great, aren't they? I keep trying to get Carla to tell me what's in them, but she won't."

"Is Carla the one who greeted us?"

"Yeah. She pretty much just runs the door on weekends, but she's the one who came up with all the recipes. Save room for dessert too... it's excellent."

"There's dessert?" The original plate had three eggs, two pieces of toast, bacon, sausages, ham and home fries. Dessert seems a little excessive.

"Yeah, waffles." Evan nods happily. "I think dessert for breakfast is a brilliant idea. The way of the future, even."

"Good to know. I'll save some room." He eats a few more bites in silence. He realizes that he doesn't even know these guys well enough to know if they're normally silent over breakfast, or if they're being unusually quiet. From what he's seen of Evan at other times, he's betting it's unusual. "So, Jeff, are you gonna see your mom today? Or do gallery stuff?"

"Uh, a bit of both, hopefully. I need to go by the gallery for a few hours this afternoon, but actually... she was saying that she'd like to see the barn. She's the one who taught me to ride, you know—she's been a horsewoman all her life. So if you don't mind, I'd like to bring her out." He pauses a little awkwardly. "I can just introduce you as the trainer, we don't have to...."

"Sweet Jesus! With *your mom*? I would hope we wouldn't have to!" Dan's aware that he has some mother issues, knows that other people, Justin included, have developed the ability to relate to their moms as human beings as well as maternal figures, but... there's no way Dan is going to stand there while Jeff introduces him as the new member of her son's gay threesome. For once, Puppet-Chris is in full agreement.

Jeff laughs a little. "Okay, take it easy. Trainer it is, at least for now. Assuming you don't mind her visiting otherwise...."

"No, that's fine with me. Does she still ride?" Dan doesn't know if he wants to put some frail old lady on one of the eventers, but she could take Smokey for a spin, if Jeff wanted one of the others. Dan's never really seen Jeff ride, other than the quarter horses that one night in Kentucky, and he wouldn't mind having the chance.

"Yeah, just on the flat mostly now, though. But it'd be great if I could take her up to see the cross-country course."

"Smokey'd be good, or maybe Sunshine, if Tat's okay with it. I mean, *somebody's* gonna have to keep her in shape until Tat's back in the saddle." Dan glances at Evan. "But we should get on that buying some riding horses thing. Do you want me to start looking around? I think I know a guy—he moved out here somewhere a few years ago."

"Not Sean?" Evan asks.

"Uh, not for quarter horses, for sure... for eventers, maybe, but if we can find them ourselves, we'd save some money—he's got to be taking a cut, right?"

Evan nods in agreement. "Yeah, okay. And I forgot tell you; my lawyers FedExed the signed partnership stuff to Chris, so he's probably got it by now. As soon as he gets it to you and it's signed, we're good to go."

"Wow, okay. I'll call him later." Dan laughs a little. "I guess I should talk to him anyway—he must be getting tired of my nocturnal phone calls."

"Especially with the time difference," Jeff says wryly.

"Yeah, it sure doesn't help." Dan turns to Evan. "And you? Plans for the day? Are you ready to let Tat put you on a horse?"

Evan's smile is a little nervous. "I guess... but you're going to be there, right? She's got a bit of a mean streak sometimes."

"Yeah, Evan, I'll keep your fifteen-year-old sister from hurting you."

Evan grins. "And that means that I can hang out with you all day, right? Not as a babysitter, just...."

“Find a better word than ‘companion’, dude.” Dan frowns. “And, no, anyways. You should spend time with your friends, shouldn’t you?”

Evan just shrugs. “I’ll talk to them, maybe? If they behave themselves, can they come to the barn?”

“Okay, man, I haven’t signed the papers yet—it’s still your barn.”

“Yeah, but that makes it worse, because then I’m an employer, creating a hostile environment or whatever.”

Dan laughs a little. “Well, if I’m there, I’m gonna be riding anyway, so it’s not really a big deal who’s on the ground. But do you really want an audience for your first lesson?”

Evan shakes his head emphatically. “She can teach me this morning—they won’t be up until noon, likely.”

Their waitress comes back then, collecting the messy remains of their meals, and a moment later she’s back, carrying three plates of waffles piled high with whipped cream and fruit. Evan looks thrilled. Dan wonders a bit about the mechanics of being stupidly rich; does Evan have to deliberately deny himself things in order to enjoy getting them later?

There’s silence for a bit as they eat, but this time it feels more comfortable. That drops off pretty steeply when Dan looks up from his waffles to find that Brian and Todd have returned, this time with their father. The man looks a little nervous, a hand on each child’s shoulder, twisting a little in the fabric of their shirts. He’s looking not at Dan but at Evan.

“Uh, Mr. Kaminski, hi. I just wanted... I just wanted to apologize for my boys... anything they might have said earlier. If they gave you any offense, I apologize. I don’t know where they get this stuff from.”

Evan fixes the man with a steely glare. “You don’t know where they get it from? Really? ’Cause the way they were talking, it sounded like they got it from you.”

The man just stutters a little, and Dan is surprised by how long Evan lets it go on before he has mercy. “You probably want to watch what you say around them, don’t you think?”

The man nods a little frantically. “Yeah, you bet I will. Like I said, I’m really sorry.”

Evan nods. “No harm done, man. Have a good day.” And the man almost shoves his kids off their feet in his rush to get them out the door.

Dan looks at Evan in some consternation. “Jesus, man, are you Tony Soprano or something?”

Evan just shakes his head, but Jeff frowns. “He might as well be. What percentage of the jobs in this area are directly tied to you, Evan? And that means that pretty much *all* of them are indirectly connected. You may not actually order hits, but if you told someone to fire him....”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t!” Evan protests.

“But you could.” Jeff looks out the window at the family piling into their minivan. “Do you even recognize the guy? Does he work for you, or just work for one of your employees?”

Evan’s a bit sheepish. “I’m not sure. I think maybe he’s one of the teachers at the high school.”

“The high school? Maybe when you go in to visit your computer labs in the fall, you could look for him. Or when they finish construction on your new library....”

“Yeah, Jeff, thanks, I get it!” Evan sounds frustrated. “What do you want me to do, exactly? How is it my fault that the guy apologized for making an off-color remark?”

Jeff shakes his head sadly. “It’s not your fault, kid. It’s just... frustrating.”

“Yeah, for me too. I mean, I vote Democrat, or further left if I can find anyone, I give money to every social cause I can find, I offer so many scholarships that I should just build a damn university and be done with it... I bend over backward to support policies that help other people and hurt me... and then they turn around and vote for Proposition 8 and make ignorant comments in front of their kids. And you give me shit every time somebody notices that I have a lot of money.”

Dan isn’t a big fan of this dynamic. “The guy might not be homophobic. I mean, maybe he’s just a gossip, right? No harm, no foul.” He crams the last bit of waffle into his mouth. He’s totally stuffed, but it was really too good to waste. He picks up the bill from the edge of the table. “So are you paying, Mr. Moneybags?”

“Dude, it was your idea. I naturally assumed you’d—” Evan stops with a laugh when Jeff snatches the bill out of Dan’s hands.

“This one’s on me, boys.” Jeff grins at Dan. “I don’t mind contributing to the fatten-up-Dan campaign.”

“Jesus, I’m going to be never alone and fat—nice. Maybe you guys could apply yourselves to some slightly different goals....”

Jeff just smiles as he pulls a few bills out of his wallet and then starts shuffling out of the bench. “We can drop you at your place, Dan, and then go out to get my car at the farm?”

Evan and Dan both nod their agreement, and they all head out to the car. This time Jeff takes the back seat. Dan wonders how many other tiny equalities they’ll need to be aware of. The whole thing is pretty damn complicated. He turns around so he’s sitting sideways, so he can talk to both Jeff and Evan, and he takes the chance to really look at them. There’s Jeff, handsome and charming, a little world-weary but still kind and gentle. And Evan, strong and enthusiastic, trying so hard to be good and not let his power go to his head. Yeah, it’s a complicated relationship, and Dan’s a bit worried about the challenges they’re going to face. But more than that, he’s worried about what will happen if they don’t make it, because, despite his best intentions, he’s grown to really care about both of these men, and he doesn’t like to think of his life without them in it.

chapter 10

DAN showers and gets dressed, and then climbs into the truck for the trip to the barn. When he gets there, Robyn is already tacking up Winston. She gives him a bit of a smirk, and he's really not sure if he wants to know why.

His curiosity gets the better of him, though, and he frowns at her a little as he says, "What?"

She makes an odd face as she slips the bit into Winston's mouth. "You were at The Fireside last night, huh?"

"What? For about one drink, yeah."

"Until Evan came and swept you off your feet?" Robyn asks gleefully.

"Who told you that? I mean...." He doesn't really know where to go with this.

Robyn looks tickled. "Dude, don't worry about it—the man's gorgeous and loaded and sweet. He's a hell of a catch! I mean...." She looks a little pensive. "I sort of thought you were getting along with Jeff pretty well, but Evan's great too. Are they just... *totally* open about all this?"

Dan stares at her. "Seriously, though... how do you know I left with Evan? And what makes you think it was anything other than... friendly?"

Robyn laughs so loud that Winston's ears go back, and she soothes him with a pat on his neck. "My friend Candace was sitting next to you. She told me that my boss had come in and had a steamy conversation with a gorgeous guy and they left together—I just asked enough questions to find out if it was you. I'm telling you, Dan, there's no escape. My spies are everywhere."

“Yeah, great.” Robyn leads Winston outside then, and Dan isn’t exactly sorry to see her go. He usually doesn’t mind her gossip, sometimes enjoys it... but it’s a bit different when it’s about him. Especially when he’s the subject for the second time that day. He tries to put it out of his mind as he goes and gets Monty’s halter and lead rope. Maybe the big guy will be challenging enough to keep Dan’s brain busy.

Monty hasn’t been out in the field for long, and Dan knows he won’t want to come in, so he grabs a few apples on his way out. Bribes are always useful. Sure enough, as soon as Monty sees Dan he turns his rump and looks like he’s going to take off. Dan doesn’t really think Monty would kick him, but the turned quarters are a warning that he can’t afford to ignore. If he didn’t have the apples, he’d have to go through the boring procedure of circling around at a distance to approach Monty’s head, only to have Monty turn again and start the whole circling procedure over. But Dan *does* have the apples. He’s still stuffed from breakfast, but he forces himself to take a big bite of one of them, then chews it loudly, with his mouth open so the smell of the juice travels to the recalcitrant horse.

Monty’s head swivel is almost comic, it’s so predictable. “Oh, you like me now, do you?” Dan asks as the gelding turns and starts toward him. “Well, that’s just too bad. You had your chance, big boy, I’ve moved on.” Dan turns and walks away, taking another bite from the apple. He doesn’t turn to look, but he can almost feel Monty following him. He tries to imagine it in his mind, sees how fast the big horse could turn, then how quickly he’d walk after Dan—or, more accurately, after the apple—and when he thinks that Monty must be almost to him he breaks into a jog and glances over his shoulder to see that Monty *was* almost there and is now trotting after him. Dan likes this kind of game better than the flat out race he’d had with Sunshine; the horses still generally win, but at least he can make it a challenge.

Dan waits until Monty is almost to him again and then dodges, runs left a couple steps and then turns left again so he’s running back in the direction he just came from. Monty wheels to follow, but he’s not as quick to turn as Dan is, and as soon as the horse gets close, Dan dodges again. Dan’s played this game with Smokey, and the little cow horse had really shown his breeding, twisting and turning and anticipating Dan’s moves like the man was an errant calf; Monty’s a bit slower,

mentally and physically. Dan dodges a few more times and then comes to a sudden stop, stepping aside just in time to keep Monty from charging into him. There's no point in being an ass about it. The high-class eventer just isn't quite as good as Dan's horse, obviously.

"Hey, Monty, hi. I didn't know you wanted anything! Oh, the apple? *This* apple?" Dan takes another bite as Monty stretches his handsome face toward him. He gives Monty what's left of the apple as he pulls the halter over his head, and then gives him another. "See? It's fun to get caught in the field. You should always come when people want you." Dan's probably fed the gelding a couple bushels of apples trying to teach him this with no luck so far, so he doesn't really expect the lesson to take this time; but it still makes Dan feel a bit better about his silliness if he pretends that it was training, not just playing. He pulls gently on the lead rope, and Monty follows placidly. Once he's caught, he generally behaves himself.

When Dan gets to the barn, Tat and Evan are waiting for him. Evan smiles at him warmly. "Seems like every time I come down here, you're playing with horses. Do you ever actually ride them?"

"You here for your lesson? Why don't you get tacked up, and we'll see who's a rider and who isn't."

Evan makes a scared face. "Okay, you win, I'm not a rider." Then he looks at Tat. "But let's get tacked up anyway. Jeff's bringing his mom out this morning, and it might be nice if I got done making a fool of myself before she showed up. She already thinks I'm an idiot."

Dan shoots Evan a cautious look. "Really? Is she a hard ass?"

Tat scoffs. "Momma Stevens? She's the sweetest lady ever! She always brings me a present. She has a friend who makes jewelry—she says he's just a friend but I think he's her boyfriend—and she brings me earrings or a bracelet or—" Tat pulls at her necklace, bringing a simple polished stone pendant from beneath her shirt. "She gave me this! Isn't it beautiful?"

Dan nods, but he's really thinking about how beautiful Tat is, getting excited about a polished rock when she could probably coat her entire body in diamonds if she asked Evan nicely. "So, what's wrong, Evan? Did she not bring you any jewelry?"

"The way she treats me, if she brought me a present it would

probably be toy soldiers or Legos or something. Seriously, you'll see. I wonder what she thinks it says about her son that he'd get involved with an immature moron like me." Evan seems to remember that Tat's listening, and pulls himself together. "She is really sweet with Tat; I'll give her that."

Dan grins at him. "Tat, can you grab Smokey's halter and a lead rope from the tack room?" She nods and heads off, and as soon as she's turned around Dan steps toward Evan and pushes him into an open stall, just out of sight. He shoves the taller man up against the wall and presses into him. "I bet Momma Stevens thinks Jeff's after your fine, tight ass," he murmurs, letting his hands take a tight grip on the anatomy in question.

Evan grins back and cups Dan's head, pulling his face up for a quick but deep kiss. "Old lady's got a good eye, I'll give her that."

And then Dan pulls away and steps back out into the aisle. He was okay taking a *chance* of Tat catching them, but he doesn't want to make it a sure thing. Evan follows him casually, and they're both standing by Monty's head when Tat returns.

"So, Evan, Smokey's got good manners. He shouldn't give you any trouble, but you should be the one holding him in case he jerks his head or something." Dan peers closely at Tat. "Hey, are you still all drugged up? Or do broken collarbones hurt less than I remember?"

Tat scowls. "I think 'drugged up' is a bit strong." She smiles. "But I am working with a little chemical assistance, yes!"

Dan looks at Evan, who shrugs. "The doctor gave us twenty pills and said she could use them for as long as they lasted. She's still got a few left." He turns to Tat. "After that, you're gonna be lucky if you get baby aspirin, though, so you might want to save a few in case you have a bad day." He looks back at Dan. "I'm keeping track, and I've got a separate stash of ones for her to take at night so she can sleep."

Dan raises his hands. "I didn't mean to question your drug management, man. I just wondered if you wanted to take lessons from her when she's stoned."

Evan gives her a critical look, then turns back to Dan. "I think stoned might be better—I'm hoping she'll be mellow."

If Tat's maniacal laughter is to be trusted, Evan's hopes are in vain, but Dan doesn't interfere. Smokey will take care of them. He works on getting Monty ready, and by the time Tat and Evan are back from the paddock, Dan's ready to go. "I'm gonna work on dressage with Monty, so as soon as you've got Smokey tacked up, you can bring him out to the sand ring and we can share the space, okay?" Tat nods. "And use his western saddle, at least for today." He turns to Evan. "It's a different feel, but it's more secure—there's a lot more to hold on to."

Evan nods. "That sounds good." He looks like he's trying to psych himself up, and Dan almost wants to stay and watch more of nervous-Evan. But Monty is getting impatient, so he heads out to the ring.

By the time Smokey and his friends make it outside, Monty is warmed up and Dan is working on his collected trot. It's always a struggle. It's a pretty basic skill, and Monty knows exactly what Dan wants, and he's totally capable, but he would really rather be jumping or galloping or anything, damn it, where he can stretch out and be crazy. But dressage scores can make the difference between being a competitor and being a winner, and Dan wants Monty to be a winner. Justin would expect nothing less.

He gives Monty a break when Tat has Evan lead Smokey over to the mounting block. She's got the stirrups a little short for real western riding, but Dan doesn't worry about it. Evan will probably switch over to English soon enough, so there's no need to get his legs used to stretching. She instructs Evan to check the girth and runs her own fingers underneath it to be sure, and Dan smiles. She's just as conscientious as he'd thought she'd be.

Evan probably doesn't need the mounting block, but it doesn't hurt to use it; it's easier on the horses' backs, if nothing else. Tat walks him through the mounting procedures, and then Evan gives it a try, looking surprised to find himself on Smokey's back. Dan gives him a round of applause, and Monty starts to prance, probably assuming that the ovation is for him.

Evan doesn't look entirely comfortable, and he's a bit too big for Smokey, but it's good to see him on a horse. Dan and Justin had spent a lot of time together with their horses, and Dan loves that Jeff knows the animals; it'll be great if Evan develops an enthusiasm, so that it's

something that Dan can share with both of his... and he stops. He'd just been thinking "both of his lovers." Just casual, every day... both of his lovers. He shakes his head. Apparently his subconscious mind is charging ahead with this thing. Dan tries to consult Puppet-Chris, but the bastard isn't at home. Just then Dan's phone rings, and the call display shows that it's real Chris. That's a little creepy.

Monty seems content to walk around and watch the drama at the other end of the ring, and Tat's doing a great job with Evan, so Dan answers the phone.

"Hey, Chris. I'm on a horse, so if I have to hang up, I'll call you back when I can."

"Yeah? Who're you riding?"

"Monty."

"That arrogant son-of-a-bitch. Tell him you're talking to the Queen about finally getting him the knighthood he deserves, and he'll be good as gold."

"Yeah, okay, Chris, I'll tell that to the horse." Dan pauses. "Hey, did you know that 'knight' in French is *chevalier*, and 'horse' is *cheval*? So if he was a *French* knight, he'd be Chevalier Cheval."

"Okay, well, that's what I called to find out. So, I guess I'll talk to you later."

"Dude, you're the one who brought it up. You should be impressed with my knowledge of a foreign language."

"Yeah, two words. I'm stunned."

"Also, 'knight' in Spanish is *caballero*, and 'horse' is *caballo*."

"So he'd be Caballero Caballo?"

"You see? Talking to me is fun *and* educational."

"Yeah, you've convinced me. This conversation is so much fun that I think we should continue it in person."

"Huh?"

"What, aren't you going to tell me how to say 'in person' in Swahili?"

"Are you saying 'in person' in Californian?"

“Yeah, maybe. I was gonna FedEx this contract back—it looks fine, by the way—but I thought I might as well bring it out myself.”

“Are you going to FedEx yourself? ’Cause they *say* that they take extra care with live animals, but I’m not really sure they do.”

“Nah, I thought I might fly passenger. Let the contract breathe a little.”

“Huh. When?”

“Well... this afternoon, maybe? Then we could go out tonight and hang out tomorrow, and I could deal with the lawyer stuff Monday morning and still be back in time to catch up on work here Monday night.”

“Shit, really? That’d be great. I mean, things are a bit upside down out here, but... yeah, it’d be nice to have my own contribution to the chaos, actually. Did I tell you that I moved out of the guest house, though? So you could have the couch at the apartment, or I could whore myself out and you could have the bed at the apartment.... That might be fun for me, at least. Or I guess you could have one of the bedrooms at the guest house, but it’s been designated as ground zero for most of the whoring, so I don’t know if you want that.”

“You have a designated ground zero? This is some very organized whoring you’ve got going on.”

“The logistics of a threesome are a little insane, my friend.”

There’s a pause, and then Chris sounds a bit more serious. “So you’re really doing it? It’s going okay?”

“Yeah, it’s... it’s good, mostly. I mean, it’s weird, but... it was gonna be weird with anyone other than Justin, probably. Right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Dan can almost picture Chris shaking his head. “Okay, I’m way too sober to talk about your feelings. It’s good if I come out?”

“Absolutely, that’d be great. Give me a call when you have your flight information, and I’ll pick you up. There’s airports in San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland—although I have no idea where Oakland is, to be honest, but I could find it.”

“Yeah, you’d probably find the airport and not be able to find

your way back home. We could end up in Mexico.”

“Well, that could be a good weekend too....”

“Yeah, fair enough. I’ll call you when I have a flight. Assuming I can get something today.”

“If I don’t answer, leave a message. I want to get at least a few horses ridden, so I might not be able to pick up.”

“All right. Talk to you later.”

Dan clicks his phone shut and looks down to where Tat is helping Evan to steer. Smokey’s helpfulness is almost a problem, Dan thinks, because he’s guessing what Evan wants, even when Evan gives him the wrong signals. But Tat seems to be on top of things. Dan nudges Monty forward, and they trot down to stop next to Smokey.

“Looking good, Evan. You know, John Wayne was a big guy, and he rode quarter horses.”

“Yeah? Did his little sister lead him around like he was on a pony at the fair?”

“I don’t remember seeing that on film, but, hey, maybe.” Dan holds his phone up. “Chris just called. He’s coming out for a visit, gonna try to get a flight for this afternoon. So, you know, in case the weekend wasn’t mental enough....”

“That’s great, though, man. He can check up on you, make sure that we’re feeding you enough....” Evan looks at Dan a little critically. “Maybe you should wear a heavier sweater or something.”

“I *told* you he doesn’t eat right!” Tat exclaims. “You can make him eat Tia’s lunches, can’t you, Evan?”

“I’ll work on it.” He turns his attention back to Dan. “Do you want him to stay at the guest house?”

Well, the pros and cons of that are a bit awkward to discuss in front of Tat. “I don’t know, whatever. He’s slept on my couch lots of times in Kentucky; he can do it here too.”

Tat doesn’t like the sound of that. “But if the guest house is just sitting there empty... he should use it!”

Dan gives Evan a look, but just nods. “Well, I appreciate the offer. Maybe we’ll just see how the evening shakes out.”

“We should have a barbecue, though, right, Evan? Your friends are here, and Momma Stevens, and now Dan’s friend....”

“Yeah, a barbecue would be good, if you’re up for it, Dan. How long is Chris staying? Are you okay with sharing him?”

“Uh... he was talking about going back Monday, but nothing’s really set yet. He’s got to get a flight.” Just then Dan’s phone rings, and he looks apologetically at Tat and Evan, who gesture for him to answer. He picks up. “Hey, man, what’d you find?”

“I’m on my way to the airport now. The flight leaves in two hours, going to San Francisco... I get in at 4:57, your time. Delta flight 743.”

“Okay, excellent. Delta 743, five o’clock.”

“Four fifty-seven.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll be there. I’ll park off site; just give me a call when you’re off the plane, and I’ll start working my way in to the terminal.”

“Cool. I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah, excellent. Bye.” Dan clicks his phone shut. That happened fast. Dan feels a little off balance, but it’ll be good to see Chris again. Good to compare the performance of Puppet-Chris with the real thing. Dan bets real Chris can hold his liquor better, if nothing else.

He gets back to work on Monty, and Evan and Tat continue with their lesson. There’s a rousing game of “red light, green light” in which Tat is almost run over three times, saved only by Smokey’s good manners. Then Evan manages a perfect stop, and they apparently decide to end on an up note. Monty is still fighting, so Dan can’t take the same easy out, and he’s still working as Tat and Evan head into the barn.

He’s dimly aware of a car moving into the parking lot, but Monty’s almost giving in, and Dan’s too focused on that to pay attention to any arrivals. It’s only when Monty finally agrees, letting his head fall into frame, relaxing his back, swinging along like he’s relaxed and happy, that Dan looks up and notices Jeff and an older woman standing by the railing, watching. Dan takes Monty down to a walk and then back to a collected trot a few times, just to reinforce the lesson,

and then he lets him walk and cool off. He heads over to the audience, not sure of their reactions. It might just look like he doesn't even know how to ask a horse to trot....

But Jeff and his mother are both smiling when he arrives. "He finally gave in, didn't he?" the woman asks. "He certainly made you work for it!"

Dan nods. "He almost always does."

"The best ones are rarely the easy ones, are they?" She reaches over the railing to run an admiring hand over Monty's well-muscled neck. "He's beautiful." She looks up at Dan. "And I'm Anna. I'm the one who failed to teach Jeff how to introduce people."

Jeff rolls his eyes. "You taught me not to interrupt people, as I recall, and you haven't stopped talking since he got here! Mom, this is Dan. Dan, this is my mother. I could try to introduce a little anecdote to get you two chatting, but I'm a little late on that, I'd say."

Anna smiles at him. "You know how I am about horses, dear. Once I get started...."

"Speaking of getting started, do you want to ride up the hill and see the cross-country course? Dan said we could borrow his quarter horse, and I can probably handle one of the eventers."

Dan grins. "I'm sure you can. You can take Monty, if you want. He needs to cool off anyway. And Evan just took Smokey in, so it won't take long to throw his tack back on him."

Jeff and his mother both look at Monty with interest. "You don't mind one of us riding him?" Anna asks.

Dan had really been thinking that Jeff would be riding Monty, but he can't exactly tell the woman that she's too old, and she doesn't look too frail.... "Uh, I'd want you to wear a helmet—he's not afraid of anything, but he likes to pretend sometimes, play-spooking."

Anna beams at her son. "You can get a helmet for me when you go inside to get your horse, can't you, Jeff?"

Jeff looks as if he'd like to argue. "I thought maybe *I* could ride Monty...."

"You can ride him any time." She glances apologetically at Dan.

“Well, anytime Dan lets you.” Her expression becomes a little sly. “Maybe you could figure out some way to talk him into it.” The suggestiveness is clear, and Dan is a little boggled. He knows he isn’t obviously gay, not stereotypically effeminate or flamboyant, so if Jeff’s mother is suggesting what she seems to be suggesting, does that mean that Jeff has talked to her about Dan? Dan thought he and Jeff had agreed to *not* discuss that with her, but he guesses that she’s Jeff’s mom; if he can handle it, Dan will just have to find a way.

Jeff just rolls his eyes. “Fine, I’ll go get Smokey.” He looks at his mother. “And the ugliest, most uncomfortable helmet I can find.”

Jeff has just started for the barn when Evan and Tat appear in the doorway. “Hi, Momma Stevens!” Tat yells. “Do you want Smokey?”

“Jeff does!” Anna calls back. “But could you bring me a helmet, sweetheart?”

Tat and Evan both disappear inside the barn, only to return a moment later, Evan leading Smokey, now with an English saddle, and Tat carrying a helmet. Dan swings off Monty and looks at Anna. She’s tall, but not as tall as Dan, so he shortens the stirrups by a few holes on each side. He checks the girth, and by then Tat is there, collecting a hug from Anna in exchange for the helmet she’s brought. She hands a helmet to Jeff, too, who puts it on without protest; there’s too much proof of the dangers of riding right there in their little circle for him to deny the importance of protection.

Anna smiles at Evan. “Jeff says you’re learning to ride, too, Evan. Isn’t that sweet?” Dan tries to keep a straight face, but it isn’t easy. Anna *had* sounded like she was talking to a toddler. He wonders what Evan’s done to deserve her opinion of him and hopes that he manages to avoid making the same mistake.

Jeff and Anna are soon mounted up and riding out on the path to the cross-country course, and Dan heads back inside. He’s still got several hours before he needs to get cleaned up and drive to the airport. The rest of the weekend seems likely to be a write-off, so he’d like to make the best use of the time he has. Tat and Evan come with him, and they’re almost to the barn when Dan hears a shout from the roadway and sees Blaine, Monica, and Amanda strolling toward the barn. Great. If there was ever an antithesis to using time well, those three are it.

He raises his hand in greeting and then says to Evan and Tat, “I’m gonna go get another horse ready. I’ll see you guys later.” If he’s lucky, maybe they’ll all go back to the house. But he’s got a sneaking feeling that he’s not going to be that lucky.

chapter 11

JUST as Dan had feared, the three visitors soon troop into the barn. Tat seems to be enjoying their company, but Evan looks a little worried, and Dan smiles, hoping to reassure him. As soon as Evan grins back, Dan busies himself with brushing Tulip; the sooner he can get out of the barn, the better. Unfortunately, he seems to be the only one with that goal. Blaine's the first to try to distract him.

"Hey, Dan, good to see you, man." It sounds like they're old friends who've been cruelly separated for years.

"Uh, yeah. Hi." Dan ducks around to Tulip's other side and practically runs into Amanda.

"Dan, hey!"

He almost yelps. "Whoa! Hi. Uh...." He looks around a little wildly. Okay, there's only one more. Where is she?

He runs his eyes over Tulip—he's only done a quick brushing, but.... He ducks back over to Blaine's side and grabs the saddle. Time to get this show on the road.

"He's a really beautiful horse, Dan." Blaine pets the horse's neck and looks like he's trying hard to be sincere. Too bad he's an idiot.

"She's a mare, dude," Dan corrects, and Blaine bends over to look.

"Huh. Well, still beautiful. Right?"

"You bet." Dan pulls the saddle pad up a little, then slides the saddle into place on Tulip's back. He goes around to the off side to attach the girth, and Amanda's still there.

"So, Dan, we were thinking about going out for lunch. You could pick the place...." Amanda's smile is almost seductive.

“Uh, I don’t really eat out that much. I’m sure Evan knows somewhere good.” The girth is attached, and he moves back around to the other side to tighten it. Evan is standing off to the side, apparently monitoring the situation. Dan frowns at him, and Evan shrugs his shoulders apologetically. He’s apparently given pretty clear orders to his friends to be nice; how can he go back and tell them to be a little less nice now?

“But where would *you* like to go?” Okay, now *Blaine’s* almost seductive. That’s... nasty.

“Uh, I don’t know. But I’m eating lunch here, so... it doesn’t really matter. Ask Evan.” Girth done up, time for the bridle. Almost done, thank God.

But then, holy shit, Monica’s there. She’s so little, she’d been just around the corner, part way into one of the stalls, but now she’s out, and her smile isn’t seductive, it’s... sweet. Damn it. “We haven’t really gotten a chance to talk much, Dan.” She looks a little sad, but she’s not overdoing it. “It would be great to get to know you.”

Dan backs away a little. “Yeah, uh... well, I’m at work right now, so this isn’t a good time for me.” There, that’ll help. If he can’t dislike her as Evan’s ex, he can at least call up a little class resentment to help him resist. Have any of these people ever had a damn job?

Monica looks a little taken aback, but Amanda jumps in. “Okay, excellent. You’re going to *eat* lunch, right?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess....”

Monica turns to Evan. “Let’s go get takeout. We can bring it back here and have a picnic!” Tat smiles enthusiastically. Great. If Tat’s behind the plan, Dan might as well give up.

“Well, I’ve got a lunch I brought, but obviously you guys can eat here....” He decides to try one last effort. “But the smell of horseshit isn’t all that appetizing for most people. There’s a couple spots up on the cross-country course with great views. Maybe you should head up there.”

“Meh, we can eat with a view anytime,” Blaine decides. “This is our chance to eat with Evan’s new”—and he breaks off with an incredibly awkward look in Tat’s direction before finishing with—

“friend.” The words aren’t all that incriminating, but Blaine’s reaction is far from subtle.

Shit. Evan told these idiots but didn’t tell Tat? Judging by the look on her face, she’s come to the same realization and is torn between being happy that she got what she wanted with Evan and Dan and upset that Evan hadn’t bothered to tell her. Dan can understand that. Judging by Evan’s face, he can too. He looks a little torn himself, but he seems to be wanting to simultaneously talk to Tat and kill Blaine.

Dan decides to jump in. He can’t mess things up any worse than Blaine, surely. “Tat, did you get a chance to look at any of those books I left for you?” When in doubt, evade the issue; that’s Dan’s motto.

She looks a bit surprised by the topic change. “Uh, not yet, really....”

“That’s too bad. Tulip’s got a little bump here on her neck, I thought you might be able to diagnose it.”

If Tat’s ears could move, they would be perking forward. She scurries around to where Dan is standing and runs her fingers along the spot on Tulip’s neck. “Oh, wow, I feel it! Is it serious? Will she be okay?”

Dan grins. “Get a bit more information first. Does it seem sore? Press pretty hard, watch her ears and body for a reaction....” Tat does. “Did she seem to react?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Okay, good, I don’t think so, either. So, not sore. Feel it a bit, see if it’s hard or soft, if it moves around....”

“Moves around?!” Tat’s hand jerks back in alarm. “Is it something *alive*?” Evan has drawn a little closer, whether in genuine interest or just an attempt to be near Tat, and he makes a disgusted face as well.

Dan tries to hold back his laughter. “No, I doubt it. But some things are anchored to the spots they formed, others... they move around a bit.”

“Yikes.” Tat returns her fingers gingerly to the lump and follows Dan’s instructions. “Okay, It’s... pretty hard, seems like it’s all the same texture all through it... and it’s not moving, thankfully! So, is it

serious?”

Dan shakes his head. “I doubt it. I think it’s just a bug bite. But we need to keep an eye on it, just in case. And if you only rode one horse and were the only one riding her, you could just keep track in your head. But who knows the next time you’ll be in a position to check on this, right? So....”

“Her binder! Do *I* get to make the note?”

“You’ve got all the same information I have, so why not?”

Tat scampers happily to the tack room to get the binder, and Evan smiles gratefully at Dan. “Thanks, dude.” Then he turns to Blaine. “Seriously, man, could you possibly try thinking before you speak? Like, ever?”

“Shit, Evan, I’m so sorry. I just... you know I’m crap with secrets! You should never tell me anything.”

“No, I really try not to. But sometimes you dig your way into things that are none of your goddamn business and you won’t let it rest. Sound familiar?” Evan sounds genuinely angry, and Dan almost feels sorry for Blaine. Almost. Evan doesn’t seem interested in forgiving him, although he does stop glaring once he sees Tat returning with Tulip’s binder.

Tat looks tentatively at Dan, and he nods at her. “Go ahead. Just note down what you observed, make sure you date it. It’s that easy. If I’m not here and you think it’s something important, leave me a note on the chalkboard, but otherwise, you’re done.” She looks pleased with her new responsibility, so Dan continues. “And once you’re back in the saddle, you should start making training notes as well. If I’m not here, you can read my notes to see what you should be working on and then put your own notes in to say how it went. Okay?”

“Really? I can do all that?”

“Dude, it’s about time you started pulling your weight in this partnership, right?” Dan smiles to make it clear that he’s teasing, and she smiles back.

“All right, partner.”

Tat hops up on a stack of hay bales and starts writing, and Dan reaches for the bridle. Maybe he can capitalize on Blaine’s mistake, get

rid of the three of them while they're still feeling awkward and guilty. "I'm actually going to be taking a lot of the weekend off, so I want to get some riding in while I can. I'll probably just eat something as I go. Why don't you guys head into town and find somewhere nice to eat? Maybe Tat has a favorite place." Most of this was said to the crowd in general, but the last was sent straight to Blaine. Hopefully he still feels like he needs to make something up to her.

To his credit, Blaine takes the hint. "Yeah, Brat, what do you say? Has your injury put you off your food, or do you want me to buy you lunch?"

Tat looks from Evan to Blaine, and then back. "Can we go to Zio's?" As soon as Evan nods, Tat's beaming. She turns to Dan. "Are you sure you don't want to come? You liked Zio's, right?"

Dan thinks back to his last meal at Zio's with Tat, when she had been so rude to Ryan. It seems like forever ago. "Yeah, I like it, but I want to get some stuff done around here before Chris comes."

Tat nods her acquiescence before returning to her binder. Evan looks like he's looking forward to the lunch about as much as Dan would have been. Dan isn't sure how to feel about that; the LA Three aren't exactly Dan's favorite people, but Amanda was right when she'd pointed out that Evan doesn't have a lot of friends, so Dan doesn't really want him to be angry at the ones he *does* have....

He decides it isn't really his problem. Evan's a big boy, and he hasn't asked for Dan's help. Which is good, because Dan really can't think of anything intelligent to do, and bumbling around with his usual lack of interpersonal skills probably wouldn't help anyone at all. He'll just stick to horses, at least if these people will let him.

"Uh, I'm just gonna go ride now, so... excuse me...."

Amanda steps aside somewhat reluctantly, and Blaine gives in on his side. Dan pulls the reins over Tulip's head and leads her to the jumping ring. She's still young, and he doesn't want to push her, so it'll just be low obstacles for her. She's one of those horses who just loves jumping, though, so he doesn't really think he needs to worry about souring her or pushing her too hard. He's turned her out in the jump ring a few times and she's jumped all on her own, just for fun. Another horse with a lot of potential. Reading over the partnership contract, Dan

had seen the price Evan had paid the Archers for the string of horses. He agrees with them that it was a good price and almost certainly more than they would have gotten if they had tried to sell at auction, but he also thinks Evan got a good deal, because damn it, these are some damn fine horses, most of them with potential that an average buyer wouldn't be able to see. Dan still can't believe that he's been given a chance to actually own them, even partly.

He warms Tulip up on the flat and remembers that this is where she might have some trouble. She's a lot like Monty: too proud, too full of herself to accept her rider's guidance. Dan has to admit that he kind of loves that about her.

He takes her over some trotting poles, but she's still fighting him, still wanting to do things her way. He thinks he might have to scrap the jumping plans for the day. There's no point in doing it if it's just going to teach her bad habits. He notices that Smokey and Monty are back, their riders sitting on them and watching Dan's struggles. He rides over to say hello and maybe to share a little frustration.

Anna is the first to speak. Dan hasn't known her long, but he's willing to bet that's the usual order of things with her. "Beautiful mover, isn't she? Lots of muscle, too, for a Thoroughbred."

Dan remembers just how much he likes this horse. "Yeah, she's pretty great. Super-athletic, obviously." He smiles ruefully. "Lots of energy, maybe a bit stubborn...."

Anna laughs. "You just need to get her tired out. That was my strategy with Jeff, when he was a youngster. Whenever he stopped listening to me, or wouldn't use his common sense, I'd set him to moving things or digging holes or... anything, really, just to wear off some of that rebellion." She smiles fondly at her son, who looks like he'd like to dig another hole just about now, big enough to crawl into and hide. "And look how well he turned out."

Dan grins. "Yeah, he's as calm as Smokey, there, isn't he? You're right, that would probably work." He looks at his watch. It's past noon, and he was hoping to ride at least one other horse, and lunge one of the colts....

Anna jumps in again. "I can do it, if you want. There's a lovely hill on the way up to the course. I could take her up and down that fifty

times, see if her attitude improves.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t ask, as I recall. Really, I’d be happy to do it. Jeff needs to go in and be the artist-in-residence at the gallery, and I was just going to get dropped off at his house. I’d be bored and probably entertain myself by snooping through his things, so, really, you’d be doing both of us—everyone—a favor if you kept me occupied.”

Dan looks at Jeff, who shrugs helplessly at him. “She’s right, really. If you’re not comfortable with it, don’t worry, but if you are... it’d be great. You could drop her off at my place when you go home, or she can just stay here and knock around the barn until I get back to pick her up. Or, hell, she could borrow one of Evan’s cars and drive herself around.”

Monty is standing calmly, happy as a clam with the strange rider on his back, and that’s a pretty good sign that Anna knows what she’s doing. Monty isn’t the sort of horse to be patient with inexperienced riders. “Well, yeah, if you don’t mind... that’d be really helpful.” He remembers that Jeff is a bit out of the loop. “Chris is coming out—I’m picking him up at the airport at five. Evan was talking about a barbecue—or maybe just Tat was, I’m not sure.” He turns to Anna. “But I could drop you off at Jeff’s on the way to the airport, if that works for you.” She nods, and he continues. “Do you want to just swap horses? I can take Monty in.”

“Oooh, I like this, having my horses taken care of for me when all I do is ride. I feel like a lady of leisure!”

“See if you still feel that way when she’s ripping your arms out of their sockets.” Dan catches himself. “I mean, she won’t do that, but she does tend to pull....”

Anna swings down from Monty’s back and nods. “She’s off-the-track?”

“Yeah... I’ve gotten her used to lighter contact, but she still wants to balance off the bit if you let her. I ride her with a lot of seat, not too much hands or leg, but she will yield once she gets in the right mindset.”

“So, if I trot her a bit, walk her up and down the hill, trot her a bit,

then back to the hill?”

“Sounds perfect, yeah. If she gets wound up, drop contact almost entirely and just slow her down with your seat.”

Anna nods confidently. “Okay, great.” She smiles at Jeff. “I might just have to visit more often, if I get to do all this fun training down here.”

“Well, you know I’d love that, Mom.”

Her smile turns a little wicked. “Yeah, it didn’t seem to cramp your style too much last night... stumbling in this morning looking all worn out....”

Jeff and Dan are very careful to *not* look at each other, but that seems like just as clear of a signal to Anna as if they had, and she chuckles gleefully to herself as she ducks under the fence and takes Tulip’s reins from Dan. He ducks under in the opposite direction and is glad to have an excuse to turn his blushing face away from the older woman’s observant eyes. Jeff looks like he’s more or less used to this level of invasiveness.

Anna springs up onto Tulip’s back like someone half her age, and Dan thinks that the woman actually *looks* a little younger than she had when he’d first seen her. Apparently riding agrees with her. She takes a moment to get organized as Tulip prances around like she’s walking through a room of snakes, and then Dan leads Monty down and opens the gate for Tulip and Anna to head up to the hill. Anna salutes smartly as she passes through, and Dan smiles in return. Jeff’s mom is excellent.

He decides not to bother getting on Monty’s back to go back to the barn; he rides so much, it’s nice to just stretch his legs sometimes. And Monty is being a gentleman for a change, happy to walk along beside Dan. When they get back to Jeff, he swings down off Smokey so he and Dan are at the same level.

“Your mom’s great, man.”

Jeff nods. “Yeah, she really is. I got lucky.”

Dan thinks of his own mother. She’d been sick for so long, it’s hard to remember what she was like before all that. But he can remember her standing by, silent while his stepfather had called him a

fag, said that he wasn't going to have a cocksucker living in his house.... Dan really can't imagine Anna doing that. Or being stupid enough to marry the asshole in the first place.

Jeff notices his thoughtfulness. "Thinking about *your* mom?" he asks.

"Yeah, I guess." Dan shoots a quick look at Jeff. "Makes me wonder where I got my great taste in men."

Jeff smiles at the compliment. "My mom might make you wonder where I got my laid-back attitude."

"Yeah, good point. I guess sometimes the fruit *does* fall a bit away from the tree."

"Or runs away from it."

They head back into the barn and untack the horses together. There's no sign of any Kaminskis or their guests, which is lovely, and Robyn and Sara are just going upstairs for lunch. That leaves Dan alone in the barn with Jeff, and that's a situation that definitely gives Dan ideas.

He checks that Monty and Smokey are both securely crosstied before moving up behind Jeff and wrapping his arms around his chest, nuzzling his chin over the other man's shoulder. Jeff brings one of his hands up to hold onto Dan's and leans back a little, letting Dan take some of his weight. It feels good, but Dan can't leave it like that for long, and he twists his head, brings his mouth to Jeff's neck. He kisses a little, sucks a little, nips... and he can feel Jeff chuckle as he brings his other hand up to pull Dan's head away. Dan resists, but then he figures out that Jeff is turning his own head, bringing their mouths together, and the angle isn't great for Dan's neck, but his cock likes its location, rubbing up against Jeff's tight ass. He grinds in, just a bit, just enough to give Jeff the idea.

"Shit, Dan, you're as hard to tire out as that damn horse." But Jeff doesn't really sound like he's complaining, and he twists his own torso a little, letting their mouths line up better without changing the position of their hips.

Dan smiles into Jeff's mouth, and then brings his tongue into it, running a hand down from Jeff's chest to reach in under his shirt and

run up over his warm skin. Dan's hand lingers, tangling in the hair it finds, pulling just a little as he starts a gentle rolling with his hips and brings his other hand down to sneak under Jeff's waistband. But Jeff catches that hand, holds it flat against his stomach, and won't let Dan go any further.

"We could put the horses out, take a quick trip to the hay shed..." Dan suggests.

"That's tempting, believe me, but I want more than a quick trip with you, man."

Dan shrugs. "A quickie now, more later... God knows when, but..." Dan turns them both so they're facing each other, ruts his hardness up against Jeff, and they both inhale sharply. "Sometime soon, definitely. But in the meantime, come on, man." He doesn't want to beg, but he does want to get off, preferably not alone.

Jeff loosens his grip on Dan's hand just slightly, and Dan takes it as an invitation, wriggling loose and working his way inside Jeff's pants, twisting his arm a bit until he can get a good grip on Jeff's rapidly hardening cock. "Just my hand, man? Is that all you want? You don't want my mouth? Are you sure?" Dan sucks softly on Jeff's tongue, feels the man's hips jerk in reaction, and smiles. "Yeah, you want it. Come on, man; the horses are fine, nobody's around—come here." He pulls Jeff gently backward, shuffles a few steps until they're inside a stall, out of sight of anyone who might wander into the barn aisle, and he's undoing Jeff's fly as he drops to his knees. Jeff just leans back against the wall and lets it happen. One of his hands goes to Dan's head, while the other is spread out along the wall of the stall, fingers gripping in as if trying to find something to hold onto.

Jeff's totally hard now, leaking, and Dan gives a quick little suck on the head, just a taste, and then runs his tongue down the side of Jeff's cock. He nuzzles into Jeff's balls, gives each one a lick and a little suck, and brings one of his hands up to work them gently as he returns his mouth to the shaft. He wraps his lips around the head and gives it some intense attention, and it isn't long before Jeff's hips are jerking involuntarily. Dan pulls him in deep then, sucking him down, feeling the head of Jeff's cock hit the back of his throat and then slip down further. Dan works hard and fast, bobbing his head, lips sucked tight and tongue never still, and soon Jeff is gasping softly, his fingers

tightening against Dan's scalp and then releasing as he moans and spasms into Dan's mouth.

Dan sucks him dry and then slides up his body until their mouths meet, Dan's hard and demanding, Jeff's soft and relaxed. Dan thinks back to his earlier concern about Jeff and his cocksucking tendencies and decides that this is the best time to find out if they're going to have a problem. He guesses that he's in no position to complain, not as long as he's refusing to bottom, but he'd at least like to know so he can start working on ways to get used to the disappointment. He kisses Jeff once more before drawing back, looking at Jeff and making it clear that the next move is his.

Jeff smiles lazily, and then—praise Jesus—he shifts around, pressing Dan back against the wall as he drops down. Dan's so relieved he almost doesn't care if Jeff blows him right then and there, he's just happy to know that it's going to happen eventually, and then Jeff's got Dan's pants unzipped and is mouthing at his cock through his underwear, and Dan changes his mind; it is absolutely imperative that Dan be inside Jeff's mouth immediately. He moans a little and brings a hand down, trying to help Jeff understand that things will work better if the underwear isn't involved, but Jeff catches his hand and gently but firmly presses it back against the wall.

"Slow down, Dan, it's my turn now." Jeff's rumble is sexy enough to have Dan's hips jerking even without any contact.

"Yeah, okay, but... fuck, man, hurry up, please..."

Jeff just laughs and runs a hand along Dan's shaft, still through the fabric. "You've got to learn that there's more speeds than a gallop, cowboy. And normally I'd be all for the patented Stevens 'wear 'em out' approach, but given the situation... I'm just gonna have to trust in your self-discipline."

Dan shakes his head. "I don't have any. And, seriously—don't talk about your mother any more."

Jeff's smile has a dangerous edge. "If you don't have *self*-discipline, you'll have to get used to *my* discipline... and that's another thing that's better suited to a different environment. So for now, it's my way or you're on your own." His hand has been doing interesting things this whole time, rubbing the underwear fabric up against the skin

of Dan's cock in a very stimulating way, and Dan really doesn't think he could imitate it very effectively by himself. He leans his head back and pushes his hips forward in wordless surrender, and Dan can feel the curve of Jeff's smile as he returns his lips to Dan's cock. Smug bastard.

He can't deny that it feels good, all the things that Jeff's doing, but he wants more. He wants to come, damn it. He got hard before Jeff, and now he's still hard after Jeff's come... how is that fair? He resolves that next time he'll make Jeff get him off before he repays the favor and then realizes that Jeff probably *wants* that; if Dan waits for Jeff to start things up, they'll probably end up with some crazy day-long make-out session, no orgasms in sight. Jesus. Jeff's a bastard.

Finally, Jeff brings Dan's underwear down a bit, but even with that, he's still not really getting to work. He's looking at Dan's dick like he's never seen one before or like it asked him a weighty philosophical question that he needs to think about. He leans in and gives the head a gentle lick, and that's something, at least, but then his mouth is on Dan's stomach, for fuck's sake, mouthing around his goddamn bellybutton like it's got the answer to whatever question his dick had asked, and Dan's hands are itching to grab Jeff's head and redirect him back to the proper area, but he has a pretty good idea that Jeff would consider that a violation of his stupid fucking rules, and Dan is not going to go through all of this and *not* get a chance to feel those smug fucking lips curl around him....

He slams both hands back against the wall. "Jesus Christ, Jeff, you fucking son-of-a-whore, just do it, you bastard, you cockteasing fucker, just do it...."

And Jeff's lips are pulling away from Dan's stomach, even, and that's just not right, and Jeff looks up at him with a warm smile. "You're drawling, Tex."

Dan's brain can't figure that out. "I'm what?"

"You're drawling. I've never heard your Texas before." Jeff gives the head of Dan's cock a congratulatory suck, and Dan's hips shoot forward into Jeff's restraining arm.

"Fuck, man, suck my dick and I'll sing the Yellow Rose of goddamn Texas for you, I swear. Just do it, Jeff, come on." Jeff does seem to like Dan's voice, keeping his mouth on his cock now, although

he's still not doing a hell of a lot with it. Dan can't decide if Jeff gives terrible head or is just a total bastard, but if talking keeps his mouth in roughly the right place, Dan will talk. "Come on, man, it's gonna feel so good. Suck me down, Jeff, let me see what you've got." Dan just hopes he isn't already seeing what Jeff's got. But there's a little flicker of tongue that sends shivers up his spine, and he gets the idea that Jeff is probably just a total bastard. "That felt good, man, more of that would be excellent. Just in case you were looking for feedback, you know." Dan really isn't a talker. He's okay on giving instructions, but just babbling? Not really his thing. But even a tiny pause in his talking has got Jeff backing off, and the bastard is back to kissing *around* Dan's dick, which really isn't the goddamn idea here.

"Holy shit, Jeff, please, I'm begging you, don't be like that...." Jeff's laughing, but his mouth goes back to Dan's cock—slow still, but Dan keeps up the string of almost unintelligible talk, and Jeff keeps working. He licks, he sucks gently, he works his way about halfway down and then off again, but at least this time he stays in the right area, running both lips down the side of Dan's cock and nuzzling into his balls, then bringing his hand into it, one hand working Dan's balls and the other slipping around the back, running a finger up the crease of Dan's ass. Dan doesn't care, barely notices, because now Jeff's mouth is wrapped around him tight, and he's still moving slow but he's going almost all the way down, going until Dan can feel his dick hit the back of Jeff's throat, feel Jeff gag a little each time but keep going, and it's perfect, and Dan can feel his orgasm building, fucking finally, hot and tingling at the base of his spine. Then, inconceivably, Jeff's mouth comes off and he's standing up, leaning up against Dan and kissing his mouth.

Dan won't even kiss back, just says, "You're not quite done down there, you bastard," and Jeff smiles at him.

"You stopped talking, Tex."

"I stopped...? You son-of-a-bitch, you want me to talk?" Dan puts his hands on Jeff's shoulders and pushes him down. "Oh, I'll talk, you fucking bastard. I'll tell you what a smug asshole you are, you teasing fuck." Jeff's mouth is right there, now, his lips kissing the tip of Dan's cock, but that's not enough, and Jeff looks up at him.

"No, we already did that. Now I want you to say nice things." The

words should sound stupid, like a little kid, but somehow Jeff's voice is enough to make them sexy.

"Nice things? What the fuck, Jeff, what do you want to hear?" Even Dan can hear the desperation in his voice.

Jeff kisses Dan's cock again, and smiles. "You can think of something."

"Something *nice*?" Dan's at a goddamn loss. One of his hands wanders almost instinctively to his cock; it would be much better to come in Jeff's mouth, but....

Jeff pushes his hand away. "Tell me something that you like about me."

"Something I like about you." Dan rests his head against the wall. He's being cockteased by a sixteen-year-old girl. But he really, really wants to come, so... here goes. "I like your voice. I like the way you look at me sometimes, like there's a secret or something, like only you and me understand what's really going on." This seems to be the right idea, because Jeff is sucking him down again, taking him deep, and it's still slow, but it's hot and good, and Dan isn't going to last long, but that's good, because then he can stop fucking talking. He's gasping for breath as he tries to keep going. "I like... oh, fuck, man, I like it when you do that. Yeah, shit, just like that. I like that. I fucking *love* that. And I like... I like how, even when you laugh at me, you don't make me feel stupid. And when I get all wrapped up in shit, you're there to... oh, fuck, Jeff, yeah, just like that... oh yeah...." And finally, finally, Dan's coming, and it feels like he's been storing up the intensity. It almost hurts he comes so hard, and Jeff's right there for it, sucking him hard and fast now, working out every last drop of pleasure, and then gently releasing Dan's cock and rising to his feet to kiss him.

Dan's still out of it; doesn't even realize he's being kissed for several seconds, and once he does realize, he has some trouble remembering how to move his lips in order to kiss back. Once Dan's eyes are back on line, he sees that Jeff is looking at him fondly but also a bit smugly. Jeff runs a hand gently along the side of Dan's face. "Wasn't that a nice change?" he asks.

"Pretty damned inefficient, if you ask me." Dan is still fighting for a bit of dignity. "And you—you talked about your mother while you

were blowing me. That's... that's so uncool."

Jeff just laughs and kisses Dan silent. Monty peers into the stall, and Dan and Jeff both get a bit self-conscious, tucking themselves back in and doing up their pants. Monty doesn't look too concerned one way or another.

"We should get the horses turned out. And aren't you supposed to be going in to the gallery?" Dan's brain is working again. He's not sure if he should be happy or sad about that.

Jeff frowns a little. "Yeah, I guess so. And then Chris will be here—where's he staying?"

"I don't know—wherever we pass out, probably."

"Yeah, okay. So... you'll drop my mother off at my place?" They've got the horses on lead ropes now and are headed out to the paddocks.

"Wait a second, man; what did you tell her? About me, or us, or whatever?"

"Nothing, really... but she's practically psychic." Jeff grins. "Have a fun drive into town."

"Dude, I'm just gonna be working her, trying to get secrets about you."

"Yeah, and she'll be working you right back... and I'm sorry to say it, man, but you are out-fucking-classed on this one. She's gonna eat you alive. I only wish I could be there to see it."

Dan can't deny that Jeff's probably right. They turn their charges out into their paddock and wait to see Smokey trot over to each horse in happy greeting while Monty regally surveys them all, and then they both start grazing. Dan and Jeff stand there and watch them for a minute, then turn and head back to the barn together.

Dan wants to get another horse ready so he can make a quick escape if The Annoyers come back from lunch, but he's strangely reluctant to leave Jeff. And Jeff has somewhere to be, should be impatient to be getting to his show, to talk to people about his art, but he's hanging around too, looking at Dan almost shyly.

Dan takes a look around and then pulls Jeff in for a quick, hard

kiss. “Okay, man, get out of here. Go be an artist. I’ll tell Evan to give you a call about whatever’s going on tonight, all right?”

Jeff nods and heads for the door. He stops when he gets there and then raises a hand and waves before continuing out to his car. Dan walks after him to the doorway, and he stands there and watches him drive away.

chapter 12

THE LA Three return with the Kaminskis just as Dan is leading Kip out to the ring. He waves politely but doesn't even think about hanging around and talking to them. When Evan comes out the ring, Dan rides over.

"So, how was lunch?"

Evan holds up a brown paper bag. "Brought you a sample."

Dan's hand shoots out almost automatically. "Panini?" he guesses hopefully.

"I'm not stupid, man. And you're not exactly subtle." He hands the bag up and watches in amusement as Dan rips it open and pulls out the wax-paper-wrapped contents. Dan takes a big bite of the still-warm sandwich and feels his eyes rolling back again. Goddamn, that is good food. He's torn between wanting to demolish the sandwich and trying to savor every bite.

"You know, man, twenty minutes ago Jeff was my favorite, but now... you are!"

"Love the one you're with, is that your motto?" Evan seems amused by Dan's fickle nature.

"It's one of my mottos, sure."

"And what did Jeff give you that made you happy with him?"

"Blowjob," Dan says around a mouthful. He's aware that this is sort of a weird situation, talking to one partner about sex with the other partner, but he doesn't want to start hiding stuff, so, what the hell, why not be totally open? Better to be straightforwardly awkward than secretly awkward. That can be another one of his mottos.

Evan looks a little surprised. "Here at the barn?"

Dan nods. “In one of the stalls. Pretty hot, really. If you’re jealous, we can visit the hay shed later....” He smiles devilishly as he takes another bite of his panini.

“Shit, man.” Evan looks a little pained. “I told Tat I’d go to the house with her. Her collarbone’s starting to hurt.”

Dan nods seriously. “That is such a good excuse that I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Raincheck, man. Seriously, I’ll even write it down—give you a coupon, good for one super-duper blowjob. Some conditions may apply.”

“Dude, you still owe me one from last night.”

“I don’t remember anything like that. Let me see the coupon.”

Evan laughs. “There’s no coupon. Damn it, I’m getting things written down from now on.”

Dan shakes his head. “A businessman like yourself, you’d think you’d know these things.”

“Well, I’m self-taught, you know. I didn’t actually go to business school.”

“Maybe it’s not too late. You could still go back, maybe.... Do you think you could get in?”

Evan shakes his head as he laughs. “Damn, give you a blowjob and a sandwich and you are just full of beans.” He frowns. “And, honestly, I know you like the paninis, but Jeff must be off his game if that’s all it takes to beat him.”

“Well, I’m kinda a ‘what have you done for me lately’ kind of guy, so, you know... blowjob then vs. sandwich now, sandwich wins. If you lined them up next to each other and I had to choose... that’d be a closer race.” He thinks for a second. “Although, the way the bastard dragged it out, I probably could have chosen the blowjob and I would have needed the panini to snack on halfway through, ’cause we’d have run right over a couple meal times.” Evan laughs as if this is a familiar trick with Jeff. Great. Kip is starting to get restless, so Dan lets him move off, calling over his shoulder, “I told Jeff you’d call him if you were going to do something tonight.”

“Yeah, we want to barbecue—is that good for you and Chris?” Evan raises his voice a little to be heard.

Dan circle Kip back around. "I haven't talked to him, but probably. He likes food. Did you kiss and make up with Blaine?"

Evan looks a bit discouraged. "It's hard to stay mad at the guy. But it's also hard to put up with him, you know?"

Dan nods thoughtfully. "Yes, I think I'm in tune with that sentiment... the second part, at least."

"Yeah, I know. So, you and Chris can come by straight from the airport, get here six-ish? We can make up rooms in the house for you if you want to crash here, or obviously the guest house is available... although I don't think any of us went back to clean up today...."

Dan tries to think back. "Other than the bedroom, I don't think it'd be too bad. Thanks for the invitations. Is it cool if we play it by ear?"

Evan nods. "Yeah, absolutely. And now that Blaine's big mouth has let the cat out of the bag with Tat, it wouldn't be a big deal if you wanted to stay with me. You know you like that bed...."

"I don't know, man. Have you talked to her about it?"

Evan shakes his head. "I haven't really had a chance yet. What do you think I should say?"

"I don't know. About the relationship itself, or about why you told Blaine and didn't tell her?"

"Either. Both."

"She's your sister, man, I'm sure you know better than I do, but you could say that it's all really new, and you don't know where it's going, so you didn't tell her, and you only told Blaine because he saw something and made an ass out of himself. It's a pretty good story, I'd say. And it's got the added advantage of being true, so... that's handy."

"It's just crazy enough to work." Kip is dancing now, so Evan waves a hand. "Okay, go deal with the beast. I'll see you guys tonight, six-ish, unless you call."

Dan nods and gets down to business. He's got Kip worked, cooled, and untacked when he sees Anna coming back from the hill. Tulip is sweaty but not lathered, and she's moving in a relaxed way, not quite as coiled as Dan would like to see her in the dressage ring, but

certainly much more controlled and unresisting than she had been earlier. He raises an arm and points Anna toward the jumping ring, then jogs Kip out to his paddock before going over to meet Anna.

“She looks great!” he starts. “Good job. Do you want to take her over a couple low jumps?”

Anna nods emphatically. “God, I was hoping you would ask. I know it’s within your rights to kick me off and do it yourself, but... I’d really love to!”

Dan laughs. “No, you did the work, you deserve the fun.” There are jumps set up from when he had been planning to work the mare, so he just gestures. “I was going to try her over those crosspoles with the trotting poles in front. She’s free-jumped a lot, just on her own without prompting, even, and I’ve taken her over crosspoles a couple times before, but she generally gets worked up and I have to stop. It’ll be interesting to see how she does when she’s all tired out.”

Anna brings Tulip to a trot and circles her a few times, making sure that she’s responsive and balanced, and then brings her to the jump. Tulip hops over as if it’s nothing and canters only a few strides before coming back to a trot. Anna looks over for feedback, and Dan applauds. “Excellent. Let’s see if you can get a few more nice calm jumps out of her, and then we’ll give her a break.”

Tulip is good as gold for the next three jumps, and Dan thumps her enthusiastically on the neck when she’s done. Before he’s thought about it, he’s given Anna’s leg a congratulatory slap as well. It’s what he would have done with any of the other riders, but his face heats up as he realizes that this isn’t one of the riders, it’s Jeff’s mother. But she doesn’t seem to mind, just smiles at him tiredly as she slides to the ground.

“That was a lot of fun, but I’m not in the shape I used to be.”

Dan feels contrite. “Oh, damn, I’m so sorry. I should have thought...”

“Thought what? That I’m too old and stupid to know my own limits?” She sounds a bit testy, but then she smiles. “It’s been the best day I’ve had in a long time, Dan. Please don’t apologize for it.”

“Okay, yeah. Great.” He smiles back. “I don’t suppose you’re

looking for a job? You're still in pretty good shape, or even if you just work part time...."

She shoots him a quick look. "Don't tease me, Dan."

Dan realizes that he probably should have checked with Jeff before encouraging his mother to move closer to him, but he hadn't really thought she'd consider it. "Well, I'm sure you've got a life up in Seattle... but if you lived here, absolutely we'd have work for you. We've got lots of enthusiasm on staff, but we're a little light on experience, and we're thinking of buying some more horses, so we're definitely going to be needing to hire."

She gives him a long look, as if gauging his sincerity, and then her smile is bright enough that Dan thinks scientists should find a way to harness it. She's actually a little choked up when she speaks. "Thank you so much, Dan." She takes a moment to compose herself, and then seems to think that an explanation is called for. "You have no idea what it's like to get old and feel useless. I keep myself busy, but everything I do is just for myself, you know? Nobody else really seems to need me."

Dan isn't good with emotional women, but this seems like a situation that calls for a hug. He approaches cautiously, and decides to go for a one-arm version, just giving her shoulder a squeeze, but she turns into it, wrapping both her arms around his chest and squeezing surprisingly tightly. It's quick, thankfully, with her moving away before he's even got the presence of mind to bring his other arm into play, and then she's smiling a little embarrassedly and turning her face away.

"Well, I'd better get her taken care of. She's pretty warm to be standing around like this."

Dan nods and falls in beside her as she begins to walk. "Our hot-walker is still in some sort of installation limbo. We could go over and look at it, but the electrician hasn't got it hooked up yet."

"Oh, that's all right. I never really trust those machines anyway. I can take care of her."

Dan checks his watch. He's a bit off schedule (and he doesn't want to think about how he spent his extra time, not with Jeff's mother right next to him), so he decides to leave the lunging for another day. That means it's just taking care of Tulip and then off to the airport to get Chris. He's really looking forward to seeing the guy, but he's

beginning to be a bit apprehensive about the mix of people. Maybe the barbecue isn't a good idea; maybe it would be better if everyone just went to their corners and played with their own friends.

Dan realizes that for all their talk about keeping things quiet, everyone at the barbecue tonight is going to have at least some knowledge about the new relationship. That should make things... incredibly uncomfortable. He wonders how tacky it would be if he and Chris just went and got drunk at a bar somewhere. He wonders if he *cares* how tacky it would be, 'cause it sounds like a brilliant plan.

While Dan's been lost in his thoughts, Anna has apparently been thinking too. "It's been really nice to have met you, Dan. Jeff's talked about you, of course, since long before he met you. He was so happy about that kiss at Rolex! Well, we all were, I suppose. Anyone who cares about a gay athlete was happy to see one who didn't feel he had to hide."

That's a surprising turn for the conversation to take, but Dan tries to go with it. "I don't think.... Justin wasn't really a 'make a statement' kind of guy. He was just happy, you know?"

Anna smiles sadly. "That's what made it so beautiful—it wasn't political, it was personal. We were there, you know, Jeff and I. He took me as a birthday present. It was a lovely day." Her smile brightens a little. "So that's two days that I've spent near you, and they've both been lovely! You must be a good luck charm."

Dan just shakes his head. "This day's not over yet. There's still the damn barbecue."

She looks at him oddly. "Are you a vegetarian, or something?"

"No...." He laughs a little. He can't really explain why he's uncomfortable without opening up a conversation about himself and her son, and he'd really rather not do that. "I'm just a little done with Evan's friends. They're a bit...."

"Protective?" Anna suggests, smiling kindly. "Evan's a sweet boy—you can't really blame them for wanting to look after him."

"Evan's a grown-ass man," Dan retorts, with a little more heat than he'd intended. He tries to moderate his tone. "I wouldn't be interested in him if he was a boy." And Dan's been so busy worrying

about his tone that he's forgotten about the damn content. Shit. He just admitted to Jeff's mother that he was interested in her son's lover. He cuts his eyes over tentatively, and the woman is smiling in a quietly satisfied way. No, not smiling... smirking! Dan remembers how Jeff had said that he was going to be outclassed in the information-seeking game. He'd known that was true, but he hadn't realized quite *how* true.

Anna lets him off the hook. Either that or she's just playing with him before reeling him in. "I suppose he has grown up a lot since I first knew him." They're at the barn now, and Anna feels Tulip's chest. "She's still wet, but not hot."

"I'll grab her halter; we can untack her out here and hose her down. We've got warm water, so it should be fine." Dan goes inside and grabs the halter and a lead rope. He's glad for the break.

When he returns, Anna already has Tulip's saddle off, and Dan throws the lead rope around the horse's neck before taking her bridle off and replacing it with the halter. Then he hands the lead to Anna in exchange for the saddle. "The wash rack is over there," he says, gesturing, and Anna obediently heads in that direction while Dan carries the tack indoors.

When he gets back outside, Anna already has Tulip's halter clipped to the wash rack, but she's waiting for Dan before going any further. "If she's off the track, I suppose she's fine with being washed?"

"Yeah, no problems. Do you want to man the hose, and I'll do the sponge and bucket?"

"I make no promises about my aim." And she looks a little gleeful about that too. Dan wonders if he's about to get soaked, but he gamely grabs the bucket anyway, filling it with water before handing the hose to Anna. He goes to Tulip's head and runs the sponge over her face, and she leans into him, clearly enjoying the sensations. Anna has started the hose, spraying the concrete pad first, and then running up Tulip's legs. Dan appreciates the cautious approach; horses are flighty animals, so even if Tulip has never had a problem with being sprayed, it just makes sense to work up to it.

They work in companionable silence. Once Dan has washed Tulip's face, he grabs a different sponge and gives a little attention to her tail-area. She probably wouldn't mind being sprayed there, but... it

just seems a little rude. Not that the sponge isn't, Dan guesses.

Then he takes the sweat scraper and works along behind Anna, sending the water off in splashing sheets. There's something very satisfying about using a sweat scraper.

He hears the water turn off, and Anna reappears from the far side of the horse. "Is that good?"

"Yeah, it's great. She likes to drink from the hose. If you just put it on a pretty gentle setting, you could let her play with that while I finish up with the scraper?"

Anna follows Dan's suggestion, and he hears her delighted laughter soon after. He looks up just in time to get a spray from the hose. Anna is trying to look surprised. Technically the nozzle *is* being held in Tulip's mouth, but Dan can see Anna's hand supporting the hose on the far side of the horse's face, and the woman's face is far too innocent for her to actually *be* innocent.

Dan just shakes his head. "And you think *Evan* is immature...."

"Honey, at my age, being called 'mature' is no longer a compliment." She reclaims the hose from Tulip's mouth and starts coiling it up while Dan finishes off with the scraper. He checks his watch again.

"It's still warm out, and there's no wind. She can just go in the paddock to dry." He runs a hand over her legs, sweeping the water away from the places he can't use the scraper. "Would it be okay with you if we stopped at my place on the way to Jeff's? I just need a quick shower and some fresh clothes. We're supposed to go to the barbecue straight from the airport, and I really don't feel like facing the Three while I smell like horse." He casts a mock frown at Anna. "*Damp* horse."

"Oh, Tulip must have been trying to clean you up! How thoughtful of you, sweetheart." She pats Tulip's neck. "But, you're right, she didn't do an excellent job, so I'd be happy to snoop around your house while you get cleaned up."

Dan just laughs. "The place is clean, lady. Snoop all you want."

She pouts a little as she backs Tulip out of the wash rack and starts leading her toward the field. "Well, what's the use in snooping if

there's nothing to find?" She tuts a little. "That's very disappointing."

"Sorry. If you want to wait in the car a couple minutes, I could try to plant something...."

"Oh, what a gentleman you are! I appreciate the thought. But I guess I can just... read?"

Dan shrugs. "Actually, most of my books are over at Tat's for her to read while she's recovering. But, honestly, I'll be quick. Less than five minutes, guaranteed."

Anna gives him a look up and down. "All this and low maintenance too?"

"Hey! Don't objectify me!" Dan pretends to be bashful and hide behind Tulip. He really likes Jeff's mom; he's not even too worried about her asking about him and Jeff. Hell, he almost hopes she does, just so he has someone to talk to about it. Well, he'll be able to talk to Chris, but Chris doesn't really know Jeff, and his perspective can be a bit... odd sometimes.

They turn Tulip out and head back to the barn, and Anna watches with interest as Dan leaves a few notes on the chalkboard. As they're walking out to the car, she asks, "So, how did you get trained for all this? Did you go to school, or...?"

"Nah, no school. I'm not... I'm not much of student. I never really got trained. I just picked stuff up as I went." He looks around a little furtively. "Probably everyone else here has had more actual training than I have. I've never even taken lessons, except for trainers yelling at me to stop ruining their horses."

Anna nods and smiles. "That's pretty impressive, then, isn't it? To be self-taught and still have trained a Rolex winner?"

Dan shrugs uncomfortably. "I was on the paper as Willow's trainer, but... that was a family effort. Justin's parents owned her, and they always had lots to say about her training. *Lots* to say. And Justin... you know, he was working with other horses, but he spent a lot of time with her too. I think I learned a lot more from that experience than I knew going in." They pause for a second as they climb into Dan's truck, and they're quiet for a bit longer as they pull away. Dan's thinking about *everything* he'd learned after taking Willow to Rolex.

“We got hate mail. To Justin, mostly, but sometimes to me too.” He looks over at Anna’s confused face. “After the kiss. I’m glad that it was good for you, and Jeff, but... Justin was young and gorgeous and well-spoken and American.... He should have been rolling in offers, but he hardly got any endorsements. He had an agent before Rolex, for handling endorsement contracts, or whatever... and after Rolex, he quit. He said if Justin was going to shoot himself in the foot, there was no point in wasting everyone’s time.”

Anna shakes her head. “I didn’t know that. It...” She sighs. “It’s an ugly world, sometimes, isn’t it?”

Dan doesn’t really have anything to say to that. She’s right, it is. “And then, after... after the accident. I got a bunch more letters. Most were really nice, you know? But there were some—quite a few, really—that said that it was a punishment. That having Justin fall at the exact same event where he’d kissed me.... They said that was a clear message and God was punishing him for being gay.” He shakes his head. “Well, they didn’t say anything quite as polite as ‘gay’.” Dan’s never told anyone this before. He doesn’t really know why he’s saying it now.

“That’s....” Anna seems to be at a loss for words. “I mean, obviously you know that’s total horseshit, but it must have still hurt to have somebody say it.”

Dan laughs a little uncomfortably. “Yeah, something like that.” He has no idea why he brought this up, and he thinks he’d better get the hell off the topic before he has trouble driving. “So, did you used to work with horses?”

Anna copes with the change of subject smoothly. “I’ve ridden all my life, but, no, I’ve never been paid for it.” She looks over at Dan. “I was a high school principal, actually.”

Dan thinks back frantically. He’d said he wasn’t much of a student, but he hadn’t said anything too bad about school itself, had he? “I didn’t know that. I, uh... I had some pretty nice principals, I think....”

“Some? How many schools did you go to?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Quite a few.” He shrugs a little. “I moved around a lot.”

“Well, that can certainly make it difficult to care about school.”

That’s a bit more understanding than Dan was expecting from someone who’d devoted her professional life to education. Nice. “So did Jeff go to the high school you worked at?”

Anna laughs as she shakes her head. “I think he was mortified enough just to be attending school in the same district where I worked. The same school would not have been a good plan.”

“I don’t know, you could have shared your rebellion-management system with the teachers, really helped them out....”

“Oh, I shared the plan, believe me. I was always quite active in his education, to the discomfort of him *and* his teachers.”

Dan nods. “Yeah, I’ll bet. So did he go to college or anything? Or just start working with horses?”

Anna frowns at him a little. “Do you two not talk at all?” Dan is a bit embarrassed, but Anna just continues. “He went to U Dub—The University of Washington—for Fine Arts. But he needed a job when he graduated, and the horses were easy.”

“And it took him this long to get back to the art? I mean, I knew the show was a big deal for him, but I didn’t know it was *that* big.” Dan is a bit ashamed. He should have known, should have taken the trouble to find out.

They’re at the apartment now, and Dan is suddenly shy. From the way Jeff acts, Dan had thought that Jeff came from a similar background to his own. He hadn’t been embarrassed about working-class Anna seeing his dingy apartment, but Principal Stevens might not be too impressed. But she’s getting out of the truck, and it’s too late. “Uh, it’s just temporary.... I haven’t been out here long.”

“I thought Jeff said you were staying in the Kaminski guest house?”

“Uh, yeah, I started there, but it was a bit... close. You know?”

She nods. “You need a little independence. I can understand that. I think Jeff feels the same way, sometimes.”

They head up the stairs, and if Anna is surprised when they get inside, there’s no visible sign of it.

“So, uh, I don’t have much to offer in terms of hospitality; there’s water or beer or... bourbon....”

Anna’s eyes literally light up. “Oh my God, a beer would be perfect.” She’s heading toward the kitchen as she speaks. “Can I get you one?”

“Oh, no, I’m good. I’m just gonna go hop in the shower.”

She nods and pulls the fridge open. “Okay. Five minutes, now—I’m timing you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He heads off to the shower. He’s not quite sure how he managed to get to this point in his life, stripping down while there’s a female high school principal drinking beer in his living room, but he doesn’t really have time to worry about it. He has no doubt that she really is timing him. He steps into the shower before the water’s even hot and lathers up. He doesn’t want to disappoint Jeff’s mom.

chapter 13

DAN is showered and dressed in four minutes. He's not exactly dry, but he's dressed. He heads back out to the living room and finds Anna sitting on the couch with her beer. There's a book beside her on the sofa, looking like she'd just set it down, and Dan comes a little closer. Sweet Jesus. It's *Conditioning the Equine Athlete*, the book he and Justin had defaced with their suggestions for things they'd like to do to each other.

Judging by the look on her face, Anna has gotten that far in the book. Dan wishes that the apartment was in a high-rise building so that he'd have a chance of dying if he threw himself out the window.

Anna looks up and sees his cherry-red face, and she giggles a little. "Oops. It was on top of the box."

Dan looks in the directions she'd gestured and remembers putting the book there. He'd been being careful, sorting it from his other books to make sure he didn't accidentally send it to Tat. "Shit. I'm sorry."

Anna shakes her head. "No, really, I'm sorry." Her apology would be more compelling if she could stop giggling. Although her obvious amusement makes Dan's own apology fairly unnecessary as well.

He shakes his head. "Better you than Tat, I guess."

Anna stops giggling and breaks into a full-fledged laugh. "Absolutely! You wouldn't want to build up her expectations, make her think that the men in her future life are likely to be that... creative."

Dan snorts a little. "A lot of it was mostly theoretical..."

Anna holds up her hand. "No, don't disillusion me!" She gets a crafty look on her face. "Low maintenance, punctual"—she gestures to her watch—"and adventurous." She waves her hand at the book. "Jeff's a lucky man."

Dan groans. “No, please don’t mention your son while you’re sitting next to that book.”

“What, Jeff doesn’t deserve to benefit from your... imagination?”

Dan’s hands fly to his ears. “I’m not having this conversation with you.” He’s tempted to start the “Lalala I can’t hear you” routine, but he refrains. For now, at least.

Anna stands up, and Dan thinks she’s relented, but then she picks up her beer and takes a few chugs to finish it. “I had to cool off a little,” she explains.

Dan shakes his head. At least now he knows where Jeff got his laid-back attitude toward sex. “If you’re about done, we can get going.”

She starts toward the door. “You did say I could snoop, as I recall.”

“I know I did. I forgot about the book.” Dan shakes his head, and then turns to her in renewed alarm. “Is that all I forgot? Did you find anything else?”

Anna just smiles beatifically at him and then proceeds down the stairs. He resists the urge to run back inside and search madly through his possessions to find anything incriminating; instead, he follows her down.

They get in the truck, and Dan concentrates on driving. Anna’s quiet for a while and then says, “Nice truck.”

Dan looks at her warily. He happens to agree with her, but most people would only say that if they were being sarcastic. “It’s not flashy, but it does its job,” he replies cautiously.

She nods. “And probably doesn’t complain a lot, either.” She pauses. “How do you think Jeff would feel if I came down here and worked for you?”

Dan grins a little sheepishly. “Yeah, that question occurred to me about two seconds after I mentioned the job to you.” He shoots her a quick look. “I’ve never heard him say anything that would suggest that it would be a problem. But, like you said, we don’t talk that much.” He frowns. “Or, we do, but it’s usually about me, maybe...” He looks at her again, trying to gauge whether she’s concerned about her son getting involved with such a self-centered ass, but she’s smiling.

“That sounds like Jeff. He’ll answer a direct question, probably, but he’s really not much for volunteering information.” She runs her hands gently over the dashboard. “If the offer’s still open, I’d like to talk to him about it. I’ve been feeling a little... directionless... in Seattle.” She looks out the window and then back over at Dan. “That’s a bit of an understatement. I’ve been feeling like I’m in a warehouse, being stored until I have the good manners to die.”

Dan has trouble believing this. He doesn’t know how old Anna is—doesn’t know how old Jeff is, really—but she seems very healthy and energetic. And her mind is obviously still completely sharp. A little too sharp, even. “Does Jeff know that? About how you’re feeling?”

She shakes her head. “It just seemed like complaining, to tell him. But if I have a solution in mind, then it’s not complaining, it’s explaining... right?”

“Sounds right to me.” Dan pauses. “But I should probably warn you; I have pretty bad judgment about people. Or something. I don’t read people very well. I think that’s it. Or part of it, at least... I’m not sure....” He grins a little. “Also, I babble.”

Anna laughs. “All right, I’ll consider myself warned.”

They’re silent for a while, and then Anna starts up. “Jeff and Evan... they’ve been together for quite a while.”

Dan just nods. He’s not sure what else to do.

“I never really understood the relationship, to be honest. It seemed like Jeff was just feeling guilty, and Evan was looking for a father or something. Wanted the security but didn’t want to settle down and put the work into a serious partnership.”

This isn’t a conversation Dan really feels like getting into. “I guess it’s always hard to judge these things from the outside.” He doesn’t want to offend her, but he also doesn’t want to hear something that will make him like her less.

“Dan, you’ll break my heart—don’t you know that a mother never thinks that she’s outside of her son’s life?” Anna doesn’t sound heartbroken, but she does sound a little sad. “But I think you’re right. I think maybe.... I think that *was* how they were, at the start. But they’ve changed, and I haven’t seen it.” She’s looking out the window now. “As

an educator, I always had to remember to let the kids grow up. The kids that come in as freshmen leave in four years as adults. And I had to be sure to treat them that way. I'm not sure I've given the same courtesy to Evan."

Dan thinks for a second. "What I said before, about Evan being an adult?"

"A grown-ass man, I believe you said."

Dan nods. "Okay, yeah, that sounds familiar... but I didn't mean it like *you* needed to change. I mean, I was talking about The Annoyers, but even if I was talking about you... what I meant was that you *don't* have to change, because... well, because Evan's a grown-ass man. He knows who he is. He's not looking to other people to tell him that. So, if you haven't been appreciating his maturity, I don't really think it's affected him too much. You know?"

Anna's quiet for a moment. "And *this* is you being not good at reading people?" She smiles.

They're pulling into Jeff's driveway now, which saves Dan from having to respond. Anna climbs out a little stiffly, and Dan leans over to say, "Evan's got a hot tub—you should soak in it for a bit tonight."

Anna nods. "That sounds heavenly. I'll remember to bring my suit." She shuts the door gently and then leans against the bottom of the open window. "Thanks for the ride, Dan. I'm... I'm very glad to have met you. Sometimes I worry about Jeff. He's my only child, so it's my job. But I like what I've seen of him on this trip. He's a bit preoccupied, maybe, and hasn't been giving the proper amount of attention to his dear old mom, but it's nice to see him really *engaged* in his life."

"Well, the art show has been huge for him, obviously."

Anna smiles. "He's been dreaming about that for years. But don't fool yourself, Dan. It's not just the art show."

Dan looks down a little bashfully, then looks back up and sees Anna still watching him. He nods, acknowledging that he heard her, at least, and that's enough for her to step away from the truck and let him back out to the road. He sees her still watching as he pulls away, so he waves out the window, and she waves back. Dan's mind stays with her

for a while, but by the time he's to the highway, he's looking forward, getting ready to see Chris.

He's almost to the airport when his phone rings, with Chris's name on the caller display. "You'd better be calling from California, man, because I am almost to the airport."

"Yeah, I'm sitting on the plane. We're on the ground, just heading for the terminal."

"All right, great timing. I'm about ten minutes out, maybe a little less. You didn't check a bag, did you?"

"Yeah, right, for my vast wardrobe. I'll wait for you at the Arrivals curb. You still driving the truck, or has Evan got you fixed up in a Ferrari or something?"

"Chris, I think you're maybe going to be a bit disappointed by the Kaminski lifestyle."

"Just so long as you're happy, pumpkin."

Dan hangs up. It's not long before he's fighting his way through the airport traffic, and he sees Chris raising his arm from the side of the road. He pulls in, and as Chris is throwing his carry-on in the back of the truck, Dan hops out and almost runs around the front of the truck. Chris sees him coming and opens his arms wide, grinning like a lunatic. Dan's not usually much of a hugger, but damn, he's missed the guy, even if it's only been a few weeks since Dan left Kentucky. They give a few manly thumps before they pull away, and Dan retreats to his side of the truck.

They're halfway out of the airport before Chris starts. "You know, man, I could have come out earlier. If I'd known you were pining for me...."

"I'm not pining! I just... I don't know, temporary insanity. Besides, you hugged back."

"Dude, I didn't get out of the truck. That's all you."

"Yeah, whatever. How're things?" He braces himself. "How're Karl and Molly?"

Chris thinks before speaking. "I guess they're... okay, maybe. They're out of the house now—it's not knocked down, but it will be

soon. I think they sort of thought that the developers would build the subdivision around it, but that's not the plan. So that's a bit hard, you know... the house Justin grew up in, plus the barn and the horses and everything..." Chris shakes his head. "They don't really seem to be *trying* to get over it, you know? They're just... resigned, maybe? Like they've decided that the rest of their lives are gonna suck, so there's no point in trying to make it better. I don't know." He shakes his head again, more vigorously this time, as if he's trying to shake the mood off. "So what about out here? What's our plan?"

"Uh, Evan's got some friends in. They're kinda a pain, but whatever. But he's having a barbecue, invited us to come over. But we don't have to do that, if you'd rather just hang out somewhere."

"No, a barbecue sounds suitably Californian. It'll be poolside, I assume?"

"Dude, there's pools in Kentucky."

"I'm sure I'll be able to tell the difference."

"Yeah, okay. And Jeff's mom is in town, so I think she's coming. She's really cool, actually. You'll like her."

"All right, excellent. We going straight there?"

"If that's okay. We might crash there, if neither of us wants to stay sober enough to drive."

"What, there's no fleet of limos for us?"

"Seriously, man, brace yourself for disappointment."

"I looked him up—the family's net worth is estimated at *twelve billion* dollars. Do you understand how much money that is?"

Dan thinks for a second. "Honestly, no, not really."

Chris nods. "Try this—if he wanted to spend all that money in a single year? He'd have to spend almost thirty-three million a day. A day, Dan."

That's... a lot of money. Dan mulls it over. "Well, he's not spending it on Ferraris or limos, dude. Sorry."

"Well, is the barbecue at least going to include some sort of exotic, preferably endangered meat product?"

“Uh, last time it was diamond-encrusted panda, but no guarantees for tonight... and, honestly, the diamonds were a bit rough going down.”

“Panda? Jesus, Dan, why is that what you thought of? What’s wrong with you? You shouldn’t even joke about eating pandas!”

“Shut up, man, it was the only endangered species I could think of.”

“Black rhinos are endangered—and I bet they’d be delicious.”

“Not too tough?”

“Well, you’d probably want to marinate them for a while... or pound them with a diamond-encrusted meat tenderizer.”

“Huh. If the lawyer thing doesn’t work out, maybe you should have your own cooking show.”

“From torts to tortes?”

There’s a pause. “I don’t really know what either of those is.”

“Well, then, I guess I’ll be looking for someone else to be my sous-chef.”

“I guess you’d better. How’s the family?”

Sorting through the various misbehaviors of the Foster Clan takes up most of the rest of the trip to the farm, although Dan does point out a few landmarks, most notably Zio’s, home of, “I swear to God, the best panini ever created. Possibly the best *food* ever. Could only be improved if it included tiny, tender slivers of marinated rhino meat.”

Dan doesn’t feel nervous until they reach the edge of the Kaminski property, but once he’s there, the tension hits him like a freight train. “Uh, this thing tonight.... I could be paranoid, but it could be a bit awkward.”

Chris looks interested. “Yeah? You know how I feel about the awkward.”

Dan had actually forgotten and groans a little. “It’s not fun, for Chris’s-entertainment awkwardness. It’s....” He struggles for words. “Jeff and Evan and me... everyone there kinda knows. But I don’t think most of them—well, I don’t think *any* of them, probably—have seen us

hanging out together. Since they found out.”

Chris doesn’t seem put off. “So, awkward for you and Jeff and Evan, entertaining for the rest of us. I’m not really seeing the downside. And, honestly, from what I’ve seen of Jeff and Evan, I’m thinking mostly awkward just for you, ’cause neither of them is quite such a sensitive flower as you, right?”

“I’m not a sensitive flower, asshole.”

“Ooh, you said a naughty word! I take it back, you’re not a sensitive flower at all.”

“Fuck you.”

“Oh, my ears! You brute!”

“Sweet Jesus....”

“Blasphemy! To what depths will you sink?”

So at least Dan is laughing a little as they pull up to the house. They get out of the truck, and Chris looks around, then over at Dan.

“We should have gone to the barn first, probably. It’s more impressive than the house. But the house is bigger than it looks, really.” Dan doesn’t really know why he’s trying to justify Evan’s real estate.

“And where are the flocks of bikini-clad California beauties?”

“Yeah... prepare for disappointment.”

They circle around the side of the house by the kitchen. Tia sees them through the window and beams at Dan, and then gestures for him to go up on the deck by the breakfast nook. He obeys, and as soon as he arrives, Tia is there, and she’s hugging Dan. “Oh, those books were a blessing this afternoon! She just couldn’t settle down, and then I pulled out the books and the assignments, and she got right down to work. We had to tear her away when Jeff and Anna arrived!”

“Oh... well, great. The assignments were a good idea, obviously. Way to go.”

Tia just shakes her head. “Oh, no, no modesty for you. You had the first idea and did all the work; I barely even helped. Way to go, you!”

Dan shrugs and is happy to turn the attention to Chris. “Uh, Tia,

this is Chris, my friend from Kentucky. Chris, Tia looks after Evan and Tat. It's a pretty big job."

Tia welcomes Chris to California, and then gestures toward the back yard. "Everyone's back there, getting up to mischief. Off you go."

They head around the back, and as they turn the corner, it does seem like a perfect California scene. Jeff and Anna are reclined in the teak deck chairs, talking to Tat, who's in the pool, bracing one arm on the tiled edge while the other rests in a slightly dampened sling. Evan and Blaine are behind the bar, apparently preparing mimosas, and Monica and Amanda are standing in front of the bar, waiting to be served. And they, at least, are wearing bikinis.

Chris nods. "Okay, it's a small flock but good quality."

"Amanda, the one in red, is dating Blaine. Not that I think that should stop you. She's *possibly* too good for him—not because she's so great, but...."

Chris reaches over and slaps the back of Dan's head. "Don't be catty about my future woman." The gesture is so similar to his imagined rebukes from Puppet-Chris that Dan is thrown a little off balance, speechless long enough for Chris to add, "Or the friend of my future woman... things remain to be decided."

"Well, Monica's Evan's ex, so... I don't know how much you're gonna suffer by comparison, but honestly, I'd be worried."

Chris shoots him a dirty look. "You don't know everything about me, Danny. And if you're alluding to what I think you're alluding to, you *definitely* don't know!"

Dan laughs. "Are you sure about that? Remember that time at Scotty's place, when you hooked up with... what was her name...."

"Laura. Or Lauren, or something...."

"Yeah, in the same room I was sleeping in. The well-lit room, where I was *trying* to sleep."

Chris looks like he's trying to think back and remember details, and then Evan has seen them and is coming out from behind the bar and crossing over to greet them. And the awkwardness starts already, because Dan has no idea what the appropriate greeting should be. Hugs

seem strange, handshakes remote, a kiss *far* too much.... He solves the problem by pushing Chris forward. "Look what I found at the airport!"

Evan gives Chris an enthusiastic handshake. "Hey, man, welcome to California! It's good to see you again."

"Thanks. It's good to be here. And it's a beautiful place, too. Thanks for inviting us."

"Meh, I have to keep an eye on Dan. You're just a special bonus!"

"You have to keep an eye on him?" Chris is smirking, as if he can smell that there's a bit of a story there. "Has he been getting himself in trouble?"

"No!" Dan protests.

Evan shakes his head. "He has, actually. He gets a little crazy on his own."

Chris shoots a quick look at Dan. "They're not doing the shifts, are they?"

"No! There's no shifts!"

Evan raises a finger to his lips and gives Chris a meaningful look. "No, of course there's no shifts. Dan is completely fine on his own, and does not need to be babysat. Of course." He smiles a little and then nods toward the bar. "Let's do introductions and get you guys some drinks."

Dan and Chris follow obediently. Blaine, Amanda, and Monica all greet them warmly, and Blaine immediately drags Chris into a discussion he and Evan had been having about college basketball. Dan tunes them out pretty quickly, and it isn't long before he's wandered over toward Jeff and Anna. Tat has climbed out of the pool and is heading over to the bar, but she stops on the way to give Dan a wet one-armed hug. "I got two of the assignments done," she tells him proudly. "And I started the third one." Then her conscience catches her. "But I did the easy ones first."

Dan nods. "That makes sense. Why don't you bring them down to the barn tomorrow and we can look at them?" Tat agrees and heads over to mimosa-land.

There are only two deck chairs where Jeff and Anna are sitting,

and Dan pauses awkwardly. Is it presumptuous to pull up another chair? Is it rude to tower over them as they sit? Jeff solves the problem, at least *that* problem, by pulling his feet up, leaving space at the bottom of his chair and nodding that Dan should sit. Dan does, but it feels... odd.

“So I hear you’re trying to lure my mother out of retirement?” Jeff sounds amused, but Dan can’t be sure.

“Uh, yeah, sorry, I should have—well, *maybe* I should have talked to you first? It just sort of occurred to me.”

“No, I think Evan’s got it right, keeping our business decisions as separate from our personal lives as possible.” Jeff catches his acknowledgment of a personal bond with Dan, made in front of his mother, and glances over at her. She smiles knowingly, and he looks rueful as he shakes his head. Then he runs his feet down the chair a little, just enough to catch under Dan’s thighs. Now it’s Dan’s turn to look at Anna, but she just smiles at him too. Jeff is watching the exchange fondly. “And if you *had* mentioned it to me, I would have said it’s a great idea. I’d love to have her closer, and I think she could be great at the barn.”

Dan barely knows what Jeff’s talking about. All he can think about is Jeff’s feet, the casual intimacy in front of Anna. He can feel the warmth spreading through the thin fabric of his worn jeans, and then Jeff wiggles his toes a little, and Dan really can’t be expected to carry on a conversation, can he? But apparently the toe wiggle was an attempt to get him back on track, because both Jeff and Anna are watching him curiously. He fights to recall the last thing that somebody said. “Uh, good, yeah. That’s a relief, I guess.”

Jeff’s smirking a little, obviously aware of Dan’s discomfiture, and Dan doesn’t really like it. She’s *Jeff’s* mom, for God’s sake, why should *Dan* be self-conscious? So he smiles back and brings his hand over to Jeff’s ankle and runs his fingers up along it a little. He’s underneath Jeff’s pants, running his smooth finger tips along the rough hair of Jeff’s leg, and he hears Jeff hiss under his breath as Dan curves his nails in and reaches a little higher. Dan’s still safely below the knee, but now it’s Jeff’s turn to squirm a little in front of his mother and Dan’s turn to smirk. He glances over at Anna, and she’s smirking a little too, apparently not minding seeing her son’s game turned back around

on him. Dan lets his fingers relax, sliding down to grip lightly around Jeff's ankle, and Jeff relaxes a little too.

Jeff goes back to telling his mother about the gallery, and Dan half listens to them, but a big part of his mind is elsewhere. He glances over toward the bar and sees Evan looking at him, and they both smile. Evan holds up a beer bottle questioningly, and Dan checks Jeff's and Anna's wine glasses, then nods and makes a circle with his finger to indicate that they all need another round. Dan supposes that he should get up and get the drinks, but he's feeling fairly benevolent about the LA Three, and he doesn't want to ruin the mood by having to actually deal with them. Evan nods and reaches for the wine bottle just as Tat shrieks with laughter. Chris is showing her one of his bar tricks, apparently, and Anna looks over in interest.

"It's just Chris, my friend. He's... entertaining, I guess."

Anna stands up only a little stiffly. "I'm going to go watch."

"Yeah, great, give him an audience. He'll never quit now," Dan says, but he knows Anna can tell he's teasing. She runs into Evan part way over, and he tops up her glass before continuing on his way. Dan's not sure if Anna left deliberately to give the three of them some time alone—is she really that smooth? But the effect is the same, whether it's deliberate or accidental, and Dan isn't sorry.

Evan fills Jeff's glass from the wine bottle and hands Dan a fresh beer and then sits at the bottom of Anna's lounge chair. He tangles one of his bare feet with Dan's on the deck, and the other he lifts up and puts on Jeff's chair, his toes nestled into Jeff's instep, just beneath Dan's thigh. They sit there like that for a while, listening to their friends and family members enjoying themselves. The sun is low in the sky, turning everyone's skin golden in its warm rays, and to Dan it seems like the moment itself is golden too. He tries to concentrate on the feelings, hoping to imprint them on his memory so he can call them up to help him through tough times, but the more he tries to catch them, the more elusive they become, and he finally settles on just letting them wash over him.

Then Chris is there with a small parade of people behind him, and Dan jerks a little, thinks about moving, but Jeff and Evan aren't so Dan doesn't either. Chris notices the positions, obviously, and smiles. "I

almost forgot. I had our specialist look over the contract again, and she says it's still good." He pulls an envelope out of his jacket pocket and passes it to Dan. "Evan's already signed, so as soon as you put your mark on it, it's official." Dan looks around at the audience, and Chris adds, "Witnesses are always good."

Chris produces a pen as well, and Dan looks at the little tags indicating where he should sign. Tat grabs a book from the end table and hands it over to use as a desk... Dan isn't sure what *Centered Riding* is doing out by the pool, but he doesn't complain. He just starts signing. It's weird to have an audience, but when he hits the last tag and signs it, they all applaud, although it's mostly a little awkward since they're all holding glasses at the same time.

Chris raises his glass and says quietly, "To new beginnings."

Dan is still smiling at him when Blaine chips in, "To new partnerships," and there's just the right amount of emphasis that it's clear to everyone that he means more than just business, but it somehow isn't enough to be lewd or inappropriate. Maybe the guy has some redeeming qualities, Dan thinks, and he smiles at everyone as he raises his bottle and then takes a long swallow.

He has no idea what he's gotten himself into with Jeff and Evan, and has no idea how things are going to turn out. But if his time with Justin taught him one thing, it's that he *never* knows how things are going to turn out, even when he thinks he does. Whatever this is, this thing that's grown between the three of them, for now it's right. It's perfect, even, for now. He can't see the future, so he'll concentrate on the present. And, with these men and these friends... the present is more than enough.

chapter 14

THE day after the barbeque feels anticlimactic to Dan. He'd stayed sober enough to drive, so he and Chris had returned to Ryan's apartment for the night, although Evan had repeated his offer of the guest house or beds in the main house. There had been only a slight suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows to accompany the second offer. But Chris hadn't seemed to care, and Dan was feeling a little overwhelmed. It was great to have Chris in California, but it was hard to see the guy without thinking about Justin, and... Dan didn't feel *guilty*, exactly, for being with Jeff and Evan, but he felt... he felt like he might need a night in his own bed.

Jeff had gone home, too, and Dan had to resist the feeling of relief that created in him. Yeah, things seem to finally be going smoothly with the three of them, but Dan doesn't really like the idea of the other two having a lot of time alone without him. He's not sure if he's worried they'll change their minds or just jealous of them having sex. Then he realizes that it's not even the sex, he's just jealous of them getting to spend time together without him. That's a little worrisome.

Chris and Dan sleep in on Sunday and then go out for breakfast. After the meal, Dan's at a bit of a loss; he's used to just hanging out with Chris, but it seems like they should be doing something more exciting, since Chris is only in town for a couple of days. Chris seems perfectly content, though, and spends his time giving his opinion on everything he sees or thinks about *except* for Dan's new relationship. Dan spends half the day bracing himself for the onslaught and the other half wishing that it would come, just so he'd have someone to talk to about it all. He's not sure if Chris is doing it on purpose or if the guy has evolved to the state where he can drive Dan up the goddamn wall without even *trying*. Either way, Chris is a son-of-a-bitch. It's just Dan's bad luck that he's also his best friend. Dan finds himself with a

new sympathy for the Evan and Blaine dynamic, although at least Chris seems to limit himself to making *Dan* crazy; everyone else seems to think he's utterly charming.

They go out to the farm in the afternoon and ride up to the cross-country course. Chris takes Smokey but only after carefully inspecting him to make sure that Dan is taking good care of his present. "He looks a bit thin, Dan... well, not so much thin, as... unfit. Un-muscled, I think. He's a quarter horse, you know, not one of your eventers. He's supposed to be stocky. Sturdy."

Dan lifts the heavy western saddle up a little higher and then shove-drops it at Chris, who's too much of a horseman to let a saddle fall on the ground. It's not exactly a victory, but it shuts Chris up. For a while. But Dan's pretty sure Chris catches him when he runs a quick hand over Smokey's quarters, relieved to find them as muscled and firm as they always have been. Stupid Chris.

They head out on the trail and make polite conversation for a while, but Chris starts it up again before they're halfway up the hill. "Speaking of skinny Kentuckians, your clothes are hanging a little loose too. I think it's the California *girls* who are supposed to have eating disorders."

"Shut up, man. I've lost a few pounds, maybe. I'm just getting in to a new routine." Dan grins. "I really didn't realize how much food I mooched off people back there—Karl and Molly, you and your family, the bar...."

"Dude, there's got to be good mooching potential at the Kaminskis'—that was a hell of a spread last night, and there must be leftovers."

"Yeah, I dunno, it's a bit weird to start hanging around the kitchen...." And Dan waits for Chris's comment, waits to be made fun of for sleeping with a guy but not taking food from him, or for whatever else he's going to come up with, but Chris just shrugs and looks out at the view. "I can feed myself," Dan says eventually, and Chris looks at him like he doesn't even remember what they'd been talking about.

"I'm sure you can. You're all grown up, right?"

"Yeah, seems like." Dan decides to try to steer the conversation a

little. "So, you had fun last night?"

Chris shoots him a questioning look. "Sure. Hot women, lots of food and drink... and the company was all right too." He smiles affectionately at Dan, a rare break from his customary expression of detached mockery. "And it was good to see you happy."

Happy. Dan thinks about it for a second, almost repeats the word out loud. Had he been happy the night before? Is he happy now? It's hard to reconcile the word with the tight bundle of tension that he carries in his stomach so often these days, but it's not a bad tension, maybe. It's scary to be hoping for good things, that's all. But still better than *not* hoping, surely.... Dan realizes that Chris is watching him, and shrugs. "Hot men, lots of food and drink, and okay company...."

Chris's mouth twists a little, but he smiles. "Yeah, okay, I guess we're both just easy to please."

"Simple men, simple pleasures." Dan twists around in his saddle and grins. "Wanna race?"

Chris looks at Ronan, the off-the-track Thoroughbred Dan's riding, and then down at Smokey. "I don't know, man, it doesn't really seem fair. How's your poor guy gonna keep up when we go"—he looks around the field. —"Straight line up to that jump, then around it, *not* over it, three times. Then over to that tree and around it, then back to this jump, around it twice, and finish at the gate over there."

Dan follows the course with his eyes. "Damn, that's a good one. That's fair." His horse will have the advantage on the straightaways, Chris's on the turns. He honestly can't predict which horse will win. "Yeah, let's do it."

Chris is watching him closely. "Yeah? Really? I thought...." He smiles. "I thought maybe California Dan was too mature for these silly games."

"Horse racing? Immature? Dude, you understand that jockeys are just really small, right? I mean, they're not actually children."

"Shut up, Dan." It's pretty rare for Chris to not have a comeback, and Dan isn't sure if he should savor the moment or worry about Chris's mental state. But Chris is already working Smokey up into position for the start of the race, so Dan figures maybe Chris is just

thinking about his strategy. That's their typical routine: Chris with some insanely complicated and carefully calculated plan, Dan operating on pure instinct.

Chris still seems preoccupied when they get the horses lined up, so Dan gives him another minute to think. When Chris looks up, Dan grins and says, "Ready?" Chris nods, so Dan continues with, "Set... go!"

Smokey takes off fast, like a quarter horse should, but Ronan's giant stride brings him well into the front by the first obstacle. Dan has to slow the horse to make the turn, and he seems to have trouble with the quick direction changes, while Smokey cuts right in between Ronan and the jump with his agile cow pony moves. Dan could be pushing Ronan a bit harder, but he's not going to mess up a valuable eventer screwing around with a friend, so he's a little careful. Smokey comes out onto the straightaway well in the lead, but Ronan's got a good competitive spirit and charges after him. They only go around the next obstacle once, so Dan doesn't slow Ronan as much, just lets him go a little wide, and of course Smokey cuts tight around the inside, but Ronan is close enough that he's able to get ahead of his competitor on the straight. The final turn needs to be done twice, and Smokey gets in front at the start of the second turn, and then they're on the final stretch, and Smokey's got some speed but not compared to a Thoroughbred, so Ronan catches up fast, and if the straightaway had been a few strides longer Ronan would have won easily, but as it is....

"I have no idea," Chris pants as he trots Smokey over toward Dan and Ronan.

"Me neither, man. Too close to call, I guess." Dan grins. "But, hey, Smokey's my horse, so owner or rider—either way, I win!"

"That's handy." Chris is a little out of breath, but he seems to have kicked himself out of whatever mood he was in before. If he was even in a mood—Chris is so even-tempered that Dan is more likely to doubt his own perception than to doubt Chris's equanimity.

"It is," Dan agrees, and he lifts his arm and points. "We can go up over that ridge and then loop back around to the barn."

Chris nods and they set off. Ronan's a little excited after the race, dancing around and trying to rip free of Dan's control so he can run

again, but Dan just thinks calm thoughts and lets his body relax, and eventually Ronan calms down too. Chris doesn't say much, but when they're almost back to the barn he looks over at Dan and says, "So, you're okay out here, right?"

Dan doesn't really know what to do with that. "Okay? Yeah, I guess." He remembers the late-night phone calls he's made, the strange questions he's been asking. "You've been hearing me at my worst, I think. Normally, it's just... well, it's just this, you know? Riding and whatever." He shrugs. "It's been... there's nowhere I could have been where I wouldn't have been missing him." It's nice to be with someone who doesn't need a name or an explanation. Someone who understands just what kind of a guy Dan lost. "So, here... well, at least there's been lots of distractions."

Chris gives him a look. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

Dan shakes his head. "Not just that... although, yeah, that's definitely taken some of my attention. But you know, the horses and the business and getting settled...."

Chris nods slowly. "Yeah, that makes sense."

"How about you? It's got to be a bit weird, back there. Are you doing okay?" Dan doesn't really expect Chris to do anything more than brush the question off; Chris is good at taking care of people, but not that great at being taken care of. But he surprises Dan this time.

"It's... yeah, you're right, it's weird. There's a pretty big hole, you know? Not just Justin, but the three of us. We had some good times."

Dan nods. "Yeah. And the bad times.... I know I've said it before, man, but I really don't think I could have gotten through all that without you."

"And Jeff."

Dan shrugs. "Jeff was great, no doubt. But... he's a good guy, but he didn't know Justin. He wasn't there for all of it."

"Yeah." Chris is quiet and then seems to shake off the gloom. "The three of you were pretty adorable last night, with all the touchy-feely crap."

“Yeah, that lasted for about two minutes before you dragged Evan back over to the bar.”

“Dude, we were hunting Turkey. It was important.” Chris grins. “The boy can drink, I’ll give him that.”

“That’s big of you. From the way you were hanging off each other by the end of the night, I was thinking I might be gonna get Jeff all to myself.”

Chris shoots him a look. “Is that what you want? If you had your way? Just Jeff?”

Dan isn’t really ready to answer that question, not even from Chris. “Wow, you’d switch teams just for me? You’d steal Evan away just so I could take his boyfriend? That’s sweet, man really.”

Dan knows that Chris recognizes the deflection, but he lets Dan get away with it. “That’s the kind of friend I am, Dan. Maybe you should take lessons—the next time I need a wingman in a straight bar, it wouldn’t kill you to step up.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll keep that in mind.” They’re riding the path the runs along the edge of the driveway, and they both turn their heads when they hear a car coming from the direction of the house. It’s the Mercedes convertible, with Blaine at the wheel and Amanda beside him. There’s no sign of Monica, and Dan’s stomach drops a little, thinking of her staying, maybe spending more time with Evan... but then there’s a stir of movement in the back of the car, and he sees a tiny, perfect foot reach up to rest on the top of the back door. So Monica’s accounted for.

The car slows as it approaches the horses and then stops. Blaine waves a hand vaguely in their direction. “Hey, there you guys are. We saw your truck, so we stopped at the barn to say bye.”

“Sorry, we were up on the hill. You’re heading back to LA?” Dan finds it a lot easier to feel friendly toward them now that he knows they’re leaving.

“Yeah, that’s the plan.” Blaine grimaces—or smiles; it’s hard to tell. “Listen, man, we kind of got off on the wrong foot, but I wanted to say that it’s been good getting to know you. Hopefully I’ll see you around up here, or if you’re ever down in LA...”

That was fairly gracious. Dan thinks he'll have a better chance of getting through his part without laughing if he widens the audience a little. He addresses a spot somewhere in the middle of the car as he says, "Yeah, it was good to meet all of you too. I don't know if I'll make it down to LA, but, yeah, I guess maybe I'll see you the next time you're up here."

And that's it, they pull away, and it's good to get rid of them, but Dan remembers what Amanda had said about them being Evan's only real friends. He thinks of how Evan had welcomed Chris, inviting him into his home, making an effort, getting drunk with him, even, and he feels a bit guilty. And then he feels even worse for not feeling guilty until *after* they'd left, when it's too late to do anything about it.

Chris is watching him, of course, and Dan wonders when Chris got so good at figuring out Dan's thoughts. Justin used to complain that Dan was hard to read, but Chris has never seemed to have any trouble. "You all right, Sparky? Gonna miss them?"

Dan decides to ignore the "Sparky," hoping that it will go away. "No, not gonna miss them. I just hope Evan doesn't."

"The way he was talking last night, I think he was more than ready to see them go."

Dan thinks back to the night before. Just how much time had Chris and Evan spent together? And should Dan be worried that Chris seems to be having better conversations with the guy than Dan does? And if he *should* be worried, what exactly can he do about it?

"Huh." It's not exactly witty, but Dan has nothing else to say.

When they get back to the barn, Evan is there, apparently waiting for them. His smile is warm, and Dan returns it, but he feels a bit awkward. He's not sure if there's something wrong or if it's just the usual new-relationship jitters. If he's honest with himself, he has to admit that he's really only done this once before, and he'd been so off balance at the start with Justin that he still can only remember things through a fog of bewilderment. So he hasn't got much to compare this to.

Dan swings off his horse and pulls the reins over his head, then looks over at Evan again. He feels a bit stupid when he realizes that he's come to expect the guy's rapt attention, and that he's a little put out

to realize that he's not getting it. Instead, Evan is talking to Chris, comparing hangovers and laughing over something from the night before, and Dan isn't sure whether he's jealous of Chris or of Evan, but one way or the other, he feels a bit left out. Which is pathetic and sad and pretty much proves that Dan is the drama queen he wants so much to avoid being, so he puts a smile on his face and just shakes his head at them when he leads Ronan on into the barn.

Chris brings Smokey in right behind Ronan, and when Chris has to go to the far tack room with Smokey's western gear, Dan seizes the opportunity. Evan is leaning against the wall of the aisle, and it still feels a little awkward, but Dan makes himself push past that, ducking under Ronan's crosstie and moving to stand directly in front of Evan, in close.

Evan's smile is reassuring, and Dan leans in for the kiss. It's warm and just a little wet, a promise of more but with a definite note of "later." One of Evan's hands grips the back of Dan's head, not tight, just secure, and when the kiss is over, Evan keeps Dan's head close. "Morning, Dan," he drawls, hitching one finger of his free hand in Dan's waistband. "You should have spent the night. We could have said good morning a whole lot earlier and a whole lot better...."

Evan should not be allowed to drawl in a public place, and Dan thinks he's going to need a little space pretty damn soon if he doesn't want to embarrass himself. But it's hard to pull away, so he allows himself another breath of Evan's warmth, trying to control his hands and keep them from wandering from Evan's hips to less appropriate areas....

So when Chris clears his throat ostentatiously, he's not interrupting anything really racy, but he still seems a bit weird, and Dan wonders if it's hard for him, seeing Dan with someone other than Justin. Dan's had some time to adjust to this, but maybe it's a lot for Chris to be taking in all at once. Dan gets back to work on Ronan, and Evan and Chris resume their conversation, apparently about a local vineyard that Evan's just bought.

Dan's phone rings—a California number that he doesn't recognize—and he thinks about letting it go to voice mail, but Ronan is good in crossties and Chris and Evan are entertaining themselves, so he picks up. "Hello?"

“Dan?” The voice is familiar, but Dan can’t place it.

“Yeah....”

There’s a little laugh. “It’s Taylor, man. Andrews?”

It’s disorienting, hearing that name, that voice in this place, and it takes Dan a minute to catch up, to pull himself back from memories of the swampy Florida heat, their sweaty bodies straining together at work, and then working together in a totally different way at night....

“Dan?”

“Shit, sorry, Taylor, you surprised me! It’s been a long time.”

“Yeah, I know, man, I was surprised to see your name on the results sheet from Shepherd Ranch—I had no idea you were out here.”

“I just got here; that was my first trial.” Dan tries to regroup. “So, I didn’t know you were here either. What’ve you been up to?”

There’s an odd pause, and then Taylor says, “Yeah, a bit of this, a bit of that. And... okay, straight up, I wanted to call and say hi, get caught up, but I’ve got another reason for wanting to talk to you. Is this a good time?”

“Uh, I’ve got a horse in crossties.... Is it a long story?”

Taylor laughs. “Not super-long, but.... You’re down near San Jose somewhere, right? I’m not far from there, just outside Oakland. Do you want to get a beer sometime, catch up right?”

“Yeah, absolutely.” Dan runs over his schedule in his mind. “Uh, tonight’s no good, but after that I’m free any night.”

“Okay, how about tomorrow?” There’s a pause, and Dan can see Taylor in his mind, probably running his fingers along the scar on his forearm like he does when he’s thinking. “Uh, usually when I go out, I head *toward* the city. Do you know anywhere good in between us?”

“Like I said, I just got here. Hang on.” Dan pulls the phone a little away from his mouth. “Evan—do you know anywhere good for a few beers, somewhere between here and Oakland?”

Evan gives him a blank look. “Oakland? Who’s in Oakland?”

That really doesn’t answer the question Dan asked. “Just an old friend. We’re trying to find somewhere in between to meet up.” Dan

hears a voice from the phone and brings it back to his ear. “Sorry, man, I missed that.”

“I said don’t worry about it. Once I’m on the freeway, it’s no big deal to keep going. Is there somewhere down there to meet?”

“Hang on.... Evan, how ’bout somewhere in San Jose? Near the highway would be good.”

Evan still looks a little nonplussed. “Which highway? The 880?”

“The 880?” Dan asks Taylor, and then nods at Evan.

“Uh, the Wick’s not far from the 880.” Evan looks to Chris as if for confirmation, but Chris obviously has no idea and just shrugs. Evan goes back into take-charge mode, thank God, because indecisive Evan is not Dan’s favorite flavor. “Yeah, The Brunswick, it’s just off Guadalupe, on Almaden, I think. It’d be good.”

“The Brunswick, off Guadalupe, on Almaden. Probably.” Dan repeats.

“Uh, okay... I’ll just MapQuest it. Do you want to meet there around seven, maybe?”

“Yeah, sure, sounds good.” Ronan stamps a little, and Dan puts a hand out to soothe him. “I gotta go now, man, the horse is getting pissy. But... it’s good to hear from you. I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Yeah, man, sounds good. I’ll see you then.” There’s a click, and Dan waits a moment before he closes his own phone. The call was a surprise, but a welcome one. He and Taylor had lost touch, but they’d been friends once. And it would be good to have a friend in California, someone totally uninvolved in the soap opera.

“So, an old friend?” Dan looks up to see both Evan and Chris watching him. Evan was the one who asked the question, but Chris looks just as curious.

“Uh, yeah. Taylor.” Chris raises an eyebrow, and Dan just shakes his head. “From before I moved to Kentucky, man—you wouldn’t know him.”

“You’ve never mentioned him, I don’t think.” Chris isn’t quite making an accusation, but the tone is a little more than casual.

“No, probably not. No reason to, really.” Dan has gone back to

grooming, but when he looks over, Evan and Chris are both still watching him. “Yeah, okay, you caught me. I hired someone to pretend to be an old friend... for some reason I can’t explain. With money I don’t have. Because... that’s just the kind of shit I do, you know?”

Chris looks at Evan and shrugs. “He does do some pretty weird shit sometimes.” He turns back to Dan. “You should stop it. You’ve got a new life here, don’t ruin it with your web of lies and pretend friends.”

“I’ll try to control myself.” Dan gives Ronan a final sweep with the brush, and then trades the brush for the lead rope. “You know where Smokey goes, right? Same place you got him from?”

“Yeah, no problem.” Chris follows Dan’s example, clipping the lead rope to Smokey’s halter. The horse would probably follow Chris without any guidance at all, but it seems like a bad precedent to set, because most of the eventers are not nearly that cooperative.

They head out of the barn together, Evan trailing along a little behind. Ronan’s paddock is close to the barn, and when Dan stops there and opens the gate, Evan stays with him, letting Chris walk to the back on his own. Dan leads Ronan inside and turns him before taking off his halter, then patting him on the shoulder. Ronan stands frozen for a second, then gives a little bunny hop in celebration of his freedom. He trots over to join his pasture-mates with a springy, bouncy movement that Dan only wishes he could get the horse to produce in the dressage ring.

Evan pushes the gate open for Dan, and then wrinkles his mouth around in what Dan’s coming to recognize as Evan’s version of being tentative. It doesn’t really suit him.

“What’s up, Evan?”

“Uh... okay. I wanted to run an idea by you.”

Dan’s not really sure if he’s up for any more changes, but he nods. “Okay....”

“Yeah, well... I was thinking about offering Chris a job. Out here. Working for me. Well, obviously working for me... but, you know, working pretty closely with me. The company’s got a pretty big legal department, obviously, but.... I don’t know, things are just really formal with them, you know? They’re almost all from when my Dad ran the

company, and they don't really seem to have much... I don't know. I don't feel like I communicate with them as well as I should. But Chris—I mean, he's a bit scary, but once I got past that... he's really honest, and I appreciate that. And my lawyers have worked with him twice, and they said good things...." Evan trails off and looks for Dan's reaction.

"Is he even allowed to practice out here?" Dan thinks it might be better to get the practical considerations out of the way first; it'll give him a bit of time to think about the implications of the move.

"Uh, he'd have to pass the bar, I guess. But I've got plenty of licensed California lawyers. I need somebody to tell me what all my licensed lawyers are doing." Evan's looking expectantly at Dan.

"Well, yeah, I mean... shit, I really should have asked Jeff before I talked to Anna, shouldn't I?"

Evan shakes his head impatiently. "I don't know... maybe. But he doesn't seem to have a problem with it. Do you have a problem with me hiring Chris?"

Dan tries to collect his thoughts. "Okay, uh... I'd love to have him out here, if he wants to come. You know, that'd be great. And I see what you mean about wanting him at your work, and obviously you'd know a lot better than me whether he'd be useful there. I just—okay, I'm sure he'll ask you this too—I just want to be sure that it's not... that you're not just doing me a favor." Dan frowns a little. "Does that sound unbelievably self-centered? I don't know." He plays with the lead rope in his hands and then resolutely snugs it around the hook on the fence. "Yeah, Chris is a good guy and a good lawyer, and I'm sure he'd be really useful for you, so, yeah, if he's into it, I think it'd be great."

Evan looks at him intently, as if trying to gauge his sincerity. "I would, you know. Do you a favor, if you wanted."

"But you aren't, right? I mean, Chris is a big boy, if he wants to move out here he can find his own damn job."

Evan holds his hands up. "No, I'm not. He... he'd be good."

Dan moves in a little closer and feels like he's transitioning from "friend of Chris" mode to "*friend* of Evan" mode. "Are you sure

you....” He hooks a finger in Evan’s jeans, trying to soften his words. “Amanda, in one of her speeches... she said that you don’t have that many friends... you know, like straight up, no complications, just-your-friend friends.” Dan shrugs. “Chris seems to like you, mostly. And trust me, he’s not the sort to like you just because you’re rich. You might want... maybe you want to keep him as a friend, without the complication of having him work for you.” Dan shrugs again and unhooks his finger. “I mean, obviously that’s a little tricky with him living in Kentucky and all, and even if he did work for you, he still wouldn’t start lying or blowing smoke up your ass, I don’t think....”

Evan’s smile is fond as he reaches down and catches Dan’s hand. “You looking out for me, Dan?” He uncurls Dan’s fingers and presses the palm of Dan’s hand against his stomach, just below his belly button. Dan can feel the warmth of Evan’s skin even through his shirt, and he lets his fingers drift a little lower.

“I’m just trying to make Amanda happy,” Dan mutters. “She’s annoying when—” but Dan’s words are cut off when Evan’s lips find his.

It’s just little kisses, gentle reminders of how good they can make each other feel, and Dan wants more, but he has to acknowledge that neither the time nor the place is ideal. Evan pulls away, apparently recognizing the very same thing, and smiles again. “Thanks, man. I appreciate it. And you’re right; I could use more non-work friends.” He pulls away a little further, as if just remembering something. “And speaking of new friends... this Taylor guy. How close were you two?”

“How close?” Dan shoots Evan an amused look. “We worked together... and hung out together. Shared an apartment for a while....”

“Shared an apartment like roommates or like living together?” Evan’s body language is still casual, but his voice is getting a bit tighter.

“Evan, don’t start.” Dan takes a second to weigh his options. He has no intention of lying, but he does think about refusing to answer or deflecting the question. He decides to go for honestly, though; let Evan deal with it. “We fucked around sometimes, but it was just casual. And it was years ago.”

Evan looks incredulous. “So you’re having drinks with an ex-

boyfriend tomorrow night, and I'm supposed to be totally fine with it?"

"Dude, you had your ex-girlfriend staying in your house all weekend. And Taylor and I were never... you know. We just fucked sometimes. It was just... friendly."

"Friendly?" Evan's snort is a mix of amused and disbelieving. "So if you're gonna go have a beer with him tomorrow, that's friendly too, right?" Evan turns away, takes a couple steps toward the fence. He seems to be trying to control himself, and Dan tries to do the same, tries to fight down the irritation rising in him.

"Do you want to meet us there?" He surprises himself a bit with the suggestion and isn't sure if it's a good idea. Is he being reassuring, helping Evan to adjust to the new relationship, or is he giving in to Evan's jealous paranoia? "He said he had something he wanted to talk about, though. I don't know how personal that might be... but probably not very, it's not like we're close anymore."

Evan looks torn. "I don't... I mean, it's not that I don't trust you, man...."

"Well, yeah, I think it's exactly that you don't trust me. But, you know, whatever. If you don't, you don't." Evan seems like he's going to argue with this, but Dan stares him down. He doesn't want to hear Evan denying something that's completely obvious.

Evan doesn't seem to know how to react. He takes a moment and then says, "Well, I'd like to meet him, just for, you know... curiosity. But I get what you're saying about him having something personal to talk about."

"Why don't you just come for a beer on your way home? Keep it casual. I'll tell him you're coming so he can get anything serious out of the way. If it seems like a big deal, I'll give you a call and wave you off."

Evan seems suspicious of Dan's tractability. "And you don't mind if I do this? You won't... think that I'm checking up on you, or something?"

"No, I'll absolutely think you're checking up on me." Chris is almost back to them now, and Dan hopes that Evan won't feel the need to continue the conversation in front of him. He decides to be a little

proactive, and calls out to Chris. “Hey, man, you didn’t check the water back there, did you? The automatic waterer was being weird yesterday.”

Chris frowns. “The trough was full—I didn’t check if it was refilling right, though.”

“Nah, that’s cool. If it’s full, it’ll be fine through the day, at least.”

He turns and walks with Chris toward the barn. Evan hesitates, but when Dan raises an eyebrow in question, he comes along with them. Evan almost says something a couple times but doesn’t, and when he finally does talk, it’s to remind Chris of some movie they’d been laughing about the night before.

Dan’s glad that Evan’s not dragging Chris into the whole thing, but even the prospect of it has him a little leery. Chris is *Dan’s* friend, and he’s starting to wonder about his earlier conversation with Evan about bringing Chris out to California. If Evan’s going to get bent out of shape about Dan having a beer with someone, maybe Dan doesn’t need to be quite so relaxed about sharing Chris with him. Dan knows that’s childish and isn’t too impressed with himself, but he’s not too impressed with Evan, either.

Chris asks him something about dinner, and Dan pulls himself back into the conversation. He knows Evan’s watching him a little more closely than usual, and he’s pretty sure Chris has picked up on it too. He wonders if he’s being a drama queen again, making up things to be upset about just so people will pay attention to him. He focuses on the conversation at hand, Chris and Evan wanting to go into town for dinner, and he agrees and tries to get into a good mood. Things with Evan are still sorting themselves out, and it’ll either work or it won’t; he just needs to keep himself in a place where he’ll be okay regardless of how things end up.

chapter 15

JEFF is still busy at the gallery and then getting his mom on her plane back to Seattle, but the rest of the gang is ready for food. Evan heads up to the house to get Tat, and Robyn wanders downstairs and gets invited, and they all go into town for an early dinner. The sun is still warm when they arrive, so they sit on the patio at Zio's, and it's relaxed and friendly and good. Chris agrees that the panini is a gift from the gods, and Tat uses her sore shoulder as a way to get Evan to cut her meal up for her and then tries to convince him to feed her, too, making little baby bird squawks whenever she wants a bite. Evan retaliates by putting more and more food on each forkful until she starts laughing midbite and almost chokes. Robyn grills Chris for information about people back in Kentucky, and he tells his stories with such charisma that the whole table is drawn in, even though the Kaminskis have never met any of the characters and Dan isn't sure he has, either. All in all, it's a good way to get back on an even keel.

Robyn hitches a ride back to the farm with the Kaminskis, and Chris is going home with Dan, so there's not a lot of privacy for a dramatic goodbye between Dan and Evan, and Dan thinks it's just as well. Evan was right when he said that the physical part was easy between them, that it just worked, but Dan's starting to think that maybe it's a little too easy, and that they need to stop using it as a way to gloss over things that they really should talk about. Or maybe they shouldn't talk about them, because there's really nothing to say, and they should just enjoy each others' bodies... but if that's all they're doing, then Dan still needs a bit of time away so he can keep his emotions under control, keep from getting too attached. He used to be good at sex without attachment—maybe he needs to redevelop the skill.

Dan and Chris walk back to the apartment together, neither one saying much. It's not late when they arrive, but Chris has an early flight

the next morning, and neither one is feeling too energetic. Dan pours them each a bourbon, more for the ritual than the alcohol, and he stands in the bedroom door and watches Chris as he puts the sheets on the sofa. When Chris is done, he turns and sits and looks at Dan.

“Did you and Evan have a fight? Earlier?”

“A fight? No, not really.” Dan takes a sip of his drink and leans against the doorjamb. “It was just—” He breaks off. Maybe he doesn’t need to drag Chris into this. “I never cheated on Justin. Not even after the accident. You knew that, right?”

Chris nods. “Yeah. I knew that.” He waits for Dan to continue, but Dan drains his glass instead, and Chris sits back and clinks the ice cubes in his drink. When Dan has nothing more to say, Chris changes the topic a little. “After dinner, when Evan and I went inside for a bit, he asked if I wanted to move out here. Said he thought he had a job for me, if I was interested.” Chris watches Dan closely. “He said he’d talked to you about it, and I thought maybe that’s what the fight was about. But it wasn’t? It was this... cheating thing?”

“Shit, Chris, why would Evan and I fight about offering you a job?” Dan is genuinely surprised by Chris’s thoughts. “I told him it’d be great for me to have you out here. And I said he shouldn’t offer you a job as a favor to me, because you could get your own job if you wanted to move, and he said he wasn’t. That’s... and nobody’s cheating, or thinking of cheating! It’s just Evan being... possessive, I guess.”

Chris smiles. “About Taylor.”

Dan nods, and is about to explain, but then he catches himself. “But what about the job? What did you tell him?”

“I told him I was definitely interested, but that I had to think about it.” Chris stretches his legs out in front of him. “I mean, Jeff’s mom working for you, me working for Evan, you and Evan’s sister in business together.... Things are getting pretty damn entwined. And you and Jeff seem fine, from what I’ve seen, but you and Evan.... I mean, obviously you like each other, but....”

Dan just nods. “Yeah. It’s not for sure about Jeff’s mom, but if you want the job, though... like, on its own, not as part of some larger... whatever... I don’t think he’d be an asshole about it, if this

thing with him and me doesn't work out."

"Yeah, okay." Chris's smile is fond and gentle, a look that Dan doesn't see much from his friend. "What do you think, Danny? You want a new neighbor?" He looks around the apartment. "I would have said roomie, but... I don't think so."

"Nice. What a gracious guest you are."

"Dude, I could excuse the place in Kentucky because it was right above the barn—convenience is important. But, honestly, this is the best you could do in the entire town out here? Or God forbid you go into San Jose or something."

"Hey, you and Evan are all tight now. If you don't like it here, I'm sure he's got a bed for you."

"Now you're talking—but then how could we whisper and giggle and have our nightly pillow fight? Damn, I guess I'm stuck here."

"Well, then, quit your bitching and go put your frilly pajamas on—I'll braid your hair before bed."

Chris smiles, and then shifts again. "This Taylor guy—I don't mean to pry, man, but it's always sounded like maybe some of the people you used to hang around with... maybe they weren't exactly upstanding citizens?" Chris checks to see if Dan's going to object to this, and then continues. "Is he okay? I mean... you've got a pretty good thing going out here. Is he going to get in the way of that?"

Dan thinks back to the time he'd spent with Taylor. It had only been one summer, working at the farm of a woman who seemed more interested in hiring good-looking grooms than buying well-trained horses or riding the ones she had. Taylor had resented it more than Dan had; he'd hated the way the woman treated them like decorations but also the way the other guys working there took advantage of the situation, neglecting the horses in favor of lounging around the pool at the house. Taylor and Dan had been the only ones who seemed to care about the animals, and they'd ended up working their asses off trying to pick up the slack and keep things running smoothly. Dan hadn't minded too much, but Taylor had just gotten more and more tense, until finally Dan had realized that it wasn't just the situation at the barn that was frustrating Taylor. Once Dan had clued in and made the first move, Taylor's attitude had improved immensely.

But that's not exactly what Chris had asked about, and Dan rips himself back to the present. "Uh, no, he's a good guy. He was just working as a groom when I knew him—nothing hinky."

"But maybe something a bit kinky?" Chris asks, and his grin is as suggestive as his tone.

Dan can play that game. "I gotta say, dude—I love you straight boys." He leans back against the wall and lets his eyes almost close. "He was all confused and shy at the start, acting like he didn't know what he wanted, but once we got going... damn! He loved it, and then he'd get all conflicted and angry and act macho for a couple days, and then come crawling back for more.... It was pretty fucking hot, man."

Chris's expression is weird, and Dan wonders if he's gone too far—sometimes Chris has odd little squicks that Dan doesn't even think about—but he hasn't said anything too detailed this time, so he won't worry. Chris always has about seventy things going through his head at any given time, so he's probably just reacting to something else.

"So, you know... Evan's not wrong to think that we used to fuck around, but that doesn't mean that we're going to again. I do have some self-control, you know?" Chris looks like he hasn't really been following too closely. He can't be drunk, so he must just be tired. "Anyway, nothing for you to worry about if you decide to take the job." Dan pauses. "Do you think you're going to?"

"I don't know... I think... I think I need to figure some stuff out. You know, think it through."

"Yeah, fair enough. You've got a life back in Kentucky, after all."

Chris nods. "Yeah, I do." He looks like he's going to say something more but doesn't, and he waves away Dan's inquiring look. "I'm gonna go to sleep, man. Your alarm set?"

Dan nods that it is, and heads into the bedroom. He has a bit of trouble falling asleep, thinking about Evan, and wondering again whether this is a serious problem or just one more wrinkle that needs to be ironed out. He thinks about Jeff and wonders if it's worth discussing it with him or if that would be like being a tattletale... and with that conundrum, he falls asleep.

He wakes to the alarm and turns the coffee on before heading to

the shower. Chris is looking around groggily, like he has no idea where he is or even who Dan is, and Dan feels an almost physical wave of affection for his friend. Chris has a lot of strengths, but waking up is not one of them, and Dan likes seeing him when he's a little vulnerable. Dan isn't exactly a morning person himself, and Justin used to spring out of bed full of energy and plans for the day, and then spend the first half-hour taunting Dan, and Chris if he was around. He'd said it was the only time he could get anything past them without them ganging up on him. It surprises Dan sometimes when he realizes how much a part of the relationship Chris had been; Dan had practically been in a threesome back in Kentucky, only without the bonus sex. It had sure seemed easier back there.

Chris is still lying on the couch by the time Dan's showered and dressed, and Dan's still feeling affectionate and benevolent, so he pours Chris a cup of coffee and brings it to him. Chris grunts his appreciation and sits up enough to take a sip, and then another. He sighs contentedly and leans back against the arm of the sofa, and Dan doesn't want to disturb him, but he has to.

"Now, if you lived out here, you'd be able to stay there as long as you wanted. But you don't live here, and if you want to catch your flight, we need to leave in about fifteen minutes."

Chris snuggles in a bit, still seeming half asleep, but when he speaks his voice is clear. A bit whiny, but clear. "Maybe I don't need to go back—I could just get them to ship my stuff out."

"Some people come to California for the lifestyle, others for the natural beauty—you're going to move here because you're too lazy to haul your ass off a twenty-year-old couch?"

Chris wrinkles his face up as if in deep thought, then opens one eye and looks cautiously at Dan. "Would that be a bad reason?"

"Yup. So let's go, up and at 'em, rise and shine, it's another day of glorious opportunity..." Justin had been able to say those things with a straight face and genuine enthusiasm; Dan sounds like he's about to fall back to sleep himself. But it's enough of a reminder to make Chris smile and open both eyes.

"Early bird gets the worm?"

"Well, there's no worms in the fridge. There's no anything in the

fridge, really, so if you want any breakfast, we've got to hit a drive-through—so get *up*!”

“I liked you better when you were quietly bringing me coffee.”

“Yeah, well, I'm multifaceted... and some of the facets are nicer than others. Let's go!” Dan had been leaning over Chris, but now he straightens with what he hopes is energy and enthusiasm. “Fantastic! I wonder what wonderful things will happen today!”

Chris rolls his eyes, but he sits all the way up before taking another sip from his mug. “I can barely wait to find out.”

“That's the spirit.” Chris hauls himself all the way to his feet, and Dan collapses on the newly vacated couch. He curls up in the still-warm sheets and says, “I'm all worn out. I'm just gonna have a little nap now... wake me when you're ready to go.”

“I'm'a wake you with a bucket of cold water, you bastard. Get out of my bed.”

Dan gives Chris a mock-lecherous look and stretches out on the couch. “Why you gotta fight it, baby? You know you want me in your bed.”

Chris looks temporarily startled, and then grins. “Is that the line you used on Taylor? Pretty smooth, man.”

Dan laughs. “Hey, if it works....”

“Dan, I don't think it's your *lines* that get you laid.”

Dan just grins and taps his watch. “Tick tock, dude. Go shower.”

Chris is remarkably efficient once he gets going, a feature which Dan had factored in to their morning's plans, and he's packed up and following Dan out the door right on time. They stop off at a McDonald's on the highway for breakfast. Chris bitches about the low-class dining, but he orders six of the little hash brown bars to go with his Egg McMuffin, so Dan isn't too worried.

The airport drop off is only a little awkward. Dan doesn't get out of the truck this time, but there's no winning with Chris. “Have you got your emotions back under control, then, Danny? You've been schooling yourself all the way out here, and you're somehow finding the strength to say goodbye to me without a big public display?”

“You mean dancing a happy jig? Yeah, I’m gonna save that until I see your plane actually take off.”

“Wow, you’re going to wait around and watch the plane leave? Will you run after it, waving at me through the window, bravely fighting back tears?”

“I’m bravely fighting back nausea, dude. Get out of the damn truck.”

Chris shakes his head sadly. “If that’s the way you want to leave it, darling....”

“Leave what? You’re moving out here. You know it and I know it, so stop pretending. You miss me so much you’re gonna move halfway across the continent in order to stalk my ass. Should I tell Evan he’s got a new employee, or will you?”

Chris grins. “I will. Probably. I’ve got to, you know, figure things out back home. But yeah, I think.... I don’t know, I told him I’d give him a call to discuss details... salary....” Chris whirls suddenly and fixes Dan with a steely glare. “You had better not be spying for him, man! If you tell him I’m interested, it’ll screw up my negotiations.” Chris leans back a little and then tents his fingers, tapping the tips together like a cartoon mastermind. “This is an interesting test of your loyalty, isn’t it? Do you maintain the confidence of an old friend, or do you *betray* him in order to impress your new flame?”

“Flame”? Dude, come on, are you visiting from the old folk’s home?” They’re both laughing, but Dan feels like there’s maybe something a little serious too. He’s just not sure exactly what it is, or how to say the right thing to make it okay. “Evan’s a smart guy. I don’t think I need to help him negotiate. You, on the other hand—you need all the help you can get.” Chris just nods past the insult, but Dan thinks he gets the idea.

“Yeah, all right, then.” Chris climbs out of the truck and shuts the door, then leans down to talk through the open window. “So, I’ll give you a call when I get things figured out.” Dan nods, and Chris smiles at him. “You take care of yourself, Danny.”

Dan nods. “Yeah, I will. You too, all right?”

Chris acts like he needs to consider it. “Yeah, okay, I guess I can

do that.” He thumps the roof of the truck and then backs away, waves, and turns. The airport is crowded, and Chris is out of sight almost immediately, swallowed by the crowd.

Dan feels a bit disoriented as he drives back to the barn. Hanging out with Chris had felt familiar and good, and it’s a bit hard to adjust to him being gone, even if it does turn out to be only temporary. Once he gets to work, he’s quickly distracted by the demands of his job, and he remembers that with or without Chris, the horses will always be a familiar reminder of his old life.

He finishes up in time to get home, shower, and put on clean clothes, and then he heads for the bar. He’s looking forward to seeing Taylor and wonders if he’ll have changed as much as Dan feels like he has. Dan hopes that Taylor’s not expecting the same Dan, because Dan really doesn’t think he’s that guy anymore, and he doesn’t really want to be.

The bar’s a bit of a dive, and Dan wonders for a moment what it means that Evan would suggest this place instead of somewhere classier, but he tries not to dwell on it. It’s still early and the place is pretty empty; those customers that *are* there seem not so much like the “after work” crowd as the “out of work” crowd, but no one seems objectionable, and Dan isn’t afraid of a little roughness.

He glances around and spots a familiar profile at the far end of the bar. Taylor is busy flirting with the bartender, so nothing’s really changed there, and Dan lets himself watch for a few moments before crossing over and sitting on the stool next to Taylor.

He leans in a little and says, “Hey, cowboy, wanna go for a ride?” in his best imitation of a drunk old man.

Taylor doesn’t miss a beat, and doesn’t break eye contact with the pretty bartender when he says, “I really don’t think you could keep up.” He smiles at the woman, and then slowly turns to Dan. “How ya doing, man?”

Dan nods. “Not bad.” Taylor looks good, and it’s a little disconcerting. Dan had been prepared for the pretty boy he’d known, not the man standing in front of him, and he thinks for the first time that maybe Evan hadn’t been totally wrong to be a little worried. Dark hair and blue eyes, high cheekbones, and tanned skin making him look

almost exotic.... Dan calls his mind back to business. "You want to get a table?"

Taylor nods, smiling regretfully at the bartender, and Dan gets a PBR from her before they go. They find a table in the corner with no one sitting at the tables next to it, and then sit back and look at each other. Taylor gives Dan an appreciative once-over and Dan returns the favor, and they both laugh at how cheesy they are.

"So what have you been up to, man?" Dan is genuinely curious. Taylor looks a lot less hungry than he used to. There's maybe a hint of tension around his eyes, in his shoulders, but nothing compared to the tightly wound creature that he used to be. Taylor has always reminded Dan of a cat, one of the big ones—like a panther maybe—ready to spring at any moment. But now he seems more like a lion, napping in the shade of a tree somewhere. Still beautiful and powerful, but more content.

And then Dan remembers that there's someone else who's going to be coming by and observing Taylor. "Oh, before I forget. This guy I'm... I don't know... this guy I'm involved with... he's a bit paranoid, and he was there when you called yesterday. He was building toward a bit of a freakout so I told him he could come by. Is that cool?"

When Taylor smiles, Dan is reminded again of a big cat, but this time it's getting ready to purr. "Thinks I'm a threat, does he?"

Dan needs to shut that down. Taylor's too damn hot for Dan to risk flirting with him. "Like I said, he's a bit paranoid. He worries about things that he really doesn't need to." He holds Taylor's eyes long enough to make sure the point is made.

Taylor drops his eyes and then shrugs. "Yeah, okay." He's quiet for a second and then looks up. "So, yeah, that's not why I called you. Might have been a nice bonus, but really I wanted to catch up, and, you know... ask a favor."

"Okay, good. It really is good to see you, man."

"Yeah, you too. You look... you know, older. Getting a little ragged around the edges, maybe...."

"Fuck you, Andrews. My edges are just fine."

"Maybe it was all the sun in your early years. It seems like every

time I pick up a magazine I read more about how hard the sun is on your skin, with the premature aging....”

“Yeah, dude, that says more about the magazines you read than anything else. I can’t believe you used to think you were straight.”

Taylor laughs first, and that means Dan wins. He sits back and smiles, then says, “Seriously, man, what have you been up to? We kinda lost touch after Vanessa shut the barn down.”

“Vanessa’s husband, more like it. Not that I blame him.” Taylor takes a long pull on his beer. “For a while, I just did more of the same. You know, traveling around, catching jobs when they came up... but, uh...” He looks awkward for a second, then reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet. He opens it up and passes it over to Dan, who finds himself looking at a chubby toddler, grinning from ear to ear, his face covered in something orange-red.... “He likes his spaghetti, man.” Taylor shrugs. “That’s Owen. He’s two. His mom didn’t want to have him in the first place... you know, wanted an abortion. And I thought I’d gotten rid of all that Catholic stuff, but... I don’t know, I just... it didn’t seem right. So I told her if she went through with the pregnancy, I’d take over from there.”

“Wow. Shit, man, he’s beautiful. Well, I think he is... it’s hard to tell through the sauce.”

“Flip it over, asshole.”

Dan does, and on the opposite side there’s another picture, this time of Owen a little younger and much cleaner, but with the same big grin on his face, sitting on the back of a Shetland pony.

“I was right there beside the pony. I didn’t just leave him sitting on it—someone else took the picture, and I just jumped off to the side right before they snapped it.”

“Relax, dude, I wasn’t gonna accuse you of child abuse. That damn pony’s back is so wide the kid could probably stretch out and have a nap without rolling off.”

“Gretel. The pony.” Taylor smiles fondly. “Owen had no fear at all... just marched right up to her. I think he thought she was stuffed, because we have one of those... those teddy-bear-type rocking horses? You know, it’s like a stuffed horse, but it has some kind of frame, and

rockers....” He notices Dan’s look. “Shut up, man. You have no idea how long I can talk about damn baby accessories.”

“No, dude, it... it looks good on you. Being a father. I mean, the whole thing is one more reason to be careful about sleeping with women, but... it seems like it worked out okay for you.”

Taylor gives him a careful look to be sure he’s not joking, and then nods. “Yeah, it... I mean, pretty damn life changing, but you know, it’s totally worth it.” He gets that look on his face that parents sometimes do, the almost-amazed glow, and Dan feels a flash of jealousy. He’s never really thought about kids, not seriously, but it’s hard to deny that Owen seems to have made Taylor really happy.

Taylor snaps himself back from his reverie. “So, anyway, obviously with a kid I had to settle down a little. And my family’s out here. My sister’s in Oakland, and she’s got two kids of her own, so she was really helpful. And my parents, even, once they got past the ‘where’s the mother’ crap. And my brother’s still a useless flake, but he’s not bad at being the fun uncle.” He shakes his head a little. “Anyway, I got a job at this place for handicapped kids to learn to ride horses? Well, ‘special needs’, ‘differently abled’... whatever. And at first I just worked in the barn, but I got certified and got promoted to instructor, and then about six months ago the executive director quit, and I got that job.” He looks at Dan. “It’s not all that impressive, really. It’s a small place, only five full-time staff, counting me. But, you know... it’s... I feel like I’m doing something good, you know?”

“Fuck, man, of course you are. That’s incredible. I’ve seen those places—like, demonstrations at horse shows and stuff. The kids seem like they’re having a blast.”

“Yeah, and you know, for a lot of them, that’s all it is, and that’s enough, because they have a hell of a time day to day, so giving them something fun to do is great. But for some of them, it’s real therapy. We have a part-time physiotherapist, but the kids I’ve been amazed by are the ones with emotional problems. A lot of them can relate to the horses way better than to humans, and the horses are big enough so the kids don’t hurt them if they freak out. I mean, obviously we supervise, but.... The kids get sick of adults telling them what to do, but it doesn’t take them long to figure out that they need a little advice to figure out how to get the horses to do what they want.” He trails off and looks a

little sheepish. “Sorry. I.... It’s pretty cool, is all.”

Dan doesn’t even know what word would describe how he’s feeling. He thinks maybe he’s charmed. “No, it’s great. You being enthusiastic. It’s nice to see.”

Taylor looks at Dan to see if he’s teasing, then shrugs. “It’s a big jump from shoveling shit for Vanessa, that’s for sure. A lot more satisfying.” He smiles. “But I still do some work in show barns, when I have time. Good for making connections, and the extra money sure doesn’t hurt. And I’ve been riding an eventer lately, just bringing him along, and you know how horse people are—all about the gossip. So, I think I know a hell of a lot more about what you’ve been up to than you knew about me.” His face gets serious. “I was sorry to hear about your boyfriend. I mean, I didn’t know him, but... seems like he was a good guy.” Taylor shrugs. “Must have been, if he got you to stay in one place for that long.”

“Yeah, he was.” Dan’s found that he’s able to get this far in a conversation about Justin and keep his cool, but he really can’t go much further, so he changes the subject. “And now I’m out here. You weren’t at Shepherd, were you? I would have seen you.”

“Nah, the son-of-a-bitch came up lame three days before. It’s the second time that’s happened, actually—I was gonna maybe get your advice on it, see if I’m training him too fast, or if there’s some way around it.”

“That’s it? That’s the favor?” Dan is a mix of amused and relieved.

“What? Oh, no, man. I mean, yeah, it’d be a favor, ’cause I’m sure as hell not gonna pay your worthless ass for a little advice, but no, the actual favor’s a little bigger. Well, I think it’s a little bigger. I don’t know, really, and you know, if it’s gonna put you in a bad spot, say no, ’cause I can figure something else out....”

“Okay, man, now you’ve got me curious. What is it?”

Taylor looks awkward. “It’s, uh... it’s money. When I took over the program, it was running at a loss, and then the economy tanked, and... we’re in a pretty tight spot. So I’ve got everyone on the board, all the volunteers, all the employees... we’re all calling in favors, hitting up everyone we can think of who might have a little to share.”

Dan's never been in this position before. It's a bit uncomfortable, but nothing like what Taylor had seemed to be building up to. He thinks of the money he's got in his savings account. "Yeah, man, I can spare a little. I mean, I'm not exactly rolling in cash, but it sounds like a great program. I'd be glad to help out."

Taylor doesn't look relieved, though. "Yeah, thanks, that's... that's really generous of you, and every little bit helps. But, uh... actually, I was hoping... Okay, I told you I heard about you through gossip, right? So... I also heard about who you're working for." Dan understands now, but he waits for Taylor to continue. "And someone like that, he'd have the money to *really* make a difference, you know? So, I don't know how it works with you two, but... if you were able to talk to him... it'd be great to get him out to the barn, to see what we're doing, but even just a meeting, just five minutes of face time with him... it'd be great if you could set it up, man. I mean, like I said, if it puts you in a bad spot, we'll try to figure something else out." Taylor's watching Dan carefully, trying to gauge his reaction. "His name came up after Shepherd. Somebody on the board had been there and said how Kaminski had been there, too, and how great that could be. If he got involved with horses we could maybe have a reason to approach him... and then someone mentioned your name, and, you know...." Taylor trails off and looks at Dan cautiously.

Movement catches Dan's eye, and he looks toward the door to see Evan walking through. He sees Dan and heads to the bar to get a beer before coming over. "You just want a few minutes with him, maybe have a beer or something?" Dan smiles at Taylor. He's not sure how he feels about being in this position and isn't sure how Evan's going to like it, but there's not much he can do about it right now. "Yeah, okay, I think that can be arranged."

chapter 16

EVAN looks a little out of place still dressed in his suit and tie, tall and healthy and vibrant in contrast to the rough, used-up patrons of the bar. He looks out of place but good. At least Dan appreciates it. As he walks across the bar toward them, Dan realizes that they still haven't even worked out how to greet each other in public. He thinks back, frantically trying to remember how Jeff and Evan act together or how Dan and Justin used to. He remembers the strategy he'd used with Chris and nods for Taylor to stand up. Dan stands with him but just behind, and when Evan gets there, Dan shoves Taylor forward a little and says, "Evan, this is Taylor Andrews. Taylor, Evan Kaminski." His grin is only a little wicked when he raises his eyebrows at Taylor and adds, "Interesting coincidence, I guess."

Evan's smile is a little tight when he shakes Taylor's hand, but Dan doesn't think anyone who wasn't used to Evan's usual full-face grin would notice it. Evan's got three beer bottles held between the fingers of his left hand, so that's a good sign, at least—he's being friendly enough to get a round. But now he's looking at Dan with a questioning look. "How's it a coincidence?"

Dan shakes his head. "Sit down, man." They all sit, and Dan lets his knee fall over to touch Evan's. Evan notices and glances at him, then smiles a little. So maybe they're okay there. "Yeah, uh, remember how I told you that Taylor had a favor to ask me? It turns out that you're it."

Evan looks blank. "How do you mean?"

"He wanted to see if he could get five minutes of face time with my boss." Dan remembers then and turns to Taylor. "But he's not my boss anymore. Technically." He shrugs. "But I guess that doesn't really matter for the current conversation."

“No, he’s... *he’s* the guy you’re involved with?” Taylor still seems a bit stunned by the whole situation, and Dan can’t help laughing a little. It’s kind of fun to be the one who knows what’s going on for a change.

“I didn’t mean to ambush you, man... or you, either,” he adds, turning to Evan. “We were just getting to the part where he wanted to meet you, and then, bam! There you were. It was like magic, really. I should go on the road.”

Evan’s frowning a little, but he seems more confused than angry. He seems to sense that Dan is enjoying his position of superior knowledge a little too much to be helpful, so he turns to Taylor instead. “I don’t get it. If you didn’t know that Dan and I were... involved... why did you want to meet me?”

Taylor looks more than a little flustered. Dan finds it cute, remembering when Taylor had been trying to figure out his attraction to Dan, how easy it had been to get him disconcerted, just a casual brush when walking through a doorway or holding his gaze half a second too long... but that’s not an appropriate thing to be thinking about right now, and Dan tries to call his mind back to the present.

Taylor takes a deep breath. “I’m sorry, man, I wasn’t really expecting... I mean.... Okay, sorry, just give me one second.” Taylor takes another breath, lets it out, and then smiles at Evan. “Okay. Uh, I wasn’t expecting to see you today, so I don’t have any of the backup documents or anything, but...” Taylor looks like he’s going to try to keep going with some sort of businesslike approach, but then he glances at Dan and frowns. “Okay, you like Dan, so you probably aren’t a big fan of bullshit. I, uh... I wanted to meet you because I want to ask you for money.” Evan’s eyebrows go up, and Dan jogs his knee a little, hoping to send a message to relax.

Taylor continues, his voice a little high, a little too fast. “Not for me, obviously... well, maybe that’s not obvious, I don’t know what kind of appeals you must get every day. But... I work for a nonprofit organization... a charity. It gives horseback-riding lessons and equine therapy to kids with special needs. It’s a great program, and I’d love to tell you more about it or take you on a tour of the place or whatever you’d like.... But, yeah, I called Dan because we’re in a hell of a bind, financially, and I heard he was working for you, and I thought maybe

he could help get me in past the gatekeepers.” He shakes his head. “I didn’t think it would be quite this easy, to be honest.”

Evan looks at Taylor appraisingly. “There’s a process for this. Both the company and the family give quite a bit of money to charities, but there’s an application process. We have... there’s, I don’t know, four or five people at the company who deal with this exclusively.”

Taylor looks a little embarrassed. “Yeah, I know. Sorry, we’ve applied to them, we have. But... like you said, it’s a process, and it takes quite a while, and we’re in trouble *now*. And... we have a list of the charities your company gives to, and they’re great, and we think we’d fit right in, but it’s a pretty steady list from year to year. Not a lot of new additions. I mean, no one’s gonna say, ‘no, thanks, we don’t need your money this year’, you know? And... I don’t know, we don’t have a list of your private donations, but... is it about the same, maybe? You give to the same people year after year?” Taylor shrugs. “I’m not saying they’re not deserving....”

He looks at Evan’s impassive face and then over at Dan. Then he looks back at Evan. “I’m sorry to put you on the spot. I mean, there’s stuff I’d love to show you, and I really, really think you’d be impressed by what we’re doing at the barn. But you just came here for a drink, you weren’t expecting all this....” He looks over at Dan for help, and Dan takes pity on him.

“Yeah, man, sorry.” He smiles tentatively at Evan. “I have no idea how you handle all this stuff, and I’m sure you’re already really generous with people.”

Evan looks back at him and shrugs, and Taylor stands up, taking advantage of the break in conversation. “I’m just gonna go....” he says, and he gestures in the direction of the men’s room. Dan nods, and Taylor heads away.

Evan still isn’t talking, and Dan’s beginning to get a little worried. “Are you okay, man? I mean, it really wasn’t a deliberate ambush. *I* had no idea what he wanted, and *he* had no idea you were the guy who was coming to check up on us.”

Evan sighs and turns to Dan. “I’m not mad, man, I get it. I just... Jesus, does he have to be so fucking gorgeous?”

Dan is silent for a moment and then snorts out a half-laugh.

“What? I mean... you’re still on that? Him being good looking?”

“More than good looking, Dan.” Evan sounds a little frustrated.

“Well, shit, man, what can I say? I’m shallow; I like my men handsome.” He twists in his seat a little and brings one hand over to Evan’s thigh. “You’re pretty good proof of that.”

Evan shakes his head. “Ryan wasn’t that pretty.”

Dan can’t believe that Ryan is being held up as the better option. “Ryan’s cute, and what the hell? You got all bent out of shape over him, too, so don’t go pretending this is some sort of... unique problem.”

“Ryan... shit, I’d *pay* to have Ryan back. This guy... he could be a model or something, but no, that’s not quite enough. He’s got to work for a charity, and seem be a good guy, and know about horses, *and* be fucking gorgeous....”

“Well, shit, man, when you put it that way, what the hell am I doing with you?” Dan waits for an answer and then shakes his head in frustration. “What the fuck, dude, since when are you insecure? You’re Evan Kaminski, for fuck’s sake—you give the money so people can afford to hire people like Taylor, and you know you’re a good guy, and you’re learning about horses, and I hate to break it to you, man, but you’re smokin’ hot.” Dan glances around the bar; it’s a bit rough, and he doesn’t want to call attention to them, but it feels wrong to be so far away from Evan. He brings his free hand up to the back of Evan’s neck, and gives it a shake, just like he’s seen Jeff do. “I... I wish you were a bit less mental, but otherwise, seriously... no complaints.” He grins a little. “And obviously I’m in no position to bitch about other people’s lack of mental stability.”

Evan’s quiet, but the muscles of his thigh are relaxing under Dan’s fingers. Finally, he glances over at Dan. “Smokin’ hot, huh?”

“Scorching.”

“Yeah?”

“Stop it, now. You’re just fishing for compliments.” Dan smiles, and Evan smiles back ruefully. “Okay, listen, Taylor’s gonna be back any minute, and you can do what you want about the money. That’s totally none of my business. But in terms of being jealous... chill out, man. The only excuse for that sort of behavior is make-up sex, and we

are too far from privacy for that to be a good option.”

Evan looks thoughtful. “Is there an alley? Or, hey, the back of your truck, maybe?”

Dan grins. “Yeah, I think I’m a little old for both options, and you’re too... socially prominent.”

Evan frowns. “Well, I bet there’s a hotel or something around here. Hey, maybe we could find one that charges by the hour....”

“Wow, you can add ‘classy’ to your list of good qualities.” Dan looks across and sees Taylor coming out of the bathroom. He looks across nervously, as if he’s not sure it’s time for him to come back yet. Dan nods him over. “Okay, Evan, Taylor’s coming back, and I don’t have anything to say about the money, but he’s a friend of mine, and you need to be civil, all right?”

Evan nods. “Yeah, I will be. Sorry.” He sounds sheepish and adorable, and Dan starts to think that finding a motel isn’t a terrible idea.

Taylor has stopped at the bar for another round, and Dan chugs what’s left of his previous drink. He needs to slow down or he won’t be able to drive home, but alcohol’s a good way to take the edge off, and everybody buying rounds for everybody seems like a good peace offering.

When Taylor sits down, Evan starts talking right away. “So, yeah, that does sound like an interesting program.” He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a business card, then a pen, and starts writing on the back of the card. “This is my assistant’s direct line... Sam. Give her a call and say I want to have an appointment with you, and she’ll set something up. Okay? We can look over the numbers, see what’s needed.” He pulls out another card and passes it and the pen over to Taylor. “If you write down the name of the organization and the contact information, I can get my guys started on the vetting.”

Taylor’s looking a little surprised, like he’d expected to come back from the bathroom and hear a refusal. He glances at Dan, who just shrugs, and then Taylor starts writing. “That’s... that’s great, really. I mean... it’s a really great program.” He looks over at Dan. “We actually... we have a thing set up for kids to do community service out there, you know... if they’ve gotten in trouble with the law or

something.” He grins. “They come out thinking they’re hot shit, so tough, and we have this big Percheron gelding, totally gentle but almost eighteen hands, and, you know, a *Percheron*, so... huge. And we’ll ask them to lead him somewhere, or something, and they’re almost all just petrified. But every now and then, a kid will just look at him, and... I don’t know, it’s like they... like they glow, or something... like a switch got flipped.” He catches himself, and Dan sees him try to lower his level of enthusiasm. He shrugs at Dan. “You know, I just... I remembered you had a thing for Percherons.”

Evan looks like he’s about to be jealous about this tidbit of knowledge, but Dan’s hand is still on his thigh, and it’s rubbing a little, and he calms down. “Which ones are Percherons? We don’t have any at the barn, do we?”

Dan shakes his head. “Nah, but we should. If we got one that was a little lighter than others, maybe a cross or something, that’d be a good horse for you. They’re huge, man, and totally... I don’t know, they’re....”

“Impressive.” Taylor agrees. “I’ve seen a Percheron-Arab cross that was nice—had almost all the size of the Percheron, but a great Arab head, and a little lighter in the body... still a good temperament too.”

Evan looks like he’s taking mental notes of all this. “So it’d be bigger than the eventers? ’Cause, I gotta tell you... Smokey seems pretty big to me.”

Dan laughs and glances at Taylor. “Smokey’s my quarter horse. He’s about fifteen hands.”

Taylor looks at Evan and grins. “Yeah, that’d be pretty small for a Percheron.” He looks like he’s debating whether to continue. “You know, donation or not—if you want to come out to the barn sometime and see the place, I could show you Boxer—that’s our Percheron. He’s big, but he’s gentle, so it’s like a St. Bernard, you know? Not intimidating.”

Evan gives him an incredulous look. “Dude, have you not seen *Cujo*? St. Bernards are... they’re a dangerous breed, man!”

Taylor looks like he’s not sure if Evan is serious. “Well... okay, then I was wrong... Percherons aren’t like St. Bernards. Boxer has

never gone rabid and trapped a family in a broken-down car, and I really don't think he ever will."

"Yeah, well..." Evan shakes his head. "That's what they thought about Cujo too."

Dan sits back and lets them get to know each other. They leave the Percheron and Cujo conversation after a while, thank God, and move on to discussing where Taylor's living, and his son, and where his sister lives, and what she does for a living, and what his brother does, and then his parents. It should feel like an interrogation, Dan thinks, because it's all Evan asking and Taylor answering, but Taylor doesn't act like he's being interrogated. He looks a little dazzled, maybe, but not intimidated, not uncomfortable. He seems surprised when he lifts his bottle for a drink and finds it empty, as if he'd been so engaged in the conversation that he hadn't even realized he'd been drinking.

"Another round?" Evan asks, but Taylor looks at his watch and shakes his head.

"I can't, man. I told Owen I'd be home for bedtime, and I'm already pushing it."

Evan nods. "Yeah, okay. Can't let the little man down."

"Well, I don't *want* to, if I can help it." Taylor stands up, and Dan and Evan do too. They shake hands, and Taylor heads out, and Dan looks over at Evan.

"So, how much of that was real, man? How much was you just showing off how charming you can be, and how much was you really being interested?"

Evan looks like Dan had asked if he'd eaten his daily bucket of rotten potatoes. "Of course I was interested, Dan!" He's just a little too shocked, though, and a little too sincere sounding, and Dan stares him down until he cracks. "Okay, it started as showing off, but... he's not a bad guy, is he?"

"No, Evan, he's not. He's a good guy."

Evan nods as if that topic has been resolved, and he moves on to the next. "I was talking to Jeff this afternoon—he said to come by if we wanted on the way home."

"Yeah?" Dan would like to see Jeff, would like to hear his

rumbling voice. He wonders whether Jeff called Evan or the other way around, and what exactly they'd talked about. Whether he'd been mentioned, and if so, what Jeff thought about him meeting up with Taylor. He doesn't know if he wants them to have talked about him or not. The whole situation seems topsy-turvy, somehow. He thinks of how he'd realized earlier that he'd been in a sort of threesome in Kentucky, and he doesn't think he'd have worried if Chris and Justin had talked about him; he knows, in fact, that they did. So why is he worried about it now, with Jeff and Evan?

Evan's voice cuts into his reverie. "So, do you want to? Go by Jeff's?"

"Uh, I don't know.... Do you want to?"

"Yeah, I told him I would."

And that clears that up. Evan and Jeff have already decided what to do with their evening; if Dan doesn't like the plan, he's on his own. Part of him wants to be contrary, to say he'd rather do something else just so they know not to take him for granted, but he's pretty sure they'd just let him go, and then he wouldn't get to see Jeff. Wouldn't get to take Evan's clothes off, run his hands over that lean stomach....

"Yeah, okay. I'll come by for a bit, maybe."

Evan looks like he's not thrilled with the lack of enthusiasm. "Did you have something else planned?"

Dan doesn't really feel up to explaining his ambivalence. "Not really... just maybe an early night... get some laundry done, or something."

"Is that your version of 'washing your hair'?" Evan's mostly joking, Dan thinks, but there's a bit of an edge to it.

"We don't all have housekeepers, Evan—some of us really do have to do laundry."

"Well, you know, don't let us keep you from it, if it's important."

Dan wonders where the charming, easygoing Evan has gone. Did he use it all up on Taylor? And if it was an act with Taylor, has it been an act with Dan too? He's losing his patience. "I think I can manage to do both, Evan."

“What, pop by for a quickie and then take off? So it’s still just sex, then?”

“What the fuck, Evan.” Dan shakes his head tiredly. “You can’t think that acting like this is going to make me *want* to spend a night cuddled up and watching TV with you.” He looks around the bar. Nobody’s really paying any attention to them yet, but Dan isn’t sure it’s going to stay that way. “Let’s go outside, all right?”

Evan looks like he’s about to argue, but then he nods abruptly and leads the way out the door. Once they’re outside he starts walking, heading toward his car, Dan supposes, but Dan’s car is in the opposite direction. Evan doesn’t seem to be waiting for him, and Dan isn’t inclined to call after him. He *is* inclined to *stare* after him, apparently, because that’s what he does for several of Evan’s giant strides. Then he steps back into the alcove around the bar’s door and pulls out his cell. Dan’s in over his head; he’s calling for backup.

chapter 17

DAN hits Jeff's number on speed dial. Things are spinning out of control, and Jeff is good at slowing things down. Dan stops for a moment before hitting "send," and wonders if he should keep Jeff out of it; what if Jeff turns out to be on Evan's side? Could this be it? After all of the big talk, is this all there's going to be? He hesitates, but then hits the button to make the call. He'd rather get bad news than be left in the dark.

Jeff's voice is instantly soothing when he answers. He sounds almost amused. "Dan, hi. Are you coming over?"

Dan hesitates again. "Uh... I don't know, man. I was just with Evan, and he seemed a little..." Dan trails off. He's not sure what word would best describe Evan. "Insane" certainly comes to mind.

"Yeah, I know." Dan can hear the smile in Jeff's voice. "He's on the other line. And, yeah, he's a little wound up. Why don't you come over and we'll sort things out."

"Shit, Jeff, is this.... You don't sound too concerned. Is this normal for him?"

Jeff almost laughs, and Dan wonders for the first time if it's real amusement in Jeff's voice. "Well, you know, he gets worked up sometimes."

"Maybe... should we sleep on it, and calm down a little?"

"Dan?" Jeff's voice is gentle. "It'd be good if you could come over." He pauses. "I've got to get back to Evan, but it's not far out of your way."

"Jesus, Jeff, I'm not worried about the travel time! I just..." Dan rubs his face with his hand. "Yeah, okay. I'll be there... well, just about the same time as Evan, I guess, 'cause we're coming from the same

place.”

“Okay. We’ll see you soon, then.” Jeff hangs up, and Dan leans back against the wall of the building. He’s really not sure what he’s going to have to say to Evan... or what Evan can have to say to him. But Jeff thinks it’s a good idea, and Jeff is better at this stuff than Dan, so he pushes himself off the wall and walks down the street to his car.

When he’s pulled away from the curb, he realizes that he may have lied a little to Jeff. Dan doesn’t think he’s going to arrive at the same time as Evan, because Dan has only the sketchiest idea of how to get to Jeff’s from downtown. He knows where he is, and he knows where Jeff’s is, but he’s not sure how to get from one place to the other. He ends up having to pull out a map and sort things out that way, and then he gets caught in a bit of a traffic jam. Evan probably knew enough to avoid that area of town.

He pulls up into Jeff’s driveway and sure enough, Evan’s car is already there. Dan parks off to the side, so that anyone can get their car out at any time... just in case. He takes a deep, steadying breath and heads up on to the porch. Jeff meets him at the door.

“We were starting to get worried. Thought maybe you got lost.” His voice is calm, but Dan can tell he’s asking a question.

“Yeah, I did, a little. I wasn’t sure how to get here from there.”

Jeff smiles. “Well, maybe that’s symbolic somehow....”

“Fuck that, Jeff, I’m not the one having a temper tantrum.”

Evan appears from behind Jeff, and apparently the brief separation hasn’t done much to calm him down. “No, you’re just the one meeting up with old boyfriends.”

“Oh, fuck that, too, Evan. I’m allowed to have friends. And you had an old girlfriend in your house all weekend, so spare me the hypocrisy, all right?”

Evan stares at Dan, and he really can’t tell if it’s because the words are sinking in or because he’s not willing to hear a single thing. Jeff doesn’t seem sure, either.

“Okay, guys, let’s chill out a little. Come on inside, Dan, and we’ll just figure this out.”

Dan's about to go in, because it's Jeff, after all, but then he literally catches himself, latching on to the doorjamb with his fingers. "Wait a second. Are we going inside to talk about how Evan's getting paranoid and imagining things, and what we can do to help him with that? 'Cause, okay, I can have that conversation. But if we're going inside to say that I did something wrong by going to have a drink with some guy I used to know, and *inviting Evan along*, for fuck's sake... I'm not having that conversation."

"Some guy you used to *fuck*," Evan corrects, and it's under his breath and Dan could ignore it if he wanted to, and he can tell that Jeff wants that, but he's had about enough.

"That's right, Evan, a guy I used to fuck. And it was *good*, man, totally intense. We just couldn't get enough of each other; we'd—"

"Okay, okay." Jeff's voice is raised, and Dan doesn't think he's ever heard that before. "That's not 'chilling out', guys." He takes a deep breath. "All right, let's... Evan, can you go get us some beers? Dan and I will... well, I was gonna say we'd go out on the back deck, but I don't think the neighbors need to hear all this. Let's just sit in the living room."

Evan gives them a sullen look, but he heads for the kitchen, and Jeff reaches a hand out to grip Dan's shoulder. "Dan, I know he's being a bit over the top, but... he really made an effort to keep cool when *you* were freaking out. Try to return the favor, okay?" Jeff squeezes a bit before letting his hand fall, and Dan has to admit that Jeff has a point. Evan *had* put up with a lot of Dan's shit.

Evan's obviously still pretty wired, because he makes it to the living room before them, even though he'd detoured through the kitchen. When Evan reaches to hand Jeff his beer, Jeff shifts a little and brings his hand to the back of Evan's neck, giving him that little shake that seems to communicate so much between the two of them. Dan can see Evan relax several notches, but he's still wound up when he turns to give a bottle to Dan.

Dan tries to put a lid on the resentment he's feeling and reminds himself of fun Evan wrestling in the pool, and family Evan teasing Tatiana, and thoughtful Evan working out the deal for the new partnership, and sexy Evan pressing Dan up against the wall of the feed

shed... and when Evan extends his arm to give the bottle to Dan, Dan lifts up his hand and gently takes Evan's wrist instead, and then he shuffles in, moving slowly because he's really not sure how Evan is going to respond to this. He brings his other hand up to just above where Jeff fingers are still resting on Evan's neck. Dan looks at Evan with as much sincerity, as much serenity as he can muster, and he moves a little further in, pressing their bodies together and then their lips.

Evan doesn't kiss back. Dan breaks off the kiss and takes half a step away, and he can't look Evan in the eye anymore because then Evan would read his feelings, and he's feeling... betrayed. Evan had lured him into this, and now *he's* backing off, just like Dan had thought would happen, but Dan had ignored his better judgment and trusted them, and now he's the one who's going to get hurt. He's got no one to blame but himself, really.

He takes another step away and looks down at the beer in his hand. He'd like something a little stronger, ideally, but he doesn't think he's going to be at the house much longer and he needs to stay sober enough to drive. He's really glad he's got the apartment, so he doesn't have to go back to—

His thoughts are interrupted when he feels a gentle touch on his own wrist, and he sees Evan's fingers, not even wrapping around, just touching, like Evan can read Braille and the answers to life's problems are written on Dan's skin. Dan musters his strength and takes a quick look up, but Evan's not looking at Dan's face, he's looking down at his own fingers as they trace their gentle path. Dan's eyes cut over to Jeff's face, looking for reassurance or explanation, but Jeff is watching Evan. Of course. But then Jeff turns his face toward Dan, and he looks unsure, really no help at all.

Finally Jeff speaks, almost a whisper, and Dan isn't even sure if he's talking to both of them or just one, and if it's only one, Dan isn't sure if it's meant for him or for Evan. "Should we try that again?"

Dan thinks not. He put out himself out there once, and he's not going to do it again. But it looks like maybe he *wasn't* the one Jeff was talking to, because Evan's moving in now, even more tentative than Dan had been, and Dan can feel Evan's eyes looking for his, but Dan doesn't want to meet them. When Evan's lips find his, he manages a

quick pucker before he backs up. He thinks maybe he'd made a mistake, thinks Evan had been right to back away, maybe... the action without the emotion is empty and meaningless. He doesn't want to look at Evan, and he distracts himself by taking a long pull of his beer.

Jeff seems satisfied, though, at least for now. "How about if we sit down? Just relax a little." He sets the example, taking a step backward toward the couch, pulling Evan with him. That leaves the other couch for Dan, and of course it's like that, Dan alone on one side, the other two together across the room. Jeff looks like he realizes the dynamic a little too late, and he winces apologetically as he turns his head toward Dan.

Dan just shrugs as he slumps down on his couch. "Hey, maybe it's symbolic somehow, right?" He doesn't try to keep the bitterness out of his voice, and he sees Jeff take the hit. Evan frowns at them like he has no idea what they're talking about.

Jeff looks like he's not sure if he should be the one to speak, but Dan really has nothing to say, and Evan's shutting up, too, for a change. "Okay, uh... I guess we have some things to work out. This is... I guess I should have been around more, but the gallery's really important right now, and...."

Dan interrupts. "Jeff, it's not your fault. If Evan and I can't make it through a night without screaming at each other, that's a problem with us, not with you."

Evan looks sheepish. "Yeah, Jeff, this is on us." He glances over at Dan. "Okay, possibly... mostly on me." He looks at Jeff as if for permission, and then turns to Dan. "I swear, man, I... I don't know what's going on. I just want to.... Would it be unrealistic for us to just not ever talk to any outside people? Ever?"

Dan shakes his head. "No, that's not quite it, Evan. Seems like *you* can talk to other guys, and *Jeff* can talk to other guys; it's just me you want in isolation." He takes another long swallow. "How the hell did you manage before, when Jeff actually *was* fucking other people? I mean, if you get this mental over me having a beer...."

Evan leans forward, like he's getting in to the conversation. "I don't know, man. I mean... I guess it's because that was the rules, right? That was the deal. I knew they didn't mean anything, I knew Jeff

didn't care about any of them, or, you know, he *liked* them, but it wasn't a big deal."

"So, what... you thought I was going to fall madly in love with Taylor? That doesn't even make sense—I already *knew* Taylor, and there was no big emotional thing, so why would it be different now?"

Evan throws himself back against the pillows in a gesture of frustration. Dan raises his eyebrows at the dramatics, but Evan doesn't seem to notice. "I don't know! I guess... because that's not the rules, you know? We're supposed to be trying to be... whatever. Duogamous."

"So do we just need to change the rules? Should we go back to something like you had before, where we can all fuck whoever we want?" Dan takes a deep breath. "Or... okay, look, Evan, we can waste a lot of time on trying to fix stuff, but if the problem is just that you aren't into this anymore, that you think it isn't going to work and you're looking for an excuse to get out... seriously, it's not too late yet. If you want to go back to just you and Jeff... that's cool, man, I understand." He grins a little, trying to be brave, trying to ignore the way his pulse is racing. "I gotta say, I thought you were crazy to even consider it, right from the start."

Evan is staring at him, and when he speaks, his voice is soft. "That easy, huh? Just... take the mulligan?"

Dan isn't sure why Evan's acting like Dan just kicked him. Dan's trying to give him a damn gift—the drama-free breakup? Evan should be on his knees *thanking* Dan. "Well, you know... if it's not working out for you...."

"No, man, don't pin this on me!" Evan's on his feet now, pacing in front of Dan. "If you want out, you should at least be man enough to say so! Don't... don't pretend it's my idea!"

"Me? You're the one who's going mental! If the only way for this to work is for me to live in a locked tower somewhere, with no friends and no life, then, yeah, maybe I do want out!"

Evan pauses as if in triumph. "Good, yeah, it's good to hear you finally say the words."

Jeff's attention is swiveling between the two of them like he's

watching a game of tennis being played with a kitten's head instead of a ball. "What the hell is going on here?" he finally manages. "How did... what the fuck happened tonight?"

Evan's still staring angrily at Dan, so Dan tries to answer. "I don't think it's just tonight. Evan wants—" Dan catches himself. He remembers a lecture Justin gave him one time on fighting fair, and he's pretty sure one of the rules was to not put words in someone else's mouth. So he tries again. "This isn't the first time that I've felt like things are getting a little claustrophobic. And, you know, not the first time I've felt like I wasn't being trusted. It's... frustrating."

Jeff looks like he's listening, but Evan's just staring at his hands. Jeff gives him a little nudge. "Kid? You have anything you want to say?"

Evan shrugs. It doesn't look nonchalant, though, it looks defeated. "What am I supposed to say?" He leans back in the chair and rubs both hands roughly over his face. "It's.... I...." He takes a big breath and looks Dan in the eyes. "I feel like you're totally uncommitted to this. I mean, you say you could just walk away now, no harm no foul... like it wouldn't mean anything to you. So, yeah, sorry, I don't like seeing you with some other guy, given that you've made it totally clear that you don't think this thing with us has a prayer of working out. And that you don't really care if it doesn't."

Dan shakes his head. "No, I didn't... I didn't mean it like that." He looks to Jeff for help, but Jeff is just looking back at him. Waiting. "Wait a second—you were an asshole to Ryan before any of this even got off the ground. You have a jealousy issue, man. This isn't... fuck, this is the conversation I said I *wasn't* going to have, the one where it's my fault. Fuck that, it's not my fault!"

Jeff finally jumps in. "Okay, let's say it's no one's fault. Okay? It's... it's a bad situation, and we need to work on it and figure out a way to make it better."

"Yeah, sure, Jeff, why don't *you* be the judge? 'Cause you're so obviously impartial." Dan frowns at both of them.

"What the fuck, Dan? Now you're mad at Jeff?" Evan looks more amazed than angry. "I thought you guys had some deep spiritual bond."

"Me and Jeff? You thought me and Jeff were so close? It's the two

of you who are making plans and then inviting me along like an afterthought....” Dan takes another deep breath. “Which makes sense. I mean, you guys have been together for a long time. You’ve already got your patterns for doing things, you’re used to calling each other, whatever. But you honestly expect me to jump into it all without.... Shit, Evan, you really can’t see where I’m coming from on this?”

Evan sits back for a second before he speaks. “Yeah, I can see where you’re coming from.” His eyes are pleading when he turns them on Dan. “Can you see where *I’m* coming from?”

Dan needs to think about that one. “I guess. I get that you think I’m not committed enough... but, seriously, man, from my side it feels like I’m already in way the fuck over my head. But, okay, yeah, I can see how it would look like I’m holding back. But....” He thinks again, and then sighs. “I was gonna say I didn’t get the jealousy thing, but I guess I get that too. I wasn’t too happy to see you all cozy with Monica.”

They’re silent for a bit, and then Jeff stands up and puts out a hand to haul Evan to his feet. Evan follows along, but he gives Jeff a strange look as Jeff tugs him to Dan’s side of the room and then sinks to the floor, taking Evan with him. Evan smiles when he sees Jeff reach out and tug at Dan’s leg, pulling him down to sit with them on the floor. Dan shakes his head in amused disgust, but he gives in and sinks down into an awkward cross-legged position.

“So, what, we can all be uncomfortable together?” Dan asks.

“It’d probably be more comfortable if we were on a bed,” Evan suggests, and Dan knew there was a reason he liked the guy. But Jeff’s shaking his head.

“Okay, uh, hear me out on this... I know it’s going to sound like a terrible idea.” Jeff closes his eyes as if gathering inner strength. “I can’t believe I’m even saying it, but... I think we should slow down on the sex.” Dan thinks he must look as comically stunned as Evan does, because Jeff grins at both of them and laughs, a low, soft rumble. “I know, but... I think maybe we’re using it as a crutch. Instead of talking about things and figuring them out, we’re just falling into bed. Maybe we need to slow down a little.” He looks over at Dan. “You’re right that Evan and I haven’t shaken loose of our old patterns, haven’t really

made room for you....”

“But... maybe we need a crutch! I mean, what’s wrong with crutches?” Dan looks to Evan for agreement and sees him nodding vigorously. Dan has been frustrated with Evan tonight, but that doesn’t seem to have lessened the physical pull between them.

“Yeah, Jeff, come on... it’s not the three of us together that leads to trouble, it’s the outside world! Why change the part that works?”

Jeff shakes his head ruefully. “I’m not saying a permanent change, believe me. I’m just saying... maybe... maybe the reason things fall apart when we’re with other people is because the only way we know to communicate is physically. So when we’re out in the world, and we *can’t* just jump into bed, we’ve got nothing to fall back on.” He grins a little as he shakes his head. “I’m not saying the sex isn’t great, but if we want this to be more than just sex... maybe we need to ease off on that and focus on the other stuff.” He laughs when he sees the doubtful look Evan and Dan exchange. “Well, at least you two can agree on one thing, huh?”

Dan really isn’t sure about this development. He can see where Jeff maybe has a point, but.... “So, what do you want to do? Just... hang out?” Dan knows he sounds like Jeff’s suggested that they shove bamboo under each other’s fingernails. He tries again. “I mean... okay. That could be.... Like, talk about how our days went?”

Jeff laughs. “Or politics, or movies, or music, or our pasts, or our hopes and dreams for the future....” Jeff’s teasing a little by the end, so Dan doesn’t help him with the conversation, just sits and waits. Finally, Evan chips in.

“Dan wants me to buy a Percheron.”

Jeff nods at Evan. “Horses. Good.” He turns to Dan. “Did you have a specific one in mind, or do you just like the breed?”

“Uh... I like the breed. But it’d be a good size for Evan, if he just wants a horse to screw around on. And, uh....” He’s a little worried about mentioning the name, but he’s not going to pussyfoot around Evan’s paranoia. “Taylor said he’d seen a Percheron-Arab cross that was nice. Or we could look at just a light Percheron. Or, you know, it doesn’t have to be that at all. Evan’s not too heavy for Smokey. We could just get another quarter horse. It just... you know... it’d be fun to

have a horse that suits him personally.” Dan knows he’s babbling a bit, but it’s hard to stop. He can’t remember ever having felt so much like a conversation was a test.

Jeff’s calm smile helps a little. “And you think that’s the horse that would suit his personality? A Percheron?” They both turn to look at Evan, trying to imagine the perfect match. Evan grins a little and strikes a noble pose with his head and shoulders, as if trying to encourage them in a certain direction.

Dan shakes his head. “I don’t know, man... do you pick a horse to *match* his personality or one to *complement* it?” Jeff cocks an eyebrow inquiringly, so Dan goes on. “Like... if I was trying to *match* him, I’d want a horse that was brave and kind, but, you know... maybe a little high strung. Maybe not all the way to a Thoroughbred, but... well, any of our eventers, really. But if I was trying to find one to *complement* his personality....”

Jeff nods. “Something steadier, calmer... something that wouldn’t get all nervous when he does.”

Dan grins. “So, Jeff, what’s your horse equivalent? Huh? What breed would you be, if you were a horse? ‘Cause that’s what he needs.”

Jeff shakes his head slowly, eyes half-closed as if he’s trying to picture imaginary Evan on different horses, but half-open as if he doesn’t want to stop looking at the real men sitting in front of him. “He needs something pretty big. Maybe a warmblood, if we could find one that they haven’t bred all the sense out of... or, yeah, I like your Percheron idea.”

Evan shifts a little, and the other two look at him inquiringly. He blushes a little. “This probably shouldn’t be turning me on, huh?”

Dan’s eyes fall to Evan’s crotch, while Jeff just snickers. “You always have been an attention whore, kid, but if this is some new horse-kink, we’re gonna have to keep you away from the barn or Dan’ll never get any work done.”

Dan shakes his head. “So how does your ‘conversation-first’ plan address this, man? What happens if conversation is really just foreplay? Do we get to follow through?”

Jeff leans back a little, hooking his elbows on the seat of the easy

chair behind him. He looks lazy, and relaxed. “It wouldn’t kill either one of you to experience a little delayed gratification, you know. Waiting for things just makes them sweeter when you get them.”

“Yeah, if your balls don’t explode while you’re waiting.” Evan’s voice is light, but there’s a thread of tension in it. Jeff smiles at him as if this is a conversation they’ve had before, and Dan feels left out again.

Evan’s knee is next to Dan’s foot, hidden from Jeff’s view by the knee of Dan’s other leg, and Dan wiggles his toes a little, getting Evan’s attention, and then strokes them down his knee. Evan shifts again, and his leg presses more firmly into Dan’s toes. Dan’s not sure what he’s started, and based on his past initiatives, it seems unlikely to be a good idea, but he doesn’t care too much about that. Conversation is hard, and sex is easy; maybe Jeff can just lean back and be all relaxed, but Dan’s had a weird night, and he could use some stress relief. If Jeff doesn’t want to take part, that’s his decision, but Dan’s pretty sure he won’t have any trouble getting Evan involved. Dan runs his toes along Evan’s leg again, and Evan risks a glance at him. It’s brief, but Dan has no trouble recognizing the desire in Evan’s eyes. Yeah, that won’t be a problem; now all Dan has to do is figure out whether the two of them can manage to get Jeff involved. And whether they should go ahead if they can’t.

chapter 18

DAN'S having fun. He's mostly just listening to Jeff and Evan, although they do try to include him in their conversation and he tries to contribute, but he's not much of a talker at the best of times, and his attention at the moment is definitely not on their discussion of Evan's company's efforts to set up a manufacturing community in Thailand. Instead, he's focused on getting Evan turned on. Without Jeff knowing.

The first part really isn't much of a challenge. Evan had been pretty interested to start with, so Dan just has to brush his toes against Evan's leg and lean over occasionally to rub his fingers against him. The second part is trickier. Dan thinks he's maybe a bit too obvious when he braces himself on Evan's shoulder in order to climb to his feet and get them another round of beers, and then sort of rubs against him as he stands, but if Jeff notices, he doesn't say anything.

Dan gets a bit more interested in the conversation when they start talking about Jeff's day at the gallery. Dan really has no idea how the art world works—well, he has no idea how Evan's business world works, either, but it seems too complex to ever be comprehensible. Dan feels like he's at least got a prayer of figuring out what Jeff's talking about. And he's had an idea tickling around in his head for a while now, ever since the opening night at the gallery....

“So, all the pictures at the gallery, they're all for sale?”

Evan and Jeff look a bit surprised by the question, and Dan wonders whether they'd changed the topic of conversation while he'd been thinking. He notices that Evan's leg is pressed up against his a bit harder than before, as if Dan's toes had stopped their ministrations and Evan had missed them. So maybe his mind *had* wandered a little.

Jeff recovers quickly. “Yeah, they are. Like I said, I sold one, and had some interest in another, but the rest are all still for sale.”

Dan frowns. "There's no price tags or anything."

"Nah, apparently that's too gauche for them. If you're interested you have to ask them for a price." Jeff takes a swig of his beer as if to re-establish his working-class credentials and distance himself from the actions of the gallery.

Dan nods. That makes things more difficult, but at least he'd be talking to the gallery people, not to Jeff himself.

Jeff smiles softly. "Why, did you see something you liked? Prices are pretty negotiable, for the right people."

Dan shakes his head with a laugh. He's paid enough attention to know that Jeff has taken time off from coaching riders and is really trying to make a living as an artist; Dan's not going to jeopardize that by asking for special deals. "No, man, just interested." He catches himself. "I mean, yes, I saw stuff I liked, but, you know... I don't have anywhere to put anything."

Jeff shakes his head. "No walls in the new place? Damn, no wonder Evan wants you back in the guest house."

Dan curls his toes a little. "I don't really think that's why Evan wants me in the guest house...." Then he decides that it's time. He's got Evan firmly on board with the idea, it's time to unleash their combined force on Jeff. He uncrosses his legs and sits up straight, completely out of contact with Evan. "Not that any of that matters, if we actually go along with this insane 'no sex' idea."

Evan groans dramatically. "Seriously, Jeff. We've been talking for a while, and I think we've really developed a much greater understanding of each other. I for one feel that I have learned not only about Dan, but also a little more about you, and even about myself. So, what'd'ya say?" His grin is half mischievous little boy and half ravenous tiger. "Lift the embargo?"

Dan nods. "It'd be positive reinforcement, right? We behaved like civilized adults—now we need a reward."

Jeff looks from one to the other. "So I've got the business argument and the animal training argument—but what about my sensitive artist's soul?"

Dan barely needs to think about that one. "Be a rebellious artist

instead. Be all about the pleasure of the flesh, or whatever... what's that word, man? Starts with an H, maybe?" Dan looks to Evan for backup.

"Hedonism." Evan nods enthusiastically. "Be a hedonistic artist, Jeff. Revel in the beauty of the human form." Evan puts a hand on the waist of his shirt and pulls it up a little to show a flash of sun-browned skin. He smiles teasingly. "Ooh, the human form...." He reaches over slowly, keeping his eyes on Jeff as if waiting to see if he's going to be reprimanded, and pulls Dan's shirt up in the same way. Dan leans back a little, letting the skin stretch and ripple over his flat stomach, and Evan runs his fingertips gently along Dan's waistband. "Ooh, revel in the beauty...."

Jeff's trying to look serious, but Dan notices that he's having trouble keeping his eyes on their faces rather than their torsos. "Guys, it's not like I can just make up a rule, here. If you don't agree, you don't have to go along. I just think...." Dan reaches his hand over to Evan's thigh, rubbing along the top of it and letting his fingers trace along the hard bulge further inside. Evan stirs, pushing into the contact, and Jeff just stares.

Dan is so wrapped up in the moment that he honestly doesn't recognize the sound of his own phone ringing from where he'd left it on the end table. It's enough to snap Jeff out of his daze, though, and he springs to his feet with the agility of a teenage gymnast. "I'm just gonna go to the bathroom...." And he gestures helpfully down the hall before scurrying away.

Evan looks like he's thinking about smashing the phone. "Fuck. We almost had him." He struggles up off the floor while Dan reaches for the cell. "I'm gonna get more beer—if it's Chris, tell him the job offer's gone. I don't wanna hire a cock block."

Dan glances at the display and is just as glad Evan's out of the room, because it's not Chris. "Hey, Taylor."

"Hey, Dan. The little man's finally asleep, and, uh... I just wanted to check in, make sure that I didn't fuck things up for you with Evan. He seemed a bit...."

"Possessive?" Dan suggests. "Yeah, that's him, not you. Don't worry about it."

“Nah, man, I meant, you know, springing it on him like that. I swear I didn’t know you guys were.... Well, I heard he came to the show with your barn, but I thought it was because of his sister, not....”

“Yeah, it *was* because of his sister. We weren’t.... It’s all pretty new. But, no, I don’t think he minded about that. I think he’s pretty used to it.” Evan comes back in the room, holding three beer bottles with their necks tucked between his fingers, and Dan is torn. He knows it would be rude to keep talking on the phone with someone else in the room, but he doesn’t want Evan to think that he’s been intimidated by Evan’s bad temper, or, worse, that he’s sneaking around. “Listen, everything’s fine, don’t worry about. I’m at a friend’s place, though... can I call you back tomorrow? And....” Dan knows he’s pushing it a little, with Evan listening, but he’s not going to sneak, and he’s not going to limit his circle of friends to Jeff and Evan. “I’d like to come out and see the place sometime. I meant it when I said I’d like to help. Moneywise, obviously Evan’s your guy, but if you need anything else—you know, help with horses, or... well, that’s pretty much it, I guess. Help with horses.”

Taylor laughs quietly. “That’s your specialty, I know. Luckily, we happen to have quite a few horses, and they could all use help. It’s a different kind of training, going more for obedience and steadiness instead of maximum performance, but... yeah, if you’ve got any spare time, it’d be great to get you involved.” There’s a pause. “And, you know, if you could get Evan out with you....”

Dan glances over at Evan’s face, tight and closed off and obviously unhappy with Dan’s conversation, and wonders if it’s a good idea to bring Evan into any more contact with Taylor. “Yeah, okay, I’ll see.” Jeff’s back now, and he’s obviously picked up on the changed atmosphere in the room. “So, I’ll call you in the next couple days, okay?”

Taylor agrees, and Dan clicks the phone shut. Evan crosses over and hands Jeff his beer, but he sits down on the couch instead of on the floor, and all the earlier playfulness is gone. Dan sighs and tries to think of what to do. Jeff stays standing, looking like he’s sharing Dan’s train of thought. Dan closes his eyes for a second, then opens them and looks directly at Evan. “Hey, Evan?” Evan lifts his eyes in response. “I’m thinking about getting involved in Taylor’s barn, helping out somehow.

It's interesting, and I think I could be useful, and it sounds like a really good program. So that's what I'm gonna do." He pauses to collect himself, and to make sure his voice comes out as sincerely as he wants it to. "So... what can we do to make that okay for you?"

Evan looks a little startled, but Dan thinks he can see Jeff smile, so he thinks maybe he's said the right thing. Jeff's low, gentle voice confirms Dan's hope. "That's a good question. Evan, ball's in your court. What's it going to take to make you feel secure about this?"

Evan's struggling a little, and Dan can almost see him fighting to not reply with the petulance of a child, saying that nothing can make it all right because he doesn't want it to happen. Finally, he groans a little and slides down off the couch to sit on the floor. He's still leaning against a separate piece of furniture on the opposite side of the room from Dan, but it's a step in the right direction. "I don't know." Evan stretches his head back over the couch. "Okay, I totally see your point that you need to have your own friends, and your own interests.... I just... do you have to be spending time around some guy you used to date?"

Dan shrugs, trying to keep his temper down. "I don't know, man—if we make the rule that we can't see anybody that we ever fucked, the way I've heard it, you're not going to be able to walk down the damn street in this town." And that came out a little more snidely than intended. Or, rather, exactly as snidely as intended, but Dan wishes he hadn't wanted to sound that way.

He tries again, tries to really make Evan understand. "It was... Taylor and me—*everybody* and me, except Justin—it was just sex. I never...." And this is getting a little dangerous for Dan, a little too close to an area that he's been trying to keep under control, at least in front of people, but he struggles on. "Before Justin, I never loved anybody. I never even... I didn't really care. About anyone else or about myself or... anything. I just.... Sex... it was a good distraction, you know? It... it made me feel *something*, at least."

Dan takes a deep breath. It was a *long* time with Justin before they'd had a conversation this honest, and Justin had already figured out most of it for himself anyway. Had already seen most of it firsthand. Dan forces a little laugh out. "Sorry, I'm not trying to be all melodramatic or whatever. I just.... Taylor was a friend, but he was

from before Justin. He's... he's from a whole different life, you know? And...." Dan swallows past the dryness in his throat, then takes a big swallow of beer. He's about done with this conversation, but he tries to force another few words out. There's no point in having exposed himself like this if Evan doesn't even get the point. "It's not a life I want to go back to. At all."

He realizes that he's been looking at his shoes for quite some time, and forces his eyes up to meet Evan's and then Jeff's. Then he looks back to Evan. "Taylor's a good guy, and I know he's good-looking. But... I don't know, man, you being all paranoid about me being a big slut, letting people down, hurting people who care about me, who are trying to see the best in me... it pisses me off, because... because it's like an insult, you know? You're not seeing that.... I mean, I used to be that way, I know I did, and I know I let people down, but I've really worked hard... Justin worked hard...." And now it's Dan's turn to scramble to his feet. "Bathroom. I'll be back in a minute."

He's not crying, but he's closer than he wants to be. He gets to the bathroom and closes the door behind him, takes a deep breath, and tries to calm down. He almost laughs; the old Dan could take anything with a total poker face, but the new Dan seems to be a bit of a crier. He wonders when that transition occurred and realizes that it's hard to know, because before Justin's accident he hadn't had much to cry about. He pees, more for something to do than because he needs to, and then splashes some cool water on his face. That helps, except that he briefly flashes back to being in the bathroom with Jeff right after he'd gotten the phone call about Justin, and *that's* not a memory that will help him calm down.

He dries his face on Jeff's guest towel and takes a quick look in the mirror. He doesn't want to stay in the bathroom too long, doesn't want Jeff and Evan to think that maybe there's a problem, but if he goes out too soon, before he's got his composure back, then it's going to be pretty damn clear to them that there *is* a problem....

He takes three deep breaths, like he does before going into the ring at a show, and lets his body relax. He's not in great shape, and it's time to get the hell out of there and go home and regroup, but he thinks he can make it out the door without incident, at least. That's something.

He heads back to the living room and finds Jeff sitting on the

floor where Dan had been, leaning back against the couch. He looks up and smiles warmly. “Evan’s calling home, checking on Tat.” He nods to the floor beside him, inviting Dan to sit. “He won’t be long, I don’t expect.”

There’s a significant part of Dan that wants to collapse onto the floor next to Jeff and snuggle in, to bury his face in Jeff’s stubbled neck and—not cry, just... breathe. Be comforted. If it was just the two of them, Dan thinks he’d give in to the urge, and if it led to sex, great, and if it didn’t, that would be fine too. But Dan can hear Evan’s voice coming from the kitchen, and Dan doesn’t know how Evan would fit in to the comforting plan, isn’t sure that he would, really. Dan can imagine Jeff’s body stiffening as he becomes aware of Evan’s disapproval or his hurt at being left out, and Dan doesn’t want to feel that, doesn’t want to feel Jeff pushing him away in order to give Evan his attention. It’s not that Dan thinks Evan doesn’t deserve it; he just doesn’t want to deal with the rejection tonight.

“Well, I think maybe I’ll head out, actually. I’ve got a lot to do tomorrow, and, you know... a good night’s sleep....” Dan knows that not long ago he’d been arguing pretty strongly in favor of the evening continuing, but hopefully Jeff won’t call him on his change of heart.

“Are you sure?” Jeff looks concerned. “Evan was thinking maybe he’d stay over—that’s why he’s calling home.”

Dan nods. “Yeah, well, you know, he can still do that. Obviously....” Dan’s at a loss. He’s beginning to think maybe Jeff has a point about the sex; it makes it seem like they’re closer than they really are. Dan really isn’t comfortable enough with this relationship to be letting them see him when he’s feeling this exposed. He’s already shown more than he’d wanted, and now he needs a little time on his own to regroup. “I’ll wait to say bye to him, I guess. He won’t be long, you don’t think?”

Jeff’s on his feet now, moving toward Dan, and Dan doesn’t think that’s a good idea at all. His composure is a fragile thing, and Jeff’s kindness is surprisingly hard for it to withstand. He backs up a step, trying to look casual, but definitely working his way toward the door. “Or, you know, I’m sure I’ll see him soon....” Jeff stops moving forward, so Dan stops working backward, and he catches himself acting like a scared animal, and he hates it. He wishes he could be calmer or at

least be less reactive, maybe be one of those people who gets aggressive and pushy when threatened. He guesses that's just as much of a reaction, but it *seems* more proactive, making other people worry about themselves instead of about him.

And again, he's been caught lost in thought while life progresses around him. Evan's off the phone now, standing in the doorway to the kitchen as if he's picked up on the dynamic and doesn't want to scare Dan away. Dan's tired of being on the defensive.

"So, yeah, I'm thinking Jeff's probably right about the sex thing. You know, we should slow down." There, that should shut down any objections from Jeff. "And there's probably no easy answer for the other stuff, right? I mean, it's something to think about, and, you know... sleep on, maybe." He forces himself to stand still and wait for them to say the appropriate things; he's leaving, not running.

Evan shakes his head. "Are you sure, man? We were thinking we could just kick back a little. Decompress. There was talk of popcorn...."

"Yeah, uh, tempting, but, you know...." Dan decides to try a little more honesty. "It's already been a pretty intense night, right? Might be good to cool down a little. Just... yeah, cool down."

Jeff's watching him closely. "Yeah, that sounds good. But you can't do that here?"

Huh. That's a good point. Dan takes a minute to think. "I guess... you know, sometime, sure, I could do that here. But... tonight, I think... you know...."

Evan looks like he's going to argue, but Jeff talks first. He sounds like he understands. "Yeah, okay. Not tonight." He reaches one hand out slowly and cups the base of Dan's head, bringing it forward a bit. He brings his own head toward Dan's, and Dan anticipates a kiss, but instead Jeff brings their foreheads together, just lightly touching, and somehow it's more intimate than a kiss because it's not sexual, it's just... gentle. Caring. It's what Dan had wanted and been afraid to take earlier, when Jeff had been sitting against the couch. "You're all right, though? Not...." He smiles gently. "I was going to say 'not sad', but that's stupid, isn't it? Of course you're going to be sad sometimes."

There's motion beside them, and Evan's there. "I'm going to head

out, actually. So, Dan, if you want to stay, you know—get some Jeff-time... that's cool."

Dan is touched but also confused. How can Evan be so suspicious of strangers, so willing to believe that Dan's going to get sidetracked by one of them, and yet be willing to leave him alone with Jeff? Maybe it's because Dan and Jeff are allowed to be together, according to the rules that have still not been totally figured out for the relationship, or maybe it's just because Evan trusts Jeff, even if he doesn't trust Dan. Dan's strongly tempted to take Evan up on the offer, but he manages to resist. He appreciates that Evan volunteered, but that doesn't mean that it would be right for Dan to go along.

"No, man, I'm fine. Just gonna go home and get some sleep."

But Evan's already halfway out the door. "Dude, stay for a bit. Get him to make you popcorn. He does it on the stove—it's really good." Evan gives a half wave and heads out the door, leaving both Dan and Jeff staring after him.

Jeff recovers first. "When he gets the bit in his teeth...." He shakes his head and laughs gently. "So what do you say, want to come back and sit down for a while?" He runs his hands down Dan's arms, and it's still not sexual, just warm, and it occurs to Dan that Jeff is seducing him with comfort just as surely as Dan had tried to seduce Jeff with sex. But Dan thinks Jeff is going to be more successful, because now that Evan's gone, Dan has no reason to resist.

Jeff pulls a little, just a gentle tug on the back of Dan's neck, and Dan goes along with it, following Jeff back in to the living room. Jeff looks at the empty beer bottles on the table. "Another? Or...." He smiles and crosses over to the antique wardrobe in the corner, and opens it up to show a well-stocked bar. He pulls out a full bottle of Wild Turkey and holds it up questioningly. "Bought it special."

Dan smiles and nods. It's nice to think of Jeff at the store, running his errands and thinking of Dan. "Yeah, that'd be great. Thanks."

Jeff pulls down two glasses. "Ice?"

Dan shrugs. "Whatever. I'm not picky."

Jeff crosses back over to the couch with the bottle and glasses. "Straight, then. The kitchen's too far." Jeff sits down on the couch, and

Dan hesitates, then drops to the floor at Jeff's feet, and leans back against the couch, nestled between Jeff's legs. It feels a bit safer down there, with an excuse to avoid eye contact, and Jeff doesn't seem to mind, snuggling his legs in against Dan's sides.

Dan hears the bottle being opened behind him, and then the quiet gurgle of the bourbon being poured. Jeff's hand appears from over Dan's shoulder, and Dan reaches up to take the glass it offers. He takes a sip, and the familiar burn is relaxing.

Dan hears Jeff pour his own drink and set the bottle on the end table, and then Jeff's fingers are in Dan's hair, not combing through, just softly scritchng, and Dan feels like a cat and wishes that he could purr.

They sit quietly for a bit, and then Dan lifts his glass into Jeff's line of sight. "Thanks. This was perfect."

Jeff smooths his fingers down along the tops of Dan's ears, as if in acknowledgment. After a moment, he says, "That's Chris's drink too, right?"

Dan nods. "Yeah. Him and Justin. That's where I picked it up." He's quiet and then volunteers, "I used to drink tequila. You know, the Texas thing. Didn't like the bourbon at all, when I first started. But... it was a like a game to Justin." He thinks for a minute. "No, not a game. It was... I don't know. A symbol, maybe? When we were first starting, and I'd get... you know... claustrophobic, or whatever. I'd go out and drink tequila. Like I was trying to prove something." He laughs softly at his younger self. "So maybe it was a symbol for me more than for him, huh?" Jeff doesn't say anything, just quietly scritchng with an occasional soothing stroke for good measure. "So, I don't know... maybe I should start drinking wine out here? Is there a hard liquor that matches California?"

Jeff's voice is quiet. "You don't have to give up your drink, Dan. Before—you wanted to make a change, when you started with Justin. So you changed your drink. That's fair. You're right, it's a good symbol." He stops for a second, but Dan can tell he has more to say. There's a nudge at Dan's back, though, and Jeff mutters, "Scoot forward." Dan obeys, and Jeff slides down between Dan's back and the couch so that they're both sitting on the floor, Jeff leaning against the

couch, Dan still nestled between Jeff's legs but now leaning back against his chest. Jeff pulls gently on Dan's head, inviting him to lean it back, and Dan resists for only a moment before letting himself relax.

Dan can't help himself. "Damn, all we need is a roaring fire and a bearskin rug, and we'd be a *total* cliché."

Jeff rubs his stubbled cheek against Dan's. "Don't even pretend that you don't love it." He presses a quick kiss to the corner of Dan's mouth and then leans his head back. They just sit for a minute, Jeff's hands wrapping around to find Dan's and twining their fingers together. After a while, he continues with what he'd been saying. "When you started with Justin, you wanted a change, so you left some things behind. We're not... we don't expect you to leave anything behind this time. I mean, not more than what you already have. You've had a lot of changes in the last couple months, and we shouldn't be pushing too hard for you to keep adapting. We need to remember to be patient." He shakes his head. "Really, Evan and I have been a bit selfish with this whole thing. We should have waited, given you a chance to get your bearings... and we've got no damn right to get impatient with you for not diving in headfirst, not when we pushed you into it in the first place."

Dan thinks about that. "No, man, it's... I mean, yeah, about the getting impatient stuff. I am trying, you know, but... it's a lot. But getting my bearings or waiting.... I don't know, I feel like... like I spent most of the last year waiting." Dan hopes Jeff knows what he's talking about, because he doesn't really want to re-open that set of emotions. "And you know, it was stupid, I should have clued in... should have made myself accept that it wasn't going to happen." He makes himself say the words. "I should have known that Justin wasn't going to get better, but you know, after that... *I* was a bit tired of waiting too." He turns a bit, now seeking the eye contact that he'd thought he wanted to avoid. "It's been good to have something to keep my mind busy, something to keep me from... wallowing. The horses are good, but... this has been good too." He smiles a little ruefully. "A bit stressful, I guess, but..." He turns back around, nestles in a little, letting his face find the warmth of Jeff's neck. "But there are good parts too."

Jeff presses a gentle kiss to Dan's temple. "I'm glad to hear it."

They sit like that for a while, long enough that Lou rouses herself from the bed where she's been sleeping all night and wanders over to investigate and then insinuates herself between Dan's legs and rests her chin on his thigh, happy to join in the cuddling. Dan thinks about Evan, wonders how he would fit in if he was there. Not just physically, although there would be some challenges in that, but more emotionally. Would his intensity destroy the mellow feeling, or could he find a way to turn it off, to be as focused on relaxing as he could be on everything else? Dan thinks about asking Jeff about it, but he decides not to. Everything's perfect the way it is, and Dan doesn't want to disturb anything, not by speaking or even shifting his weight. Right now, he has this, and it's more than enough. He'll worry about everything else when he has to.

chapter 19

DAN isn't sure how long they stay like that, wound around each other on the floor. He thinks maybe he dozes off a little, not far enough to drool or snore or anything, just into that world of half-sleep where dreams seem real and reality seems like a dream. But his relaxed mind takes him in a direction that keeps him from staying relaxed, and he finds the energy to turn his head a little; one of his eyes is blurred from being too close and can only see the tanned skin of Jeff's neck, but the other one shows him Jeff's eye, and it's open, at least.

Dan doesn't want to break the spell, but he feels like he has to. "Is this—" He stops, then starts again. "Is this okay with Evan? Is he...." Dan wriggles a little, enough to get his face far enough away that he can look Jeff in the eye. "I don't want to make things worse with him. Or make him feel pushed out, or something... I mean... *I* could have gone. I said I would."

Jeff nods seriously. "Yeah, you did say you would. So this... I've spent time alone with Evan, since things started up with you. And *you've* spent time alone with Evan. So... this is just you and me spending time alone, right?" Jeff shifts a bit, not enough that he's pushing Dan back into the old position, just enough so that Dan has to support his own weight if he wants to stay in the new place. Dan appreciates the subtlety and lets himself nestle back in. Jeff rewards him with a soft kiss to his temple.

They're quiet for another little while, and then it's Jeff's turn to break the silence. "You and Evan—sometimes you seem... I don't know, sometimes you seem like you're getting along great." He gives Dan another temple kiss, a little rougher this time. "Great enough that I think maybe the graceful thing to do would be to bow out and let you guys... you know... have a more normal relationship." Dan's a bit too shocked to say anything, and by the time he's recovered enough to start

objecting, Jeff's already started talking again. "And then you have days like today, where... I don't know, where it seems like I'm pretty damn necessary, if only so that I can be the referee and sort the two of you out." Dan feels Jeff's arm shift and realizes that he's taking a pretty deep pull from his glass of bourbon.

Dan swivels around so quickly that Jeff jerks his head back a little, obviously startled. "Fuck, Jeff, are you kidding me?" Dan wonders where Puppet-Chris has been the last few days, because somebody really needs to give Dan a slap upside the head. The puppet's hands probably aren't strong enough for the hit Dan deserves, though. He can't believe that he's let himself get so wrapped up in himself, *again*, and forgotten that he's not the only person trying to figure out this new relationship, not the only person feeling unsure and insecure. He's just the only one making a fool of himself, getting all worked up and calling attention to his issues, instead of just trying to cope and figure things out like Jeff has been doing.

He gets an arm free and catches the back of Jeff's neck with it, shaking him gently the way Jeff does with Evan. "Jesus, Jeff, you're... shit, you're the only reason either one of us is still trying. We both want *you*, man." Dan catches himself. "I mean, Evan's a good guy, and Jesus Christ, the body on him..." Jeff smiles in wry acknowledgment, and Dan continues. "I mean, when this all started, I could have taken him or left him. He was hot, seemed like a nice guy, but there was no..." Dan shakes his head. "I suck at saying stuff, you know that, but... you felt it, you said. In Kentucky? The... attraction, between you and me?"

Dan can feel Jeff's body stir at the memory. When he speaks, his voice is husky. "Yeah, Dan, I felt it."

A chilling thought strikes Dan, and he pulls a bit away from Jeff, needing to be able to see his face. "But... is that gone? Is that... I mean... is that why you're not sure about all this?"

Jeff stares at him for a moment and then laughs. "Shit, no, Dan, it's... it's far from gone. I just—"

Dan interrupts. "It's far from gone for me too. And it's even better now, because I know you, and it's not just physical anymore, and... shit, Jeff, I'm sorry if I've been getting all caught up in myself, and in this stupid stuff with Evan, but... you're way more than a referee,

and... and if Evan and I *do* manage to calm things down and get along all the time, that won't mean that we don't need you anymore, it'll just mean that we'll be able to pull our heads out of our asses and appreciate you a bit more." It occurs to Dan that he's been making a lot of speeches tonight. Apparently he's decided that there are things that need to be said. But he's really more comfortable with nonverbal communication, so he leans in and braces his forehead against Jeff's, trying to send back the comfort that Jeff had given him earlier. "Okay?"

Jeff pauses as if he's thinking about it, and Dan feels a flash of cold fear, concern that he's misread what Jeff was saying, has somehow made things worse instead of better. Then Jeff smiles, and it's warm and true and open, and Dan realizes that he only knows two men who smile like this, pure happiness and affection, and he wonders if Evan learned it from Jeff or the other way around, or whether they somehow found each other and recognized their match. Dan can't remember the last time he smiled in a way that didn't have at least a trace of something else in it; he hopes he doesn't contaminate their purity.

But Puppet-Chris finally speaks up, reminds Dan that this is about *Jeff*, and Dan kicks his mind back to where it belongs. He leans in for a little kiss and tries to keep it chaste, out of respect for Jeff's "no sex" plan. He's surprised when it's Jeff who intensifies it, bringing his hand up to Dan's neck and pulling him in tighter. It's hot and wet and good, and Dan can't keep himself from shifting around, trying to get a little more body contact. Unfortunately, that seems to be enough to remind Jeff of his resolutions, and he pulls his head back, the hand on Dan's neck tangling in his hair now, keeping him from following Jeff's lips. Dan has been meaning to find somewhere to get his hair cut in California, and now he has an extra incentive.

Jeff's watching him closely, as if he's trying to make up his mind, or worse, as if he's already made up his mind and he's disappointed by the results. Dan chokes out a disbelieving laugh. "You're not blaming me for that, are you? I mean, that wasn't some sort of a test, to see if I'd follow your new rule...."

Jeff's eyes widen and he shakes his head, hard. "No, Dan! Not a test... or at least, not of you. I was just thinking—I'd been thinking about asking you to stay the night, just, you know... to sleep. But I wasn't sure if I could trust myself. Well, no, I was pretty sure I

couldn't, but I hoped...." He laughs softly. "I shouldn't even have considered it. You and Evan think this is gonna be tough on you—it's not just you two, believe me."

Dan thinks about pressing it; he believes Jeff when he says that he's tempted, and Dan's pretty sure he could make that temptation irresistible, but... he eases away a little, smiling regretfully. Jeff is right, they *do* need to work on other aspects of their relationship. "Do you have a time frame in mind for all this?" He shakes his head. "'Cause I'm not saying it doesn't make sense, but... it's not gonna last *too* long, is it?"

Jeff shakes his head too. "I have no idea, Dan. I... when I suggested it, I was half-expecting the two of you to revolt, decide you didn't need some old man thinking he knew what was best."

Dan squints a little and tilts his head to one side, then the other. He's only half joking. "I really... I really don't see him. This old man you're talking about? I mean—do you think Evan or I are so stupid that we see a little gray hair and think it means that you're past your best? Jesus, Jeff, the gray is sexy as shit. Makes you look experienced, and... I don't know. Hot. And your body's great, and, okay, maybe the art thing is some kind of midlife crisis, I don't know, but it's pretty much the sexiest midlife crisis I've ever seen. I can just imagine you, jeans all low on your hips, shirt off, maybe a couple splotches of paint on your chest or your arm or somewhere, looking at the canvas... *creating* something...."

Jeff's smiling shyly. "That's hot? Really?"

"Fuck, yeah. It doesn't turn Evan on? Do you let him watch you paint?"

Jeff shrugs. "He'll come in sometimes, but... you know... he's not exactly good at sitting still and watching things—more of a participant."

Dan nods. He can't really imagine Evan just watching, not for long, at least. Then again, Dan isn't sure how long *he'd* be able to keep his hands off, not if real painter-Jeff looks half as sexy as imaginary painter-Jeff....

Jeff is watching Dan, thinking, and then he seems to make a decision. "Do you have to go home? Or do you have a couple hours?"

I'd love to paint you—I mean, I'm not a portrait painter, I'm not great at it, but... I'd love to try, if you'd let me."

Dan doesn't try to hide his surprise. "Me? Really? I... wait, with clothes on? Or... Jeff, I can barely keep my hands off you now; if you're gonna be looking at me naked...."

"Slow down, cowboy." Jeff's drawl is amused, and he's clearly back in control. Dan likes it that way. Vulnerable Jeff is sweet, and Dan's happy to see him, happy to be reminded that this new thing is scary for all of them, but it's the quietly confident Jeff who drew Dan in from the start, and he's still Dan's favorite. Jeff reaches out and gently tilts Dan's face toward the light, then away. "Clothes can stay on, if you want... or maybe shirt off, if you're okay with that, so I can work on your head and shoulders." He looks to Dan for permission and keeps watching his face as he undoes the top couple buttons of Dan's shirt, pushing the collar back from his neck a little.

He sighs. "Okay, someday I'd really like to paint you naked, 'cause every extra inch I see makes me want to see three more, but for tonight... if you're okay with it...."

"Do I... I could see you, right? See what you're doing?"

Jeff shrugs. "Usually models aren't shown the work until it's done—it can make them self-conscious, or make them try to *show* the artist things instead of the artist finding the features for himself...."

"No, man, I don't mean the picture. I mean... you. I'll be able to see you while you're doing it, right?" Dan isn't sure why that's important to him, but he knows that it is. He thinks he needs to be able to remind himself that it's Jeff he's doing this for.

"Yeah, you'll be able to see me." Jeff waits quietly.

"Uh, yeah, okay, I guess. I mean... it's just for fun, right? Just—to see what it's like?"

Jeff shrugs. "Okay. You know, if it turns out to be good, I might like to show it to people, but... I wouldn't do it without your permission."

Dan thinks of Hugh Winters, the guy in Los Angeles when Dan was a teenager. He'd taken pictures of Dan, and film, without Dan knowing, and Dan had hated it, had felt so dirty when he found out.

He'd hated the thought that maybe some of those images were still out there, that maybe he hadn't found them all when he'd left. Maybe Hugh looked at them himself, jerked off to them, or maybe he'd shown them to other perverts, other assholes who got off on seeing some kid sleeping, all his barriers down, or watching him get fucked, rough and impersonal like it always was with Hugh... and now Dan's sitting here, seriously thinking about letting someone else put him in that position.

But this is different. This is consensual, and it wouldn't have to be naked, and it's art, real art, not Hugh and his claims of *erotica*, and, most importantly, this is Jeff. Dan needs to remember that.

Jeff's watching him closely. "If you'd rather not, it's okay. I'd like to, but if you're not comfortable with it, it's okay."

"No, I..." Dan briefly considers telling Jeff about Hugh, about the whole mess, but he feels like he's shared enough for one night. "I'm just... I don't know, it's new. But, yeah, I'd like to. For you." He frowns a little. "With you."

Jeff seems to understand that this is a big deal for Dan, even if he doesn't know the details of why. He nods slowly. "It doesn't have to be tonight, if you'd like some time to think it over."

Dan shakes his head. Jeff being understanding about it, trying to find ways to let Dan get out of the situation, makes it clear why this *is* different. "No, I'm good. I want to." He pushes away a little and scrambles to his feet, then reaches a hand down to Jeff. "Come on, old man, show me what you've got."

Jeff shakes his head. "I open up my soul to you, and still you mock me, and poke at my weakness...."

Dan just grins at him. "If I thought there was anything to worry about, I wouldn't tease you about it." He pulls Jeff to his feet, and then peers out into the hallway. "Is that your studio, down there?"

Jeff nods and follows behind Dan, who is practically charging down the hall. Now that he's committed, he wants to do it fast, not in a get-it-over-with way, just... to get started before he chickens out. The door to the room is ajar, but mostly closed, and Dan pauses when he gets there. He's not sure what the expectations of privacy are; he's been in Jeff's bedroom, in his *bed*, and most people would probably think that's a more intimate place than an artist's studio, but as Jeff has noted,

the three of them seem to have gotten a little ahead of themselves in the bedroom department. Dan doesn't want to make a similar mistake here.

But then Jeff is there, snaking his arms around Dan from behind, one hand spreading out over Dan's chest, the other over his stomach. Jeff's fingers are long, and strong, and Dan feels totally contained, totally safe. Jeff's voice is soft in his ear. "You having second thoughts?"

Dan turns his head enough to be sure that Jeff can see it when he smiles. "No, man, just waiting for you to lead the way."

Dan feels Jeff's laugh as much as he hears it. "Well, that's a change. Is that what it takes to tame you, just wanting to paint your picture?"

"Tame me?" That doesn't sound right to Dan. He thinks of wild animals as being strong and fearless.

Jeff's lips rub along the rim of his ear, and Dan shivers a little and leans into Jeff, as if for warmth. "Not that'd I want to, though." Jeff sounds like he means it. "I like you a little wild, a little unpredictable."

Dan fights the sudden urge to break into a tap dance or something, to blow Jeff's mind with his unpredictability. He's pretty sure that wasn't quite what Jeff meant. Instead, he just waits, and Jeff takes the prompt, gently walking Dan forward, pushing the door open, moving into the studio. Jeff gives Dan a little squeeze before moving away from him, turning on the overhead lights and then a few smaller lamps around the room. He looks at Dan, then his eyes lose their focus, and Dan realizes that Jeff is imagining, planning how to paint him.

Jeff nods toward a beat-up old couch in the corner of the room. "How 'bout over there?" He moves a few steps toward it. "Earlier tonight, in the living room... you were sitting on the floor, leaning back on the sofa, and it just... it just about took my breath away." His smile is shy. "It was beautiful."

Dan isn't sure about this, but he walks over to the couch and sinks to the floor in front of it. "Leaning back... how?"

Jeff doesn't tell him. Instead, he walks over and sits down on the floor not far away, looking at Dan with soft eyes. "Just relax a little. Just try to be yourself."

Dan raises an eyebrow. "Myself? Sitting totally still in a strange room while somebody stares at me. Yeah, okay, that'll be easy." But horses are sensitive to their riders' bodies, so he's used to making himself relax physically even when his mind is racing. He wriggles a little, makes sure his muscles are loose, and then he remembers, and his hands move to the buttons that are still done up on his shirt. "You want this off."

Jeff's hand moves quickly, catching Dan's fingers. "Only if it's okay. You don't have to."

Dan shrugs a little, resting his elbows on the couch and letting his fingers dangle off the edge of it, almost resting against his own sides. "Nah, it's all right. But I'll leave it to you. You can take it off or leave it on, whatever catches your eye...." He knows it's stupid to flirt, just going to lead to frustration when they can't follow through, but it's hard to be around Jeff and *not* think about the things their bodies could do for each other.

"That's it, right there." Jeff sounds almost smug. "That's the pose, the look." He shakes his head. "You look so innocent but so sensual...." He scrambles to his feet. "Just stay like that for a second, okay? We'll worry about the shirt later."

"Like this? Seriously?" Dan tries to look at himself without moving his head. "I'm just... sitting here."

Jeff takes time out from whatever he's doing over at his easel and grins. "Yeah, Dan—that's it exactly."

That's a bit weird. And maybe kind of disturbing. "Wait, so... do you not like it? I mean, when I try harder? Do you...." Dan's mind is racing. "Do you think it's...." He can't find the words. "Crude? Or... you know, stupid? Do I seem... like I'm...." Dan knows what he's thinking of, thinking of little kids playing dress-up, trying to be something they're not, but without the playful side that children have. "Desperate?" The next word that comes out of Dan's mouth is going to be "pathetic," but Jeff is already across the room and kneeling on the floor next to him.

"No, Dan. No." He shakes his head. "I think you're... you're pretty damn near irresistible when you're like that." He smiles ruefully. "As a matter of fact, I think my inability to resist you has been

demonstrated at least once. This is just... in terms of art, it's the tension that makes things interesting, you know?" He smooths the knuckles of one hand along Dan's cheekbone and down his jawline. "And with you... you're so many different people, and I'm telling you straight, there hasn't been one yet that I haven't liked, haven't been attracted to... but I feel like this is the *real* you, you know? So this one is my favorite."

Dan lets his body relax back against the edge of the sofa. "Well, that's all right, then. Have you seen Dan-in-the-morning-without-coffee yet? 'Cause not even *I* can stand *that* son-of-a-bitch."

Jeff grins over his shoulder as he heads back across the room. "I think I met him briefly at Evan's guest house. I thought he was adorable."

Dan shakes his head in disgust, and then sits quietly while Jeff does whatever he's doing. Dan doesn't see any paint yet; it seems like Jeff's sketching with a pencil, it looks like. After maybe ten minutes, Jeff comes out from behind the easel. "So, the shirt—it'd be great if it was off, so I could get the lines of your shoulders and your neck, but... if you're more comfortable with it on, that's fine."

Dan doesn't even hesitate. His shirt is unbuttoned in seconds, then shrugged to the floor behind him while he reaches behind his head and pulls the back of his T-shirt up and off. He gives it a playful twirl in the air before tossing it toward Jeff, being careful that it doesn't land on any of the tools surrounding Jeff's work area. Jeff smiles indulgently as Dan gives his shoulders a little roll and then relaxes back against the couch. "Like this?"

Jeff looks from Dan to the easel, and then back again. "Your left elbow out another inch or two from your body... good. Yeah. You're perfect." He smiles to make it clear that the compliment refers to more than the pose, and then he gets back to work.

Dan is surprised that he's kind of enjoying himself. Getting a little turned on, even. He doesn't think of himself as vain, but it's kind of nice to have Jeff's undivided attention, focusing on him, admiring him. Dan catches that thought with a little laugh. Maybe he's fooling himself with the *admiring* part.

Jeff has noticed his laughter. "You okay? Need a break?"

Dan shakes his head and tries to compose himself. “No, sorry. I’m fine.”

Jeff steps away from the easel and then smiles. “Well, I think maybe *I’m* done, for now. I’ve got the basic idea.” He shoots Dan a look. “We can do this again sometime? Sometime soon? I think”—he looks back at the easel—“I think maybe it could be something good.”

“Yeah, whenever, man. Except, hopefully next time we can follow up with, you know... maybe some way to thank me for helping out....” Dan leans forward on his knees and grabs his T-shirt from its spot on the floor. It doesn’t seem right to putting his clothes back on without having had some sort of gratification, but apparently that’s the world Dan is living in.

Jeff takes advantage of Dan’s moment of blindness while the shirt is over his head, moving over to stand in front of Dan, close but not close enough. Dan leans forward a bit, and the kiss is good, but it’s not as much as Dan wants. He feels Jeff’s hand sliding up between them and pushes away before Jeff even exerts any pressure. “Yeah, I know, more talking required.”

“Believe me, Dan, it’s not easy for me, either.”

“Yeah, that’s what you say.” The words are harsh, but Dan’s tone is just resigned, and he hopes his half smile shows that he’s not angry. But he does need to get away from the temptation. “Okay, then, I guess I’d better head out.”

“Yeah? I can’t... I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to stay in my bed, but the guest room’s free....”

“Nah, my place isn’t far, and I’d have to stop there for a change of clothes anyway before going to the barn tomorrow.” Dan really doesn’t trust himself to respect Jeff’s decree, not in the same house as Jeff with only a thin wall between them.

And Jeff seems to understand that, not offering any objections to Dan’s departure. “Yeah, okay. I’ll give you a call tomorrow, okay? Check in, see how you’re doing—you should maybe give Evan a call too.”

Dan nods. Evan. Everything is so easy with just Jeff. Even when they have misunderstandings, things to work out, they manage it

without all the drama, the stress that seems to come with every interaction with Evan. Dan likes Evan; he doesn't want to edge him out, doesn't think he could even if he *did* want to... but he can't deny that things are easier without him. Jeff walks him to the door, and they kiss goodbye, and even with the rich underlay of lust and need, the kiss is sweet and gentle. Dan wants that, thinks maybe he *needs* it. And he's not sure how long he can keep it; he isn't sure whether Evan will let him.

chapter 20

DAN is keyed up on the drive home, but it's a pleasant sort of tension, a happy buzz of excitement and anticipation. He's not sure exactly *what* he's looking forward to, though; he's going home to an empty apartment, he has no big plans to see anybody the next day, or, if he's talking about *plan* plans, ever, really. But he still feels good, and after his efforts at analysis fail, he decides that he doesn't really need to have a reason, and he just settles back and enjoys the drive.

He's still in a good mood by the time he's climbing into his bed, still unmade from the previous night. He reaches over to turn out the bedside lamp, and his eyes fall on the picture on the table, the photo of Justin and him at the beach that day. It strikes him that the pose they're in isn't that different from the way he'd been reclining with Jeff earlier that night, and he's a little startled.

Justin is irreplaceable. Dan knows that, and he's given it enough thought to know that he's not being melodramatic or self-pitying, he's just recognizing that Justin was important to Dan not just for himself but also for the role he'd played in Dan's life, the way he'd pulled Dan away from his self-destructive patterns and helped him find stability and love. No one else can ever be that important to Dan because Dan will never let himself blow that far off course again; he's sure there will be storms in his future, and it won't all be smooth sailing, but Justin had taught him how to steer. Justin hadn't been Dan's compass; instead, he'd shown Dan how to navigate by the stars and by his own sense of direction. No one else will ever be that important for Dan, because no one else will ever need to be.

But for the first time, Dan's starting to think about the difference between needing someone and loving someone. He thinks about Jeff, the way he can be so soft and solid at the same time, and it doesn't seem wrong, doesn't seem like an insult to Justin, to think about the

word “love” in the same context. He thinks about Evan too. Dan doesn’t get the same instant flash of... whatever feeling it is... when he thinks about Evan. There’s lots of lust, but maybe not much more. But then he remembers Evan talking about his parents and working so hard to be a good guardian for Tat, and the way he throws his head back and laughs with his whole body, open and unashamed. Evan is strong, Dan realizes, strong enough to be himself without Dan’s shield of false indifference. And there’s a stir of the same elusive emotion now for Evan too. Dan rolls over and smiles a little at Justin’s photo. Dan will never have anyone like Justin again, but that doesn’t mean he’ll never have anyone to love.

He drifts off still thinking happy thoughts, and when he wakes up the next morning, his face feels funny, and he realizes that he’d been smiling in his sleep. He stumbles to the bathroom and then to the kitchen to put the coffee on. While he’s waiting for it to brew, he finds his phone and hits Chris’s number.

Chris grunts a response, and Dan thinks maybe he’s reversed the time zone difference again, but he mentally checks and confirms that it’s two hours later in Kentucky. Chris is just a lazy bastard. “You know, if you’re gonna work for Kaminski Enterprises, or whatever the hell they’re called, you’re gonna have to wake up before noon.”

“It’s eight a.m., you bastard, not noon. And I’m up. I’m just not on... what *are* you on, exactly? Coke? Speed? I hear meth’s all the rage these days.”

“High on life, baby.” Dan pulls the carafe out of the coffeemaker mid-brew, pours what there is into his mug, then replaces the carafe. Chris is waiting patiently. Or possibly has fallen back to sleep. Dan charges on regardless. “So, I think I’m gonna ask Evan out on a date.”

There’s a pause. “Evan? Evan Kaminski?” Chris’s voice is high, full of faux energy. “O-M-G! That is so exciting! He’s dreamy, with those dark eyes, and the curly hair... I bet he kisses like a dream—”

“Okay, thanks,” Dan says, cutting him off. “I’m being serious. I wanted to know what you thought about it.”

There’s another pause, and when Chris answers it’s in his normal voice. Unfortunately, his normal voice with Dan is somewhere between mock concern and smug taunting. “You do understand that even if I

take the job out there, I'm not gonna be the guy's social secretary, right? I mean, the details remain to be worked out, but I think I might be looking at something in the legal field...."

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid was gonna happen. You get one job offer, and all of a sudden your perspective is all messed up, it's all about you and Evan, you and Evan... how about dragging yourself away from his gravitational pull for a second and thinking about me? Is it a good idea for *me* to ask... some guy... out?"

"Some guy you're already fucking? Some guy whose *boyfriend* you're already fucking? 'Cause those little details are kinda important."

Dan sighs. "Well, not so much with the fucking, apparently. Also, what happened to your threesome language rules? I thought Jeff wasn't supposed to be referred to as just Evan's boyfriend?"

"Dude, you wouldn't let me write up the contract, so those rules don't exist. I agree, I think it would be better if they did, but, hey, you got all snippy...." Dan can almost hear Chris's mind snapping to attention. "And, what do you mean, no fucking? What's going on there?"

Dan sighs again. "Long story. We're working on our verbal communication... I think. Something like that."

"Jeff is just full of good ideas, isn't he?" Chris doesn't bother to hide the laughter in his voice.

"Shut up, man, it was... okay, yeah, it was his suggestion, but it makes sense." Dan decides that Chris needs a little more background on the "date" thing anyway, so he elaborates. "Evan and I are... kinda butting heads, maybe? He's getting jealous, and you know, we've had a couple fights.... Jeff thinks maybe we should actually try to figure some stuff out instead of just skipping ahead to the make-up sex."

Chris's voice is a bit quieter. "Is it serious? I mean, you and Evan fighting? Or is it just... I mean, you can be a bit scrappy, dude... are you just playing with him?"

"No, it's not... it's not playing. He's... I don't know, the jealousy thing is a bit hard to take. If it's just the two of us, or the three of us, things are great, but he wants to lock me up in a tower or something."

"Well, you know *I've* always thought you were a pretty princess."

“Yeah, okay. But I thought the date thing might be good. You know, sort of....”

“Reinforce the pair bond?”

“Uh... maybe? I don’t know. Maybe it’s not a good idea. But Jeff and I spent some time alone last night, and it was great. So I thought... I don’t know, I thought maybe Evan and I should try the same thing. Or, you know, not exactly the same, but the same idea.”

“Yeah, okay.” Chris seems to be thinking things over, and Dan appreciates the effort. Chris doesn’t take Dan seriously most of the time, but when he does, he really does, and he genuinely tries to be helpful. “Is it cool with Jeff? I mean, is it going to set off some reaction from him?”

“I don’t think so. I’ll talk to him about it, I guess, but... you know, he wants me and Evan to get along. I guess he....” Dan thinks about Jeff’s insecurities the night before, but somehow he doesn’t want to mention them to Chris. They seem too intimate. If Chris *does* move out to California, he’ll hopefully be spending time with Dan and Jeff, and it doesn’t seem right for Dan to start giving away Jeff’s secrets. He wonders what it means that he doesn’t seem to have the same reticence about sharing Evan’s weaknesses. “I think he’ll be okay with it.”

“Well, then, yeah, why not? I mean, if you guys can’t make it through a couple hours together, better to know now than later, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the optimistic spirit I was looking for. Thanks, man.”

“And you should have the date soon, so I can hear how it turns out before I decide whether to take the job out there.”

“Wow, you’re quite a romantic.”

“Dude, I don’t want to move across the country to work for some sullen asshole who’s pining over my best friend.”

“Pining? I don’t really think Evan’s the pining type.”

“No?” Chris’s voice gets a little serious. “From what I saw when I was out there, the way he acted around you, the way he looked at you... if he didn’t get to have you, he’d be doing some *serious* pining. Possibly even a little weeping.”

Dan thinks about that for a second. “Really? He seemed that...

you know...?”

“Smitten?” The joking tone is back, but Dan is used to deciphering Chris’s teasing. “Yeah, princess, I’d say he was well on his way to being fully in smote.”

Dan needs some time to think. “I don’t think that’s a word. At least, not like that.”

“Meh, language evolves.” Chris speaks a little more softly. “But, seriously, Dan, whatever’s going on, whatever you end up with... I think they’re both pretty damn into you. I... I was watching pretty closely, and you know I’m better at this stuff than you. If it doesn’t work out, okay, whatever, but... don’t let it happen because you think they don’t care enough. You all care. All three of you.”

Dan lets that sink in. “Yeah, okay. So... the date could be a good idea, then, right? I mean... to show him that I care?”

“Without fucking.” Dan can’t tell whether Chris is laughing or not, but he thinks he probably is.

“Yeah, apparently. For the added challenge.”

“Can you, like... give sensual massages? With happy endings?”

Dan sighs. He thinks he’s probably got all the usefulness out of Chris. “Yeah, I’ll ask about that. So, seriously, though, you think the date is... non-disastrous, at least?”

“I’m sure you’ll have a lovely time, dear.”

“Yeah, okay. Thanks. Are things good there?” There’s a pause. “If you shrug over the phone, it doesn’t really come across.”

Chris barks out a little laugh. “Shit, I actually did shrug. You know me a little too well, Danny.”

“I sometimes think that’s true. But you’re still thinking of making the move?”

“Yeah, I am. It’s a bit... empty... here.”

Dan just nods and then remembers his own advice about the effectiveness of body language over the telephone. “Yeah, I guess it would be. So, yeah, I’ll keep you in the loop with the Evan thing, but, seriously, I don’t think he’d be an asshole to you if things didn’t work

out with me, and, you know... we're still trying to make it work out."

"Yeah, okay. I'll... I'll await further bulletins. Now, if you're done, I should probably get going—I'd like to leave my job here voluntarily, not because I was fired for being late all the time."

Dan says goodbye and clicks his phone shut. He still likes the date idea, but he wants to run it by Jeff first, and it's really too early for any local calls, so he fills up his coffee cup instead and heads for the shower.

He thinks it's another sign that he really doesn't know Jeff as well as he should when he realizes that he doesn't know what time the guy gets up. By the time Dan's at the barn, it's a little past seven, and he *wants* to call Jeff. He realizes that, yes, he wants to ask Jeff's opinion, but he also just wants to hear his voice, and that's a good indicator that he's getting into this whole thing pretty deep. And with things as uncertain as they are with Evan, that's more than a little scary.

He manages to distract himself with the horses, taking one of the young Thoroughbreds out for some hill work. Usually they save the hill riding for when there's a group of people to do it together, trying to make it a little less dull, but today Dan wants a little peace and quiet. And it turns out to be a beautiful morning, not too hot yet, and Dan thinks he can smell the ocean on the breeze coming in from the west.

When he comes back to the barn, he sees Evan's Cherokee in the parking lot. Dan had wanted to talk to Jeff first, but maybe this isn't bad, maybe it makes more sense to talk to Evan about how Jeff would react rather than talking to Jeff about Evan... or maybe Dan's just making the whole damn thing too complicated.

He leads his horse into the barn and sees Evan in his suit, leaning against the wall staring into space. He should look out of place, really, his clothes far too dressy for the situation, but somehow he doesn't. He looks like he belongs, and that gives Dan a flash of hope. Maybe they can both belong, together.

Dan makes a noise, rattling the chain of the crosstie, and Evan startles, then turns and walks down the aisle toward Dan. He seems a bit hesitant, as if he's not sure he's going to be welcomed, and it takes Dan's own shyness away. He glances around the barn to see if they have an audience, then nods his head toward an empty stall. Evan grins

at him and ducks inside, and Dan checks the crossties on his horse before following him.

There's another moment of awkwardness inside, but Dan pushes through it. He's not sure how things have been left with Evan, isn't sure if they're still mad at each other or even if Evan has decided to take Dan up on his offer of an easy escape, but Dan tries to put that out of his mind. He's conscious that he's wearing horse-covered work clothes, so when he leans in for a kiss it's just his face, and he's braced for rejection even as he tries to seem confident.

Evan meets him halfway, his kiss open and hungry, and after only a moment he catches hold of the front of Dan's shirt and pulls him in closer.

Dan breaks away a little. "No, man, I'm sweaty and dirty."

Evan just grins. "Fuck yeah, it's hot as hell."

Dan laughs, but still resists. "No, you're all clean. You've got to go to work...."

Evan moves quickly, spinning them around so that Dan's back is against the wall and then Evan presses in, lining his whole body up against Dan's. "Priorities, Dan," he murmurs, and then neither one of them is doing much talking. Evan's moving his body like a wave, rolling along Dan, pressing in all the right spots, and Dan can't remember the last time he got so turned on so fast. And with all his clothes still on.

He hears a noise in the barn, not right outside the stall but close enough to bring him at least a bit back to his senses. He manages to pull his mouth away a bit, leaning his forehead against Evan's, both of them breathing hard into each other's mouths. "Fuck, man, this is not the best location...."

Evan lets his body still, but he keeps it pressed up against Dan's, and he doesn't move his face away. "It's all Jeff's fault. If we'd gotten any action last night...."

Dan grins, and Evan takes advantage to go for one more sloppy kiss. It gets deep pretty fast, and by the time another sound from outside makes Evan pull his head away, they're both gasping.

Dan takes a few deep breaths, and then pushes Evan off a little.

Evan groans but goes willingly, rolling to the side so he's against the wall beside Dan, both of them leaning on it like they need the support. After another few breaths, Dan turns his head toward Evan. "So, I have a bit of a plan." Evan doesn't say anything, so Dan continues. "I think we should talk to Jeff. I think we should tell him that he's right that we need to spend more time talking, but that a total sex embargo is not going to work. It'll just make us crazy."

Evan nods emphatically. "Good, yeah. I agree completely. Not just with my dick, either—I was thinking about it last night, and I think the sex could be a good way to... you know...."

"Reinforce the pair bond?" Dan hates stealing Chris's words, but sometimes they just come to him.

"Yeah! Exactly. Remind us that we get along just fine, in at least one way."

Dan nods. "Okay. And, also...." He feels a bit foolish now, like he's going at things totally backward. He'd just spent five glorious minutes with this guy, getting as close to sex as you could without removing clothing, and now he's, what, going to ask him out for coffee? But he thinks they still need to do *something*, so he charges on. "Do you want to go out sometime? Like... you know, like a date? Just you and me?" Evan's not saying anything, and Dan's getting a bit nervous. He's never been much for asking people out, but he thought that this at least was close to a sure thing. Maybe not a good idea but at least not an instant refusal. "I mean, we don't have to. Or we could ask Jeff along... it's just... when he's there, he... you know.... We both get along okay with him, it's you and me that's... well, you know, sometimes it's great, but...."

Evan spins off the wall again, lining up in front of Dan but not pressing in, just bracing his hands on either side of Dan's head and hovering a couple inches away. "Yeah, man, I'd like that." He moves in again, but his kiss this time is gentle and affectionate. "I think it's a great idea." Another kiss, and Dan's starting to relax. He's not sure about "great," but he won't argue. "Do you know what you want to do?"

Dan hadn't really gotten that far. "I don't know... whatever."

Evan shakes his head. "No, man, not 'whatever'. It should be

something good.” Another kiss, a little longer this time, and Dan thinks Evan’s trying to make it clear that he’s adding to the idea, not criticizing it. Or else he just likes kissing; either option is just fine with Dan. “Can I plan something? You had the original idea, so you’ve already contributed....”

There’s some more kissing, and Dan really doesn’t have the willpower to disagree with anything Evan’s saying. “Sure, whatever, man, just... we should do it *after* we’ve got things sorted out with Jeff, ’cause I really think I know how I want the date to end.”

Evan grinds in with his hips, kissing his agreement, but then there are *definitely* voices in the barn aisle, and Dan’s pretty sure that one of them is Tat’s, and that’s finally enough to remind Evan where they are, and he flips around again, leaning back against the wall and groaning. Dan would like to laugh at him, but he’s dealing with his own frustration issues.

“We should talk to Jeff right *now*,” Evan growls, but Dan shakes his head reluctantly.

“We need to play it smart. If we call now, he’ll know we just got horny and weak. If we can put it off a bit, present it to him like it’s a logical next step, a good way to....”

“Reinforce the pair bond,” they say in unison, and then both laugh.

Evan nods his reluctant agreement. “Okay, but for the date... what are you doing tomorrow night? Or... tomorrow afternoon, maybe? Could you take the afternoon off? Then we could do something, and then have dinner, and then, you know... reinforce all night long, baby!”

Dan grins. “Maybe if you’d get the hell out of here now, I could get some work done *today*, and then I’d be able to take a bit of time off tomorrow.”

Evan nods. “All right, then.” He smiles happily and gives Dan a quick peck on the lips. “It’s a date!”

Evan looks like he’s about to head out, although Dan’s not quite sure how he plans to get past his sister with the obvious tent in his pants, but Dan catches his arm. “Wait, man. Have you... have you

talked to Jeff? About... I mean, last night, he was going on about how old he is, and...." Dan stalls. He's not really sure what the rules are for repeating things that Jeff said. Had Jeff said them just to Dan, in confidence, or was it okay to share it with Evan? Shit, the complications of a threesome.

Evan's looking a bit blank, and Dan doesn't know what that means. Has Jeff not said anything to him? "I just... I don't know; I got the vibe that maybe you and I aren't the only ones feeling a bit uncertain about where this is going. I mean... he's all quiet, and stoic and whatever...."

Evan frowns. "He can be really hard to read. I mean, I think of him as being all great about communication, but, really, he just gets *me* to talk all the time, and then, you know, he makes his wise comments and it feels like we really talked."

Dan nods. He thinks he can see where Evan's coming from; most of the things he's gotten out of Jeff have been more in the form of tiny snippets of information rather than full soul-baring. "Yeah... and then he cuts *us* off for not communicating better!" Evan flashes Dan a quick grin of agreement, and Dan wonders how he could ever have thought he'd be able to walk away from this man without pain.

Dan's erection is going down, albeit slowly, and he pushes off of the wall and paces a little. "Okay, so we need a third part to the plan. Part One was get the okay for reward-sex; Part Two was a date; Part Three is get Jeff talking." He looks to Evan for feedback, and Evan nods.

"Yeah, good. Damn, it'll be good to have someone to gang up on him with. When it's just me, I can get distracted, but with two of us... we can tag team the bastard if we have to."

Dan nods vigorously. "Absolutely. Hell, if it comes down to it, we can have shifts."

"Now, Dan, having shifts is just crazy talk...."

"Sorry, man, I don't know what came over me. Only a totally insane person would want to set up supervision shifts."

Evan smiles, and then shakes his head. "Damn, I was so scared when I came in here this morning. I thought you were gonna tell me it

was over. I thought maybe I'd be getting a call from Jeff later on, saying that he and I needed to talk...." Evan is smiling now, but Dan can see the remains of the strain on his face.

"Shit, man, I'm sorry. I... fuck, we need to talk about all that too. I...." Dan doesn't want to say it out loud, doesn't want to make it that real, but he can tell that Evan needs to hear something. "I am *really* into this. Into both of you. I mean, I know I was slow to get on board, and I've been trying to be careful, because it scares the shit out of me, but...." Dan needs to take a breath, and then another, and then he's about to start talking again, although he's not sure what he's going to say, but Evan is there, standing in front of him, and he reaches down and grabs both of Dan's hands and then braces their foreheads together.

"Thank you, Dan," Evan says quietly. "I'm really into it too."

Dan twists his head a little, trying to see Evan's eyes without breaking the contact of their foreheads. "Yeah?" His voice comes out a bit tremulous.

"Fuck, yeah," Evan confirms, and then the sounds in the aisle are coming closer, and Dan can hear Robyn's voice.

"Dan? You around?"

Dan groans, but there's no point in pretending that he'd just wandered out of the barn, leaving a horse in crossties. Robyn knows him too well. Evan smiles warmly as Dan moves toward the door of the stall and sticks his head out. "Yeah, hey, I'm right here."

"Oh, hey." She takes a few more steps until she's in front of Dan, and then she peers over his shoulder into the stall and sees Evan. "Oh." She's only surprised for a second, and then she waggles her eyebrows and gives them both a wicked grin. "Well, then... sorry if I interrupted." Judging by her smile, she's not sorry at all. She leans forward and whispers conspiratorially, "But Tat's in the tack room. And Devin was about to start cleaning stalls." She backs up a little. "I mean, it's not my place to judge... maybe you're into that sort of thing, the whole exhibitionist thing, that's cool."

Dan shakes his head. "You know the best part of this, Robyn?"

She shakes her head and smiles widely. "No, but I'd love to hear."

"The best part is that I went to Santa Cruz with you guys, and you

promised that if I did that, you wouldn't gossip about me for a month." Now it's his turn to grin. "A whole month, and it doesn't matter what you see, you can't tell anyone. Unless you want to break your promise...." He looks over at Evan, who seems relaxed and amused about the whole thing, and decides to take a chance. Things have been going pretty well so far that morning.

"So that means, Robyn, that even if you see something like...." And Dan reaches out and grabs Evan's tie, pulling his face forward and giving him a long, hard kiss. Evan goes along with it enthusiastically, and Dan *doesn't* have an exhibitionist kink, so it's more funny than hot, but it still feels good, feels like they're having fun and being open and normal and silly. Evan licks his lips when he finally pulls away, and Dan grins at him before turning back to Robyn. "Even if you see something like that, you can't tell a single soul." He nods philosophically. "I hope you had fun in Santa Cruz that day, Robyn."

Dan edges past her and out of the stall, and Evan follows behind him. They head down the barn aisle toward the parking lot, leaving Robyn behind them. When they're halfway to the door, Robyn calls from behind them. "I'm gonna find a loophole, Dan! I don't know how, but somehow...."

Dan just nods his head and laughs. Evan grins at him, and then says, "Okay, time off tomorrow, so we should get to work." It sounds like he's reminding himself as much as he's reminding Dan.

"Yup, okay. And we should talk to Jeff. He said he was supposed to be at the gallery late tonight. If we're just doing Part One, do you think we could do it over the phone, or should we try to see him?"

"I think we need to present a united front, so in person would probably be best."

"And maybe if we talk enough about it, that'll qualify us for a reward right away, without even waiting until tomorrow."

Evan nods. "I gotta say it, man, I like the way you think. Okay, I'll call him from the office, see if we can meet up when he's done at the gallery? I guess his place might be best, 'cause it's closest to the city."

Dan nods. "Okay. Give me a call and let me know what you set up."

Evan nods and takes a step toward the door, then turns around and comes back, giving Dan his full-power smile. “Shit, this turned out *so* much better than I thought it might!” He bends for another kiss then, more affection than lust, but deep all the same, and then smiles as he moves away. He walks backward toward the door, and it feels like he doesn’t want to take his eyes off Dan, and that feels good. It feels really good. When he gets out the door, he smiles again, sketches a little wave with his hand, and then turns away, quickly like he needs to do it fast or he won’t do it at all.

Dan is left in the cool of the barn, and he takes a minute to replay Evan’s visit. Dan doesn’t know how things can go from so bad to so good so damn quickly, but he’s glad that they’ve left it on an up note, at least for now. He’s pretty sure there are still going to be issues, and he doesn’t really think that there is a magic wand solution for any of them, but at least he and Evan seem to understand each other a little better, and they both know that there’s something there worth fighting for. He goes back to work with a smile on his face, and when he sees Robyn’s frustrated glare, it turns into a laugh. There have been hard times in his life, but they’ve taught him to appreciate the times that aren’t hard, the good times, and this seems like it’s one of those. He’s going to do his best to enjoy it.

chapter 21

DAN'S riding Monty when his phone rings, and the arrogant bastard of a horse is being too stubborn for Dan to take the call; he needs to stay focused on riding until Monty accepts that Dan is in charge. So Dan ignores the phone and keeps working, but the phone call is still there in the back of his mind, a pleasant distraction, an exciting possibility. He wonders if it was Jeff, his rumbling voice full of affection and calm, or Evan, enthusiastic and passionate. He reminds himself that other people have his cell number, and it could be any of them calling, but the potential still distracts him, and he just about hugs Monty when he finally relaxes his neck and lets his back swing and float under Dan.

The pleasure of riding a collected, relaxed horse is almost enough to keep Dan from thinking about the call, but he still finds himself jumping off Monty's back as soon as he can possibly justify it to himself. He's pulling his phone out as he leads Monty in to the barn, and he knows he's got it bad, because he doesn't even care whether it's Jeff or Evan calling, he just wants to talk to one of them. He tries not to let that scare him.

The call was from Jeff, and Dan makes himself untack Monty and throw a cooler on him before listening to the message. The hotwalker has finally been hooked up, but Dan still doesn't quite trust it, so he puts a lead rope on Monty instead and takes him outside for a little tour. Monty finds an interesting clump of grass, and Dan gives him a moment to grab a few mouthfuls, and *finally* Dan hits the button to hear his message.

Jeff's voice is warm over the line, and Dan knows he's acting like a teenager with a crush, but he's going to save the message. Jeff isn't saying much, just that Evan had called him and wanted to get together that night and that they should meet at Jeff's place. The words are unimportant, though, because Dan's sure that he can hear more than the

words. Or at least, he's pretty sure that he can. He's sure that he wants to.

Dan makes himself walk Monty a little before calling Jeff back. He's not going to be the sort of person who neglects his job just because he's got a crush. Especially when his job involves the well-being of innocent animals. When Monty plants his feet and pulls back, refusing to leave the patch of grass he's adopted, and then flattens his ears at Dan when Dan insists, he has to rethink the "innocent" part of that; he replaces it with "valuable." Dan is working with a valuable animal, and the stubborn bastard shouldn't get a chill just because Dan wants to call his boyfriend. One of his boyfriends. Whatever.

Monty seems to have resigned himself to walking rather than grazing, so Dan takes the opportunity to return Jeff's call. He's disappointed when the call goes through to voice mail, and feels a bit deflated after he leaves his message. After all that anticipation, he still hasn't talked to the man. He refuses to let himself re-listen to the voice mail, even though he wants to. Instead, he pulls a battered card out of his pocket and dials the gallery. When a man answers, Dan asks for the person in charge of sales; he's not sure if it's a good idea, but he's decided to do it anyway.

And that's that, all of his Jeff and Evan business taken care of for the day. He has nothing to do but work. Usually, he can get lost in the horses, concentrating so much on their thoughts and their patterns that he disregards his own, but on this day his rhythm is off; his mind keeps distracting him, and that's not good. It could even be dangerous, as he's reminded when one of the young Hanoverians messes up the approach to a jump and Dan isn't focused enough to catch it in time. It's a stadium jump, built to collapse, and when the mare plows into it there's no serious damage done, although both she and Dan are a little spooked by the close call.

He's not sure what's going on. He was never like this with Justin, but maybe that's because Justin was right there, working beside him, so Dan didn't have to waste his time wondering what he was doing; he could just look over and see. Whatever the reason, Dan doesn't trust himself to do anything complicated with the horses until he gets himself under control, so he takes a little time to set up training for the other riders and then takes Winston up to ride up and down the hill. It's

mindless and boring, but it's a great workout for the horse, and it gives Dan a little time to regroup.

He gets back to the barn and puts himself to work moving hay bales from the shed to the feed room. It's hot, dusty work, and it's not his job to do it, but it feels like penance somehow, like he's punishing his body for the weakness of his mind. And it works, finally letting him get himself focused and calm, and he's so involved in the rhythm of the job that he doesn't notice the car pull up, doesn't notice anything until he lifts a bale and pivots to put it on the cart and finds Jeff standing in front of him.

There goes Dan's concentration. "Shit, Jeff..." That isn't exactly what he meant to say, but he's not good with surprises. He tries again. "Hi, I mean. I thought you were in the city until tonight."

Jeff nods. "I took a break. I have to go back in for dinner." He's looking at Dan a little oddly, and Dan runs his mind back over the message he'd left. Had he said something strange?

"Oh. Okay... uh..." Dan thinks about the more enthusiastic greeting he'd had for Evan earlier, but he'd only been a little dirty then; now, he's positively filthy, with the sweat dripping off his body or sticking to him and attracting the dust from the hay, coating his whole body in a fine, gritty paste. There's no way he's touching Jeff. Not that Jeff seems interested in being touched. "So, uh... what's up?"

Jeff looks unsure, and Dan can't remember having seen him this way before. He thinks it would be adorable, except that he's getting an anxious knot in the pit of his stomach, wondering what's going on, what's gone wrong. Jeff's fingers are playing with one of the bracelets on his wrist. "Dan, did you, uh... did you buy one of my paintings?"

"Oh. Uh, yeah. Is that... I didn't think you'd mind." Dan hadn't really expected this to get back to Jeff before he'd mentioned it himself, but then he hadn't really planned to mention it, so he's not quite sure what he thought was going to happen. "You said... didn't you say anyone could buy them?"

Jeff's expression changes to exasperation. "Yeah, but you said you... well, you said you had no walls, which was a little odd"—Jeff takes a step closer—"I could have *given* it to you, Dan."

Dan shakes his head. “No, man, it’s not for me. I mean, I liked it... a lot. But... the gallery guy said he’d take care of shipping it—did he mention that?” Dan doesn’t think Jeff will mind, but he’s not really sure. When Jeff just stares at him, Dan continues. “I, uh... I bought it for Justin’s parents. I thought... I don’t know.... It really reminded me of him, and you said it was kinda related to that, and, I don’t know.... Chris said they’re having a tough time.” Dan should have talked this out with Jeff beforehand, he decides. Not just because it’s Jeff’s painting, but because it would have been nice to have another opinion on the appropriateness of the gesture. “I mean, maybe it’ll just make things worse, but I sent it to Chris, not straight to them, so if he thinks it’s a bad idea, or if you don’t want it to go there, I can still get it back.” Jeff’s expression has changed, but Dan really can’t read the new one, and Jeff still isn’t talking. Dan tries once more to explain himself. “It just... for me... it was... I don’t know, it helped, you know? Like, yeah, he should have lived longer, but he was *really* alive while he was here, and....” And now Dan’s getting a little choked up. Jesus, crying at work? Very professional.

Dan distracts himself, shuffling past Jeff and heaving the bale into place, then turning back and grabbing another. Jeff makes a move like he’s going to get out of the way, but then he just stands there and lets Dan work around him. Another few bales and the cart is full, and Dan’s got himself back mostly under control. “Do you want me to get it back?” he asks softly.

Jeff is shaking his head before Dan’s even finished asking the question. “Jesus, no. That’s... if I was going to make up the ideal home for one of my paintings, that’d be it.” Dan shoots him a quick look to see if he’s joking, and Jeff grabs Dan’s wrist and moves in close. “It’s perfect, Dan. Thank you.” He grins wryly. “And thanks for paying full price for it, I guess.”

Dan still feels a little shy about the whole thing. He’s never bought art before or even thought about doing it. “I... I don’t know, I still have to talk to Chris about it. I haven’t talked to anyone else back there since I moved, so I’m not sure....”

Jeff nods. “They say it’s the hardest thing for a parent to lose a child... but celebrating his life, that seems like a positive step for them to take, if they’re ready.”

“Yeah, celebrating... that’s... that’s what I wanted it to do.”

Jeff smiles, and moves in a little close, and Dan shuffles backward out of reach, gesturing toward his sweaty clothes. “Dude, I’m—”

“Yeah, you are.” Jeff grins wolfishly and pulls Dan back toward him. Dan isn’t sure what it is about these California boys and getting dirty, but he’s not going to complain, especially not when Jeff kisses him, harder and more demanding than usual. Jeff’s leaning into him, biting a little, and Dan wonders if he’s got enough money in his bank account to buy another painting, ’cause if that’s what it takes to make Jeff lose his cool, Dan’s ready to become a collector. Maybe Evan could lend him a little cash.

Jeff’s moving forward now, gently pushing Dan backward, and Dan feels the stack of bales hit him in the back of his thighs, and this is stupid, because okay, nobody ever *volunteers* for the job of moving hay, but it’s totally possible that someone could come looking for Dan, and he’s already been caught once today; he really doesn’t need to make it twice, but Jeff’s hands are on his ass, guiding him up onto the bales, and fuck yeah, this is happening, and there’s no way Dan’s going to be the one to say no.

Dan boosts himself up without breaking the kiss, and once he’s off his feet he wraps his legs around Jeff, pulling him in closer, and Jeff doesn’t resist at all, pressing up against Dan and grinding in. Dan can feel how hard Jeff is, his cock pushing against his light cotton pants, and Dan’s hand snakes down without even waiting for his brain to suggest it. Jeff groans and pushes in harder against Dan, then groans a little louder and reaches his own hand down to catch Dan’s.

Jeff pulls his mouth far enough away that he’s able to speak, but he keeps it close enough that Dan can feel Jeff’s breath on his moistened lips. “I’m such a hypocrite. The whole ‘no sex’ thing was my idea.”

Dan grins and leans forward to give Jeff a quick, sloppy kiss. “Yeah, but me and Evan had already decided to override your decision.” Another kiss, and Jeff’s too surprised to remember that he’s not supposed to kiss back. He’s still a bit hesitant, though, so Dan continues. “We were gonna tell you tonight.” Another kiss, and this

time it's Dan who pulls away a little. "We know we *all* need to get better about talking things out," and he hopes his meaningful look isn't lost on Jeff, "but if we're cut off sex while we're doing it, we're just gonna get crazy."

Jeff's pants are fairly thin and fairly loose, and Dan's able to wrap his hand almost completely around Jeff's cock, giving it a few encouraging jacks. Jeff moans and leans in, but then he pushes away again. "We should talk to Evan—he meant all of us, tonight, not just you and me...."

Dan sighs a little. He should have known this wouldn't be so easy. He hooks one hand on Jeff's waistband, keeping him from pulling too far away, and with his other he fishes his phone out of his sweat-dampened pants and pushes a speed-dial number. The phone at the other end rings twice, and then Evan picks up.

"Dan, hey, I was just about to call you."

"Yeah? Okay, you first. What's up?" Dan keeps his voice calm even as he runs one of his fingers along Jeff's stomach, up under his shirt and then down below the waistband, down to where his hair starts to grow rougher and thicker.

"Uh, things are kind of going crazy here. A typhoon hit one of our manufacturing plants in Asia, and some whack job is suing us over... I don't even know what, yet, it doesn't make any sense, and... you know, there's a lot of other stuff. I was gonna say I didn't think I could make it tonight." Evan pauses, and then the regret is clear in his voice when he says, "And I was gonna ask if maybe we could postpone tomorrow as well."

Dan is almost distracted from the warm pressure of Jeff, still caught between his legs. "Shit, man, that sucks. Especially because... I was gonna suggest that you get your ass home as soon as you can, 'cause I've got Jeff here, and he's all hot and ready to go, and he's only holding back because of the embargo, and because he doesn't want you to feel left out."

There's a pause, and then Evan swears softly. "Shit, man, I honestly can't. Fuck!" His laugh is a little rough. "Okay, I can't be there, but good work, you've got him on the ropes. It's all on you now,

Dan—you've got to follow through, go in for the kill. Don't let him get away, the embargo has got to be broken."

Dan smiles at Jeff and then speaks into the phone. "I couldn't agree more. Listen, have you got... I don't know, four minutes, maybe? 'Cause I don't think it'll take much longer than that."

Evan groans a little. "Jesus, Dan, are you serious? Now?"

Dan pushes Jeff back just enough for Dan to get his own feet on the ground, then hands the phone to Jeff. "Here, Jeff, talk to your boy. He'll tell you what a good idea this is."

Jeff brings the phone up as Dan gently spins them around, leaving Jeff the one leaning against the stack of hay bales. Jeff's talking to Evan, and Dan thinks absently that whatever they're saying is probably hot, and he should be listening, but he's not, not really, because he's too distracted by the feel of Jeff's skin beneath his fingers as he runs one hand up underneath Jeff's shirt. The other hand is undoing Jeff's pants, and then both hands are needed to pull pants and underwear down together, and Dan lifts Jeff's shirt up out of the way and uses the other hand to catch Jeff's gently bobbing cock. He can hear Jeff's gasp turn into a moan, and he thinks about Evan on the other end of the phone line, thinks about what he's doing, whether he's alone in his office or somewhere out where people can see him, and either option is hot as hell.

Dan remembers his four-minute estimate and gets down to work, taking Jeff in his mouth as deep as he can in one move, and then he works on improving things, changing the angle, getting Jeff deeper with every bob of his head, his tongue setting a constant rolling rhythm along the bottom. It may not be the most sophisticated blowjob ever, a little light on the teasing that Jeff seems so fond of when he *gives* head, but nobody's complaining, and Dan has set himself a deadline, damn it.

Jeff's still talking, and once Dan's got the rhythm down, he lets himself listen a little, but by then Jeff isn't saying anything too coherent, just a lot of groaning and swearing, combined with apparently random use of both Dan and Evan's names. Dan hopes that means that Evan is doing his part on the other end of the line, because, yeah, Jeff had been really turned on to start with, but four minutes was a pretty optimistic estimate....

Then Jeff's hips start jerking a little, and Dan can tell that he's trying to hold back, but there's no need for that, and Dan runs his hands up over Jeff's ass and pulls him forward, still moving his own head, so that they meet in the middle, Jeff thrusting and Dan bobbing, and it's a bit clumsy, and Dan's lips get jammed a little hard a couple of times, and the back of his throat is taking a beating, but Jeff doesn't even seem to notice, and that's the best sign yet that the usually gentle man is getting close to the edge. Jeff's rhythm gets sloppy and Dan stops trying to match it, just concentrates on suction and pressure and friction, and then Jeff's groan crescendos and Dan is swallowing and taking over the motion now that Jeff's hips have stilled.

Jeff pulls Dan off eventually, dragging him up for a sloppy, relaxed kiss, and Dan looks around for his phone. It's resting in Jeff's hand, his arm stretched out straight from his body, and Dan drags himself over Jeff to reclaim it.

"Evan, you still there, man?"

"Fuck, Dan." Evan sounds a little shaky, and Dan sincerely hopes that he's in his office, because if he's anywhere in public he's probably about to get arrested for indecent exposure.

"The embargo is lifted, man. Now we just need to get you in on the action in person."

"Jesus, Dan, let me in on the action over the phone. That was so fucking hot, him telling me what you were doing, and then I told him what we were gonna do to you...."

Dan lets his voice soften a little. "You jerking off, Evan? Are you in your office?"

"Yeah. Door's locked."

"You sitting at your desk? Leaning back in some big leather chair? You've still got your shirt and tie on, right? Are your pants... are they pushed down, or just open?" Dan leans back so his body is lined up next to Jeff's, and brings their heads together so they can both hear Evan's response.

"They're just open. You didn't give me a lot of time, you know."

Jeff grins and leans over to kiss Dan. Then his hand is on Dan's

belt, and he's struggling a bit, still a bit clumsy and stupid after coming, and Dan bats his hand away and takes care of it himself. His skin is damp, and he remembers how much he's been sweating, and instead of angling for a return blowjob, he takes one of Jeff's hands and brings it down underneath his own, their fingers twining together as they wrap around Dan's cock. The pressure is perfect, and if the angle is a little awkward, that's a sacrifice Dan's willing to make.

Dan hands the phone back to Jeff. "I'm no good at this—you talk him through it... your voice, man...." And he leaves Jeff's mouth free for talking, instead working his lips down to Jeff's jaw, Jeff's throat. He's listening to Jeff, just like Evan is, and it seems like sometimes Jeff's talking to one of them, sometimes to the other, but it doesn't really matter about the words, because Dan was right, it's Jeff's *voice* that gets him off, gravel and velvet mixed together, and combined with his imagining of Evan, leaned back in his chair, one hand clutching the phone against his ear, the other jacking himself off in time with Jeff's murmured praise and instructions.

Dan doesn't think he beats the four-minute mark, but it definitely doesn't take him long, and when his breathing turns to gasps, he feels Jeff shuffling around, feels the phone pressed against his cheek, and he can hear Evan at the other end, breathing hard himself, and Dan can hear Evan's voice catch when he realizes what he's hearing, and then there's just moans and heat and waves of orgasm sweeping over Dan as he hears Evan reach his own climax all those miles away.

Jeff brings their mouths together for a kiss, and then runs a hand over Dan's chest and shoulders while he talks Evan down. By time Dan's pulling himself back together, Jeff seems to be wrapping up his conversation, and he holds the phone out to Dan with a questioning look.

Dan takes it. "Hey, man, sorry if that was... you know, inappropriate or whatever. It just...."

"Dan, stop. Do *not* apologize for anything that happened in the last quarter of an hour. Sam's probably pacing outside the door tearing her hair out, but... hell, that just made it hotter."

Dan nods. "Yeah, okay. I mean, not about Sam, that's... that's not cool, man."

Evan laughs. “So, shit, this just made me even sorrier that I can’t make it tonight... and, like I said, maybe not tomorrow either... which sucks, ’cause I had a good idea for what to do.”

“So we’ll do it some other time. It’s not a big deal. I mean, we still need to, you know....” Dan leans back a bit. “Well, shit, I don’t even know what we need to do. Everything seems all right right now.”

Jeff frowns and takes the phone away, and when he talks it’s clear that he’s addressing both of them. “You still need to get more confident and comfortable in the relationship, so that you don’t go crazy when there’s the slightest threat from outside.” He gives Dan a firm look. “Don’t get distracted by the sex again.”

Dan groans dramatically. “But it’s *fun* to get distracted by the sex.” And then he frowns and takes the phone back. “And Part Three of the Plan is still in place. We broke the sex embargo, now we need to make sure that we follow through on the rest.”

“Absolutely.” Evan sounds firm. “You do what you can, and I’ll deal with everything here as fast as I can.”

“Yeah, okay. But, you know, Evan, don’t... don’t panic about it. We’ll....” Dan looks over and smiles at Jeff. “We’re not going anywhere. We’ll be around when you get done.”

Jeff smiles back, and Evan sounds suitably pleased, and Dan clicks the phone shut and leans in for another kiss from Jeff. Dan’s itchy from the cooling sweat and the bits of hay, and he’s pretty sure that he shot at least some of his come on himself, although he hasn’t found it yet, and there’s a burn starting in the muscles of his shoulders from where he pushed too hard earlier with the hay bales... and he still feels damn near perfect. He checks that Jeff’s and his clothes are back to some semblance of decency and then hops up to sit on the hay beside Jeff. Jeff grins over at him, and they both sit in contented silence for a few minutes.

Then Jeff sighs and pushes reluctantly off the bales. “I’ve got to get back into town. I....” He looks over at Dan and shakes his head. “I’m not saying this wasn’t a hell of a good break, but it wasn’t exactly on the schedule.”

And that raises an interesting point. “What did you think? I mean,

when you heard about the painting, and came out here, what... why did you think I'd bought it? Why did you need to talk to me right away?"

Jeff looks sheepish. "I don't really know. I was just confused, I guess. I thought maybe you were taking pity on me or something... or I thought maybe Evan put you up to it, although he's probably a bit more subtle than that." Jeff shrugs. "I just wanted to talk to you, see why you did it."

"Jesus, nice self-esteem there, Stevens." Dan keeps his voice light, but he's seriously a bit surprised by Jeff's lack of confidence.

"Yeah, I know, it's just... art. It's so subjective, but at the same time, people who care about it all think their taste is somehow definitive. I don't know, it's a bit.... It makes me insecure."

Dan nods. "Yeah, no kidding. Well, I don't know a damn thing about art, but I bought it because I liked it and because I thought it might help them. That's all."

Jeff nods. "Thanks. That's good to hear." He takes a couple steps toward the door. "And now I've got to go get cleaned up and get back into town. This dinner tonight... it could go late, and you get up pretty early. Do you want me to call you when it's wrapping up, see if there's time for us to get together?"

Dan nods. "Yeah, sounds good. I'll be waiting by the phone."

"That used to mean a lot more in the days before cell phones." Jeff grins and heads out to the car, and Dan turns back to the hay. He's halfway to the barn with a full cart when his phone rings, and he pulls it out, happily anticipating a call from Jeff or Evan. Instead, it's Taylor's number, and Dan has a flash of worry. Things are going so well with Evan, and he doesn't want to mess that up, but he also doesn't want to give in, doesn't want Evan to think that all he has to do is have a temper tantrum and Dan will do whatever he says....

He answers the phone cautiously. "Hi, Taylor?"

Taylor's voice is anything but careful. "Dan. This is bullshit, man, did you know about this?"

"What?" Dan's lost. "Calm down, man, I don't know what you're talking about."

“Yeah? You don’t know that I just lost my job? That your boyfriend just got me fired?”

Dan feels a familiar lurch in his stomach as all the warmth and satisfaction of the last day drops away. He should have known things were going too smoothly.

chapter 22

DAN tries to keep his head from spinning. He presses the phone too tightly against his ear until the submerged thud of his own pulse drowns out any sounds Taylor might be making at the other end. He pulls it away a little and struggles to understand. “What do you mean? How did... he got you fired? How?”

“How do you think, Dan?” Taylor voice is angry, but also maybe a little resigned. “He’s got more money than God—if he tells the Board that he won’t give them any cash as long as I work there, then I don’t work there anymore, you know?”

“Wait... did they *tell* you that? What did they say, exactly?” Dan is fighting to control his voice, but he knows he sounds a bit shaky.

There’s a pause, and then Taylor’s voice is a little softer. “Fuck, Dan, this... are you guys... you know, are you pretty into him? I mean... I was gonna lose my job either way, I guess—without a serious cash infusion, the place was for sure gonna go under....”

“No, but... fuck, Taylor, what did they tell you? They said you were fired? Like, those exact words?”

“Yeah, pretty close.” There’s a pause. “Look, man, I’m near your place—I kinda... when they first told me, I was pretty mad. I was gonna go down to his place, and, I don’t know....” Taylor huffs out a bitter laugh. “But then I figured he must have a lot of security, and I probably wouldn’t get near him, just end up getting arrested or something. But, anyway, I’m not far from you. Can I come by? It’s... there’s a bit of a story, I guess.”

“Yeah.” Dan doesn’t know what to think, but he knows he needs to hear more. “I’m still at work, but I can leave now, meet you at my apartment. Is that cool?”

Taylor agrees, and Dan gives him directions, one half of his brain focused on the menial details of that task while the other half is scrambling, darting from idea to idea without landing anywhere or understanding anything. Evan wouldn't do something like that, would he? But he'd been really angry, and he'd used his power to get rid of Ryan, sort of, and Dan had let him get away with that... but Evan hadn't said anything, that morning, when things were going well....

Dan doesn't know what to think, and suddenly he's so tired he feels like just sitting down in the dirt and giving up. Maybe he's just not strong enough for this kind of relationship, for all the drama and doubt. Justin was solid, and he made Dan feel strong, made him feel safe. Evan, and even Jeff... they make Dan feel weak. They distract him from what's really important—Justin's horses—and drag him into their crazy lives. Maybe *they* like living in a soap opera, with millionaires and threesomes and glamour, but....

Dan shakes the ideas off and heads for the truck. He's a grown man; he's not going to fall down in the dirt. He just wishes things could be easy for a change. For a little while, at least.

He gets to the truck and pulls his phone out of his pocket before sitting down on the bench seat. He leaves the door open, with his feet braced on the ground outside, and he hits the number for Evan's speed dial. He's not sure how to start, what to say. He's confused, but he's also angry, or he thinks he is.

The problem is solved when the call goes to voice mail, Evan's voice calm and friendly. Dan pauses longer than he should before blurting out, "Evan, give me a call. I... it's kinda... it's important, okay? I'll... yeah, okay, just call me, all right?"

He tries not to think about anything on the ride home, and when he arrives Taylor is already there waiting for him, leaning against the hood of a Corolla that has seen better years. Taylor's got a cigarette in one hand and a bottle in the other, and all the soft contentedness he'd shown the other night is gone, and he looks like the guy Dan used to know, desperate and hungry and dangerously hot. Dan shoves that reaction down deep; he *really* doesn't need the complication. A small part of his brain tells him that being with Taylor wouldn't be a complication, it would actually be a hell of a lot simpler than being with Jeff and Evan, but he tries to ignore the idea. He's got lots of

reasons to be faithful, but the most obvious is that he'll be damned if he proves Evan right about being jealous.

Taylor pushes off the hood of the car when Dan pulls in to the driveway and stands, waiting. Dan takes a deep breath before opening his door and climbing out. He walks toward Taylor and pauses, unsure of what to say, how to address whatever it is that's happened. He settles for nodding and then continuing on, with Taylor grinding out his cigarette in the gravel of the driveway and then falling in behind Dan as he heads inside the garage and up the stairs to the apartment.

There's another awkward moment when they get inside until some version of hospitality hits Dan, and he nods toward the bottle of tequila in Taylor's hand. "You want a glass?"

Taylor shrugs, and then nods. "Yeah, okay. Do you?"

Dan thinks about it as he's heading for the cupboard. He knows he should keep his head clear, and he knows he's got liquor of his own in the apartment, so there's no need to dip into Taylor's bottle. He gets two glasses anyway, and nods Taylor toward the couch.

The bottle is still almost full, so Taylor can't be too far gone. Dan's relieved to be able to assume that Taylor hadn't been swigging from it while he was driving down the highway. Things aren't quite *that* messed up yet. There's a good dent in the bottle when Taylor's poured them both two glasses, though, so it's pretty clear that sorrow-drowning is on at least one of their agendas for the afternoon.

Dan takes a deep swallow from his glass, the tequila burning harsher than the bourbon he's gotten used to. He gets up and grabs two bottles of beer from the fridge; there was a time when he drank tequila without a chaser, but apparently that time is gone. When he turns around, he feels Taylor's eyes on him, burning the way they used to when they were just figuring each other out, when Taylor was still trying to be straight but having a harder and harder time lying to himself. Dan tries to ignore the look, passing the beer over and sitting in the arm chair next to the couch.

"So," he starts but then isn't sure how to continue. He isn't sure whether he wants to hear the rest of Taylor's story.

But Taylor has taken the prompt. "Yeah. So... the thing is, uh... you know, for a while after we left Florida—until I had Owen, really—

I was, you know... having fun. Fucking around.” Taylor looks defensive, but Dan just shrugs. It’s not like he’s unfamiliar with the concept of fucking around. Taylor seems to remember that, too, and he’s a bit more relaxed when he continues. “Anyway, there was a guy in a bar down near Malibu. I should have known better, should have left the rich folks alone in their playground, but I was working there, and....” He shrugs. He and Dan both know he should have known better, so there’s no point in carrying on. “Anyway, this guy was hot, and, you know, we were in a *bar*, for fuck’s sake... so we went back to his place, and it was great, right on the beach. I didn’t get around to asking where the money came from, but... it was a bit weird, looking back, because he *really* didn’t want me to leave that night, and I should have figured something was up, but I was drunk, and it was a really nice bed.”

Dan isn’t sure where this is going or how it ties in to Taylor’s current job problems. He’s not sure he wants to know. They both take another deep gulp of tequila, followed by swallows of beer, and then Taylor continues. “So, the next morning, the bedroom door opens, and it’s the guy’s old man. The kid was seventeen, I was twenty-two.” And there’s the point of the story, Dan figures. “So, yeah, I guess that was the kid’s way of coming out, the little bastard. Didn’t bother worrying what it was gonna do to me, and didn’t bother explaining what the hell he was doing drinking in a bar, and, you know, what the fuck, have you ever asked a guy for ID before fucking him?” Taylor sighs and rubs a hand over his face.

“So what did they do to you?” Dan figures he knows where this is going, but he needs to hear the details.

“Misdemeanor statutory rape.” Taylor sighs again, and sits back in his chair now that the hard part of the story is over. “Could have been felony; that’s what the dad was pushing for. But the prosecutor wasn’t a *total* bastard, at least. The dad was rich; they couldn’t brush him off entirely, but they held him off a little, at least.”

Dan thinks back to his own experience with Evan’s investigators. “So... I don’t mean to be an asshole, man, but how’d you get the job in the first place? Working with kids, I mean?” Taylor shoots him a betrayed look, and Dan holds his hands up in surrender. “No, I’m not saying I think you’d be a risk to them, I just.... People are pretty

paranoid.”

Taylor’s face relaxes a little. “Yeah. When I started working there, I was just working in the barn, not with the kids, and, you know. I knew the woman who was in charge of the Board of Directors....”

Dan lets that sink in for a second. “Wait... are you saying you *knew* her?” Taylor’s sheepish face is all the answer Dan needs. “Jesus, man, you fucked your way into the place, and you fucked your way out of it....”

Taylor looks outraged. “Screw you, man, I was good at the *job*! I got promoted twice, even after she quit the Board! And I wouldn’t have had any trouble getting the job in the first place if some rich brat hadn’t decided that his old man needed a shake up.”

Dan nods slowly. “Yeah. Sorry. It’s....” It’s complicated, is what it is. Evan had told Dan that if they hadn’t already known each other, Evan wouldn’t have offered Dan his own position, based on his past indiscretions, so Dan isn’t too surprised that Evan objected to Taylor’s. But why hadn’t Evan told him? “So... do you know... was it Evan himself that called the Board?” That doesn’t make sense. It wouldn’t have been. Dan can feel the relief wash over him as he realizes that Evan probably hadn’t had anything to do with this at all. His company had started the vetting process, like Evan had said they would, and then they’d contacted the Board with their concerns.

Taylor has said something, but Dan’s been too caught up in his own thoughts to hear it. “Sorry, man, what?”

“I said, it’s his company. Doesn’t he know what they’re doing?”

Dan shakes his head emphatically. “No, I don’t think so. I mean, it’s a pretty big company. I think they just... well, shit, I don’t really know how it works, but, you know, he’s got... people.”

Taylor nods grudgingly and refills his glass. Dan’s isn’t quite empty yet, but Taylor sloshes some more into it while he’s at it. Then he leans back and takes a deep swallow. “Well, either way, I’m out of a fucking job.”

Dan can’t argue with that. He thinks of Taylor’s son and how much it must cost to have a kid. And the way Taylor’s tied to the area now; he can’t just pack up and move somewhere else to find work, not

with a toddler to look after. “I can talk to Evan. See if, you know... see if he’ll override the decision.”

Taylor doesn’t look too hopeful. “Yeah. I... I got the impression that the Board.... You know, I guess they didn’t know about it themselves. They never asked, I never told. But I think now that the cat’s out of the bag... I doubt they’ll want me back.”

Dan nods. “But, you know, you said it yourself. Evan’s got the money. If they want it, they’ll do what he says.”

Taylor looks almost hopeful. Dan thinks about Evan’s attitude toward Taylor and takes a deep swallow of tequila. He somehow doubts it’s going to be easy to get Evan to help, and their relationship isn’t really secure enough for Dan to pressure the guy. But Dan’s been in Taylor’s shoes, been the poor drifter getting pushed around by the rich and by the law, just because he’s got no one to stand up for him. “If you’d been from Malibu, if you’d been rich... that kid never would have picked you. Or if he did, his daddy and your daddy would have talked it out on the golf course or something.” Dan thinks of Blaine and wonders how many underaged partners he’s had. He wonders about himself, because Taylor was right; it’s not like he’s ever asked for ID. He grins a little as the solution comes to him. “And if that doesn’t work, my barn is hiring.” Taylor’s eyes cut to him fast, and Dan hurries to continue. “It might not be as much money, and, you know, you’d have to start as pretty junior—I couldn’t bump you up past other people just ’cause we’re friends. But, you know... it’d keep Owen in spaghetti.”

Taylor looks a little doubtful. “And Evan would be okay with that?”

That’s the sticky part, Dan has to admit. “Well, no, probably not, but it’s not his call. My contract says I have sole authority over hiring and firing.” Dan needs to think about this at some time when his head isn’t swimming with tequila, but he’s pretty sure he’s not picking a fight with Evan, pretty sure he’s just trying to do the right thing. Rich people might be able to write a check and soothe their consciences, but Dan isn’t rich, so his morality is a bit messier.

“I don’t know, man, I don’t want to mess things up with you guys.”

Dan shakes his head. “No, it’s... if he can’t deal with this stuff, then it’s better to find it out now, probably. You know?”

Taylor smiles ruefully. “Before you’re in too deep?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Dan doesn’t really want to acknowledge quite how deep in he already is; he’s just going to have to hope Evan understands. He takes another drink instead of thinking about it too much, and this time he’s finished the glass before Taylor. When he stands up to go to the bathroom, he has to take a second to balance himself, and he thinks back over how much he’s had to drink. It’s quite a bit, he figures, and he hasn’t eaten much. “Hey, you’re gonna be here for a bit, I guess. You sure as hell aren’t driving.” Taylor nods apologetically. “So we should think about dinner. I need some food before I pass out.” Taylor nods again, and Dan gestures to the bathroom. “There’s a good Italian place we can walk to when I’m done.” His mouth is watering already.

When Dan leaves the bathroom, Taylor goes in, and then they’re off. They sit on the patio at Zio’s, and it’s still a bit early for dinner, so they order beers and some appetizers, and it’s really a hell of a lot more pleasant than Dan had thought his afternoon was going to be when he’d first gotten Taylor’s call. Taylor calls his sister and checks that she can watch Owen, and then they just get caught up. Taylor lets Dan skip over the more painful parts of the years since they’d last seen each other, and Dan repays the favor by doing his best to be interested in the details of Owen’s progress through the milestones of early childhood. Dan isn’t sure that an early ability to grab the hand that holds two cookies rather than one indicates a rare level of mathematical genius, but he lets it slide.

By the time they finish eating, the sun is setting, they’re both still more than a little tipsy (Taylor had asked about the availability of Dan’s couch fairly early in the meal), and Dan is almost totally relaxed. He’s got things to figure out the next day, and there’s still a conversation with Evan to be dealt with, but he feels good. He feels calm. That changes pretty abruptly when he sees Evan’s Cherokee wheel into a no-parking spot in front of the restaurant, with Evan climbing out and staring at Dan like he can’t believe his eyes.

“Dan?” The answer seems pretty obvious, so Dan doesn’t say anything, just tries to collect himself as Evan strides toward him.

“Jesus, Dan, what the hell? You left me that message, and I couldn’t get hold of you, and it’s because you were out here on a patio, drinking with....”

Evan catches himself before he says anything too insulting, and Dan takes the opportunity to pat his pocket for his phone. It’s right there, and he pulls it out as he frowns at Evan. “I asked you to call me back, man, that’s all.” He’s sure he would have heard it ringing, but he flips the phone open to check for messages anyway. He’s faced with a blank screen. Oh. “Shit. The battery.... It’s an old battery, it loses its charge really fast.” He trails off. “Were you worried? I’m sorry, I just....” He doesn’t have too much more to say. “I should get a new battery.”

Evan still looks angry. “What were you calling about, anyway? Just wanted to let me know you were going out with—” Evan catches himself again. Dan isn’t sure whether to appreciate the effort at self-censorship or resent the fact that it seems to be necessary. Evan frowns a little. “Can you come out to the car for a second?” He turns to Taylor. “Do you mind if I borrow him for a minute?”

Taylor nods his acquiescence, and Dan clambers to his feet. He knows that Evan doesn’t miss it when he takes a moment to steady himself, but better that than staggering. He follows Evan to the Cherokee and climbs in on the passenger side while Evan circles around to the driver’s door. Once he’s in, Evan takes a look at the crowded patio, most of whom are watching the drama unfold, and then looks at Taylor and makes a series of hand gestures that Evan seems to think means that they’re going to go for a little drive. Taylor nods as if he understands, but Dan doesn’t see how he could. “I bet he thinks you just told him to steal a base.”

Evan doesn’t seem to be in the mood for idle chatter. He pulls out into traffic and drives down a couple blocks, then turns into the high school parking lot. They sit looking at the bleachers, and Dan nods toward them. “Where you got your first kiss. You went to private school, but you were slumming it with a townie. What, did the private school girls not put out?”

Evan ignores him, and tries to speak calmly. “I’ve got to fly to New York for a couple days, and I’m really busy trying to get ready, and then I got your message... what did you call me about, Dan?”

Dan sighs. “Yeah. Uh... I think we got it figured out. Taylor called me and said he’d been fired, and he said you were the one who did it. So I called you, to figure out what he was talking about, and that’s when I left the message. And then I talked to him... and it sounds like another thing like what happened with me, where the security guys just went a little apeshit. I mean... when that happened with me, I blamed you, too, at first, so it’s not really surprising that he got confused between you and your company....”

Evan’s still frowning. “What did they fire him for?”

Dan decides that he needs to get this all out in one go, without Evan having time to object. “He has a record, just a misdemeanor, but it’s for statutory rape, which is crap, because, shit, do you check the ID of everyone you fuck? And it was years ago, before Owen, and Taylor was just twenty-two, so it was really only a pretty small age difference, and, okay, obviously it’s not a *good* thing to sleep with underage guys, but, you know, if it had been in some states, the kid would already have been legal, so it was just Taylor’s bad luck that it was in California, and that the kid’s dad was rich and pissed off....”

Dan trails off and Evan just stares at him. “You’re telling me that they had a guy with a record for statutory rape working with vulnerable teens?”

That wasn’t quite the reaction Dan was hoping for, although it isn’t that different from his own when he’d first heard the story. “Well, yeah, obviously a bit of a weird situation, but, you know... he proved himself, he did a good job. I mean, you heard him talking, he really believes in what they’re doing.”

Evan shakes his head slowly. “I’ll tell you what, Dan. I *didn’t* know about this, but if I had known, the only thing that would have been different is that I would have been prepared for you to flip out about it. It’s... it’s a potential PR nightmare, Dan, for the company or for the family—neither one can be discovered giving money to a children’s charity that’s run by someone with any sort of history of sexual misconduct.”

“And that doesn’t bother you? I mean... you think it’s okay to be more worried about PR than about doing the right thing?”

“The right thing? Jesus, Dan, what’s the right thing? He screwed a

kid! At the very least, that shows a total lack of judgment.”

“Yeah, okay, he made a mistake! Does it just follow him forever? He can’t ever get past it, can’t find a way to give back to the community?”

“He could give back by working with *adults*, Dan! Or animals, or... doing paperwork, I don’t know, but not working with vulnerable kids!”

“So you’re saying that... that it’s not about avoiding bad PR, it’s actually... you actually think it’s right for him to lose his job over this?”

Evan takes a second to collect his thoughts. “Why take the chance, Dan? I mean, how would you feel if you fought for him to have the job, knowing that he was... questionable, and then something *did* happen? Something with a kid?”

“Questionable?” Dan can’t really keep the bitterness out of his voice. “Unsavory, maybe? Not quite the right sort of people?” Dan’s angry now. “You went to college—there are freshmen who are seventeen, right? Did you ever fuck any of them when you were a senior? Are you sure you didn’t? Did any of your asshole fratboy friends do it? But they never got charged, did they? No, not the rich kids, they’re special; they’re just sowing their wild oats or something.” He reaches for the handle of the door. “It’s bullshit, Evan. I told him I’d talk to you, see if you could help get that job back, but I also told him that if it didn’t work out, I could find something for him with the eventers.” Evan’s staring at him, but Dan climbs out of the truck. He doesn’t want to talk about this anymore. “Have a nice trip, Evan.” He thinks about adding something conciliatory, something about seeing Evan when he gets back, but he doesn’t say it.

Instead, he slams the door harder than he needs to and starts walking back to the bar. He hopes Evan doesn’t follow him but mostly expects that he will, because Evan doesn’t give up easily, and he prefers to be the one who gets to say when a conversation is over. The Cherokee doesn’t move, though, and by the time Dan gets to the corner, he can see Taylor sitting on the patio waiting for him, and as he turns he can see Evan’s car still parked, facing the bleachers. Dan doesn’t let himself hesitate, just turns the corner and heads back to the bar.

chapter 23

DAN wakes up and wishes he hadn't. His bedroom seems stuffy and overheated, his head is pounding, his stomach is... ungh, best not to think about the stomach too much. He tries to get back to sleep, even though he knows it's hopeless, knows his body is too pissed off to let him be unconscious through any of this self-inflicted suffering.

He hears the shower running and remembers Taylor. There's a moment of panic when he thinks about how the flirting had escalated as the night had run on and when he realizes that he can't actually remember getting to bed alone, but a quick look around makes it clear that the bed hadn't been used for anything more than sleeping in. And he's really pretty sure that he wouldn't have done anything that stupid; Dan knows he's not the cheating type. He tries not to wonder if there's even a relationship left to cheat *on*.

When Dan stumbles into the main room, he sees Taylor's clothes jumbled up beside an old quilt on the couch, so there's another little bit of reassurance about the separate sleeping quarters. The coffeemaker is already on but not yet producing anything useful, so Dan tries to concentrate on folding up the quilt and putting it back on the armchair it usually covers. The entire operation takes much longer than it should, and Dan feels a little dizzy by the end of it. He wonders how many times in his life he's vowed to never drink again and how many more hangovers it's going to take until he finally gets the damn message.

By the time the shower turns off, Dan has managed to pour himself a mug of coffee. The first few sips are too hot, but he ignores the pain. There's a bottle of aspirin on the windowsill, and he swallows a couple of those, and then Taylor's out of the bathroom, just a towel wrapped around his waist, and in spite of the hangover, Dan has to take a moment to admire the view. Taylor has definitely kept himself in shape.

Dan forces himself to look away before Taylor notices and nods toward his bedroom. "If you want to borrow some clothes...."

Taylor nods slowly, carefully. "Yeah, okay. Thanks."

Dan considers his hosting duties done and heads for the bathroom. He knows that nothing will cure this but time, but cleaning up will at least make him feel less... oozed on. He spends longer than usual in the shower and thinks maybe he actually fell asleep a little bit, and when he comes out with his own towel wrap-around, Taylor's dressed in a pair of Dan's jeans and a T-shirt that Dan immediately wished he'd reserved for himself, one that's worn to the perfect level of threadbare softness for his sensitized skin. Oh well—it's not like Dan hasn't got other old clothes.

Taylor rubs his hand over his face. "I've got to get home. My sister called—she needs to go out and doesn't have time to drop Owen at the daycare." Dan can't really imagine dealing with a happy toddler while he's feeling the way he is, and he doesn't know whether to feel sorry for Taylor or to laugh at him. "And, look, man...." Taylor seems to have something more important to say, and Dan tries to focus enough to listen. "About the job stuff... it's cool. Don't... you know, don't worry about it. This isn't your fault, or your problem, or whatever."

Dan frowns a little. Taylor's offering him an easy way out, and it's really tempting, but Dan doesn't want to be the sort of person who does the easy thing instead of the right thing. At the same time, he's really not sure what the right thing *is*, so he goes for the honest approach. "My brain's broken. Can I... you got severance, right?"

Taylor looks a little confused, but nods. "Yeah, a month's worth."

"So... how' bout you look around, see what's out there—'cause, yeah, I don't think Evan's gonna be much help in getting the old job back." Dan still doesn't know how to feel about that, and there's no way his head will let him think about it now. "And if there's nothing—you're a good rider, man; we could find something with the eventers, but we've got good people already, so you'd be coming in pretty far down the list, you know... have to work your way up. If there's something better somewhere else, you might as well find it."

Taylor nods again. "Yeah, that'd be a lot... tidier." He grins a little. "Maybe not as much fun, though." And Dan can almost feel it as

Taylor's eyes run over his shower-damp body. When Taylor looks back at Dan's face, his eyes are dancing, teasing, but there's a warmth there as well, a hint of a possibility.

"Get out, man. I'm too hung over to deal with you."

Taylor waggles his eyebrows and slips out the door, then pops his head back in. "Oh, shit, I forgot. Some guy came by while you were in the shower. Your landlord, I think. He seemed a bit freaked out to see me. I told him I didn't live here, had just stayed the night, but he still seemed a bit off, seemed to think there was some big secret—does he know you're gay?"

Dan tries to think back over his contact with the landlord. He can't even remember the guy's name, but Ryan had said he was some sort of hippie potter or something, which doesn't sound like a good job for a homophobe. "I don't even know if he knows I exist—I left him a note, but right now I'm just living on somebody else's thirty-days notice. That might be why he was surprised." Dan doesn't want to deal with this. "I'll try to track him down later, I guess."

Taylor frowns again. "Shit, I just can't stop making trouble for you, can I?"

"It's not your fault, man. And it's not a big deal—this place is just temporary anyhow."

"And the rest of it? The stuff with Evan?"

Dan doesn't know what to say to that. "It's not your fault, either. That's... that's me and Evan. We're... I don't know what the hell we are."

Taylor waits to see if there's going to be more, and then shrugs. "Yeah, okay. So, anyway, thanks for putting me up. I'll give you a call if I get anything figured out about the job. Is there any rush on getting the clothes back to you?"

"Whenever, man."

"Cool, thanks." And Taylor's out the door.

Dan's tired already, but he knows he won't be able to sleep, and he knows he should get to work. It'll be a lot easier to justify his hiring decisions at the barn if he's clearly doing his own job with full energy

and enthusiasm. He may not have a lot of either right now, but at least he can show up and put the time in.

He remembers to plug his phone in before he leaves, but that doesn't do him much good for the day, since it'll take awhile to charge. So when he's driving to the barn and realizes that he should probably give Jeff a call and update him on the latest disaster with Evan, he can't do it right away, and when he gets to the barn he's immediately swamped, all of the riders apparently needing his guidance simultaneously. It makes him feel guilty for cutting out a bit early the day before, and he doesn't even give himself a break at lunchtime, just eating apples as he goes.

Tat comes down to observe and to talk about some of the horses she and Dan had been thinking of buying. They watch some videos of the best prospects on the laptop in the office and discuss pros and cons, and Dan thinks maybe Tat's being a little bit weird, but that could just be his imagination, or it could be his hangover skewing his judgment, so he doesn't worry about it too much. From what he's seen, Evan tries to hold Tat pretty far away from the vagaries of his love life, and Dan has no problem with keeping it that way. She reminds him that she's going to be out of town for the rest of the week, off to visit a friend down in LA, and he settles in to get some decisions made before she leaves.

His hangover eases off after a while only to come back with a vengeance in the late afternoon. He fights through it, though, and doesn't leave until everyone else has gone, although Devin has only trekked upstairs for a break before coming back down to put the barn to bed. Still, being the only one left in the barn is enough to salvage Dan's pride, and he goes home feeling like he put in a good day's work, even though he only rode one horse, and that only on the flat.

He's too tired to worry about dinner when he gets home, and he knows he's supposed to be taking better care of himself, but he can't really be bothered. He has a quick shower and then collapses on his bed, letting the problems in his personal life back into his head. He reaches for the phone and dials Jeff's number.

When Jeff answers, his voice is cooler than Dan's ever heard it. Dan knows that Jeff has call display, must know it's Dan on the line, but still he only answers with a quiet, "Hello."

“Jeff, hey, it’s me.” Dan’s suddenly nervous. He’s sure Evan’s gotten to Jeff before him, but surely Jeff would see Dan’s side, at least a little? “Uh... I guess Evan probably called you today? Or maybe last night?”

Jeff sounds tired. “Yeah, Dan, he called me.” There’s nothing more.

“Okay. Uh....” Dan’s at a loss. He can’t remember it being this hard to talk to Jeff ever before. “Well, you know... it’s not great, and I think maybe I overreacted a bit, but, you know... I still don’t like it. I don’t think it’s fair for Taylor.”

Jeff cuts in. “I don’t really want to get involved in this, Dan.”

“What?” Dan takes a moment to think. “You mean, you want Evan and me to solve it ourselves. Yeah, that’s cool, it’s just... he’s not here, and I figured he must have called you.”

“He called me last night, after you left him in the car.” Jeff still sounds cold, and Dan’s getting a really, really bad feeling.

“Well, you know, I *got out* of the car... it’s not like I... you know, I just thought we needed some time to cool off. I needed some time. I didn’t... I mean, I didn’t *leave* him.”

“So you didn’t spend the night with Taylor?” There’s accusation now in Jeff’s voice.

“Spend the night....” Dan is more than a little tired of not being trusted. “I didn’t... what are you talking about?”

“I came by this morning, Dan. To talk things over, try to get you and Evan sorted out. And some guy was in your apartment, wearing your clothes, hair wet from the shower... I assume he was Taylor, unless you’ve got a whole different guy on the line.”

Oh. “He said it was the landlord that came by.”

“What? Jesus, Dan, what has that got to do with anything?”

“What has *any* of this got to do with anything? Yeah, that was Taylor, and, yeah, he stayed the night.” Dan’s too tired for this crap. “You’re not seriously pulling the jealousy shit now, too, are you? I’m allowed to have friends, and if a friend has a really shitty day and drinks too much to drive home, he’s allowed to stay over. That’s not...

and, fuck, if somebody stays over, he's allowed to shower, and I'm allowed to lend him some fucking clothes, Jeff!"

There's a pause. "And you didn't call me all day because...."

"Because I was at work, and my phone was dead? Because I didn't know you came by this morning? Like I said, he thought you were the landlord. I don't know why he thought that—did you say something that he could interpret that way?"

Jeff sighs. "Maybe. I said something about checking things out. He caught me off guard. But, fuck, Dan, you know how Evan feels about the guy—why do you have to keep rubbing it in our faces?"

"Rubbing *what*? Did Evan tell you about Taylor losing his job? I'm not rubbing anything in anyone's face if I spend some time trying to help a friend figure things out."

"Evan said you offered the guy a job."

"Yeah, maybe. If he can't find something better." Dan's surprised by how betrayed he's feeling. He thought he'd come to terms with his place in the relationship, thought he'd accepted that Evan would always come first with Jeff, but somehow this is still a shock, to have Jeff so totally on Evan's side. "Did Evan tell you the whole thing, about how Taylor was practically framed? And, you know, it's not just a rich/poor thing—it's also a gay thing, because do you think the dad would have flipped out so much if his son had brought home a twenty-two-year-old *woman*? It's bullshit, man."

"So, what, you're just going to charge through the world righting wrongs, throwing Evan's decisions back in his face, when all he's trying to do is protect his company, and protect his family?"

Dan's head hurts, and he's feeling a bit dizzy again. He's also feeling a bit defeated. "I'm just trying to do what I think is right. I'm not... I'm not trying to get in Evan's way. But...." He lets a little bitterness come through in his laugh. "But what happened to you not wanting to get involved, Jeff? Sounds like you're pretty involved, sounds like you've already decided that Evan's right and I'm wrong."

Jeff doesn't say anything to that, and Dan lets him think about it for a little while. Finally, Jeff sighs. "So nothing happened between you and Taylor?"

Dan's too tired. He doesn't have the words to explain how it feels to have them both doubting him, to have them both siding against him, and he can't find the energy to even try to express himself. Evan was one thing, but having Jeff feeling the same way—it's just too much. "I'm done with this, Jeff." He feels old, and worn down. "I'm not going to keep...." But the words still aren't there. He tries to regroup. "Evan gets back in a couple days, right?"

Jeff's voice is cautious now. "Yeah, that's the plan."

"We should... we should probably get together then. I think...." Dan can't really bring himself to say the words, but he's pretty sure Jeff gets the message. Pretty sure Jeff must be thinking the same way, must be wondering if the whole thing isn't just more trouble than it's worth. It'll hurt to call things off, but it's beginning to feel like it might hurt more to keep fighting for something that's just never going to work. "Well, we should talk then, I think."

There's silence on the line, and then Jeff's voice, sounding just as tired as Dan feels. "I guess maybe we should."

Dan's irrationally disappointed, and he realizes that he was still expecting Jeff to somehow save the day. He waits a second, giving Jeff a chance to perform one last miracle, and then he says, "Okay, then. Can you give me a call when he gets back?"

Jeff agrees quietly, and they hang up. Dan lies back on his bed and closes his eyes. Now that he's said the words, he kind of wishes he could take them back. He can't really imagine his life without the other two men in it. But it doesn't make sense to keep going on the way they have been, either, just little flashes of peace and happiness almost lost beneath all the conflict and struggle. And Dan still has some pride, enough that he'd rather not be caught clinging to something that the other two are just too nice to let go of. He thinks about calling Chris, but he doesn't really know what to say; he tries to summon Puppet-Chris instead, but all Dan gets is a quick flash of his disapproving face. Apparently the puppet thinks as much of him as Jeff and Evan do.

Dan lets himself get lost in ineffective thought, and at some point he drifts off. He wakes up early the next morning and goes through his routine without paying attention to anything, just letting the habits take care of themselves. He makes it to work okay and saddles up Winston

for some arena jumping. They warm up, and by the time they're ready to start working, Robyn is out, riding Sunshine. Dan waves hello but doesn't go over to talk to her; he remembers showing off with Evan, fooling around in front of her, and it makes him feel empty and a little foolish. He should have known better than to think he'd be able to make it last.

He's not paying the attention he should to what he's doing, and when someone slams a metal bin or something in the barn and Winston shies, it throws Dan off balance. It's not a big deal, and he's in the process of righting himself when another slam sounds, and Winston apparently decides he's under attack, rearing and twisting to the side. Dan's still on, mostly, but Winston has shifted them too close to one of the jumps, and when his front feet come down one of them lands on a trotting pole put at the base of a vertical, and it rolls a little, and Winston stumbles sideways and then rears and twists again, and Dan's off, falling onto the jump.

He finds himself on the ground, and when he tries to brace his hand on the sand to get to his feet, an arrow of pain shoots up his arm and he falls back. Then Robyn's there, and he has no idea how she moved so fast.

"Dan, sweetie, stay still." She looks kind of worried, but that doesn't make much sense.

"I'm okay," he says, or tries to say, but the words come out a bit slurred, and for the first time, he's a bit worried himself.

"Okay, but you took a bit of hit there." She's got her hand on his chest, trying to keep him from moving.

"Yeah, my wrist." That sounds a bit better, more clear.

"Your head, Dan." She reaches out as if to touch Dan's face, but doesn't, and Dan is aware for the first time of something warm and a bit itchy near his temple.

"Oh, shit. Am I bleeding?" His voice sounds a lot better now. "Don't tell Justin, okay? You know how he gets."

Robyn looks a little startled and then sad. "Okay, yeah, we're going to get you to the doctor, sweetie."

Dan looks around. Something isn't right. He recognizes the

jumps, the ring, the mountains in the background. “Don’t tell Evan or Jeff, either; they’re mad at me.” Dan’s head hurts, but he doesn’t want to stay still. He reaches down with the hand that doesn’t hurt and pushes himself to his feet, and Robyn gives up trying to stop him and shifts into a sort of support mode, hovering as if she thinks he’s going to fall. He realizes that she has a good reason to worry when a wave of dizziness hits him before he’s even totally vertical, but he manages to stay upright, leaning heavily on her shoulder and trying to avoid jars to his sore wrist.

He looks at the two horses standing near the jumps, and wants to ask if they’re okay, but he somehow can’t remember.... One of them is Sunshine, he thinks.... “Which one was I riding? Is the horse okay?”

“You were on Winston, and he’s fine. Are you okay to walk to the car?”

Dan starts to move forward, but Robyn catches his shirt hem. “The car’s the other way, sweetie. You’re heading off into the pastures.”

But the dizziness is worse now, making him nauseated, and he manages to get as far as the railing around the edge of the arena before leaning over and losing the contents of his stomach. He’s not sure if it’s good or bad that there wasn’t much in there but coffee.

“Okay, that’s gross, sweetie.” Robyn’s hand is soothing on his back, but then she’s yelling, and he really wishes she’d stop. “Devin! Devin!”

Apparently Devin has come out of the barn, but Dan really can’t make himself look. He doesn’t actually need to—he’s getting enough information from Robyn’s yelling. “Come get the horses, okay? And bring the first aid kit. Dan had a fall; I’m gonna take him in to get checked out.”

Robyn steers Dan toward the gate, and with every step he feels a little clearer, although the pain in his head increases. When Devin meets them at the gate with the first aid kit, Dan braces himself on the gate post while the other two squirt some saline on his temple and then put a swatch of gauze in his right hand, the one with the uninjured wrist. “Steady pressure, okay?” Robyn instructs, and then they’re on their way again. Dan has left his keys in the truck, as usual, and Robyn

steers him toward that. “I love you, Dan, but you can bleed all over your own car.”

The trip to the parking lot is excruciating, but once Dan’s in the truck, things get a bit better. He’s able to brace the uninjured right side of his face against the window, and then reach across to hold the gauze against his temple. It’s not perfect, but the world is swimming a little less.

Robyn’s on her phone as she climbs into the driver’s side and pulls Dan’s keys down from the visor. “Yeah, we’ll be there in less than ten minutes, okay?” She seems to get the answer she wants, because she clicks the phone shut and starts driving. “We’re going to Dr. Sangha’s, Dan—I met her with Tat, and she was really nice, so don’t get started with your doctor-phobia crap, all right?” Her voice is more gentle than her words, and he has to admit that she knows him pretty well, because he had just been trying to think of ways to get her to drive him home instead of to the doctor’s office.

They’re quiet the rest of the way in, but Dan can feel Robyn shooting him concerned looks from time to time. He has his eyes closed, trying to keep the waves of nausea under control, and he realizes when the engine stops that he’d been humming along with it, a quiet little breathy sound that seems loud and odd once the engine turns off. It’s really no wonder Robyn’s been keeping an eye on him.

Robyn parks the truck in a spot near the door, and by the time Dan has his feet swung around and on the pavement, she’s there to help him up. Dan isn’t sure whether he’s slowed down or she’s sped up, but there is definitely a difference in their relative speeds. She helps him inside and the doctor is waiting, an attractive South Asian woman who does seem as nice as Robyn had claimed. Dan’s bruised brain notices several people sitting in the waiting room, and wonders if he would be getting such prompt attention if he wasn’t coming from the Kaminski property, but he’s too tired and sore to worry about it. And then he worries about that, wonders if that’s how people start getting used to privilege, when they’re too weak or distracted to resist, but again, he can’t really keep the thought in his head, and he meekly lets Robyn guide him after the doctor back to the exam room.

The doctor shines a light in his eyes, looks at the cut on his temple, and asks him some basic questions. He can answer the ones

about his name and the date, and when she has him recite the months of the year backward, he's fine. But when she asks him about how he got injured, he pretty much draws a blank.

"I, uh... fell off a horse?" It's a pretty good bet, given what he *can* remember and given what he does for a living.

The doctor doesn't seem to notice the uncertainty in his voice, or at least she doesn't comment on it, but Robyn is not letting it pass. "Which horse, Dan?"

And he knows she told him this, knows it wasn't Sunshine... but he can't quite remember. He just ignores her, waiting for another question from the doctor instead. The doctor asks him if he lost consciousness, and he's barely started his denial before Robyn butts in. "Yes, Dan, you were out." She turns to the doctor. "For maybe a minute or so? Right out, flat on the ground, not hearing me or responding at all." She shoots him a dirty look. "It scared the crap out of me, Dan."

That takes some of the energy out of Dan's denials. He may be confident that he'll be okay on his own, but Robyn deserves to get some more formal reassurances. The doctor shifts most of her questions toward Robyn, apparently having figured out who her more reliable witness is. She seems a bit concerned when Robyn mentions that Dan had been disoriented and confused, and Dan can't really remember what she's talking about. The doctor takes a few notes and then has a nurse take Dan down the hall to get his wrist X-rayed. The nurse wants him in a wheelchair, and he's halfway through forming a protest when he sees Robyn starting to growl at him, and he sinks into the chair.

There's stitches for his temple, and then a bit of a wait, and Dan thinks about trying to get rid of Robyn, sending her back to the barn, but he's feeling too sick to even try. He also knows that there's no way he'd have a chance of succeeding.

Robyn seems to have her own ideas, though. She holds out her phone to Dan. "Evan's still out of town, right? But you could call him, let him know you had a spill but you're going to be okay." Dan shrugs noncommittally, but Robyn doesn't take the hint. "Or Jeff, then?"

Dan realizes that she's not going to let this go without some sort of explanation from him. "I don't—there's no point in bugging them. Nothing they could do, right?"

Robyn shakes her head. “They’d still want to know, Dan!”

He sighs. “We’re not... it’s not really going that well. Like, at all.” He gives her his most pathetic look, which he suspects is extra-specially sad right now. “Just leave it, okay?”

She looks like she has more to say, but then Dr. Sangha is back with the X-rays, showing them where Dan’s radius bone is broken. The ends are still aligned, she points out, so it should heal without too much trouble. She puts a cast on it, and then makes Dan stand up and prove that he’s not dizzy anymore. He’s not totally steady, but he’s not falling over, so she seems inclined to let him go home.

That brings its own set of problems, of course. Apparently Dan needs to be monitored for the next couple days to make sure there are no signs of bleeding in his brain. He tries to talk the doctor out of it, but she’s not budging, and he feels too crappy to argue very hard. So he turns reluctantly to Robyn. She makes a face at him.

“Yeah, Dan, you can stay with me, but are you sure you don’t want to call Jeff? Or Evan, maybe he could make it home early....” She sees his face, and turns to the doctor. “I’ll take responsibility—if I can’t find someone better, I can keep an eye on him.” Dan tunes out the doctor as she gives instructions to Robyn, and thinks about how nice it would be to sink into Evan’s huge, comfortable bed, rest his aching head on Evan’s chest.... He can almost imagine Jeff’s voice rumbling in the background as he sleeps, keeping him grounded, making him feel safe... and then the rumbling voice gets a little louder, a little clearer, and Dan pulls his head up a little and sees that Robyn has heard it too.

She gives Dan a triumphant smile and steps to the door of the examination room. She peeks outside, and then opens the door wider. “Jeff—hi! Are you looking for us?” She steps back, and Jeff’s body fills the doorway, and Dan can’t read the expression on his face at all. He isn’t sure if he should be happy that Jeff found them... or worried.

chapter 24

DR. SANGHA obviously recognizes Jeff, but she still shifts her eyes toward Dan, looking for permission to add another person to the discussion about Dan's health. Dan's pretty sure the conversation is essentially over, unless the doctor is going to start repeating everything for Jeff's benefit, so instead of dealing with the issue directly, he slumps off the examination table onto his feet.

"Is it okay to go now?" he asks the doctor, and she steps back and nods.

"So you'll either be with him or find a substitute, right?" she confirms with Robyn, who agrees much more readily now that Jeff has appeared. Dan wonders if he's such a burden that Robyn's getting sick of him, too, but he doesn't bother following that thought any further. Robyn would walk through fire for any of her friends, and he knows that.

There are some forms to sign at the front desk on the way out, and Dan takes care of it with Robyn and Jeff hovering somewhere in the background, Robyn updating Jeff on the situation. Dan marvels at how much easier the signing-out process is now that he's got good health insurance, and then he's ready to go. He doesn't really know where he's going, or more importantly, who's going with him, but he'd rather have that conversation outdoors, he thinks.

He reconsiders that decision when the first flash of bright sunlight hits his sensitized eyes, and his body actually recoils in pain. He bumps into Jeff behind him, a solid strength that Dan has to force himself to pull away from. But then Jeff's beside him, and he's offering Dan his sunglasses, the same ones from that day by the pool back when... back when everything was different. Dan hesitates only a second before taking them, and he knows Jeff sees his wry smile of recognition.

Robyn shifts Dan around so he's facing backward, out of the light, and then says, "So Jeff says he can stay with you today, if that's all right with you. We're already short of people at the barn, with Tat gone and you out, so I really should get back there." She softens her voice a little, and looks apologetically at Jeff before saying to Dan, "You can come and stay in my apartment, if you want, and I can check on you through the day, but... Jeff says he's happy to help."

Dan can feel Jeff's strong arm and knows that of course Jeff is ready to help. That's who Jeff is. And Dan can't really decide if it would be more awkward to spend time with Jeff, with their recent problems hanging over them, or to refuse to spend time with him, making the division between them even worse... and trying to think it through is just making his head hurt even more. "I just want to go to sleep," he mutters, and it's not exactly gracious, but Jeff and Robyn seem to take it for what it's worth.

"Okay, then," Jeff says quietly. "Your place is closest. Why don't we go there, and you can sleep for a while, and we can reassess when you wake up?"

Dan tries to nod, but it sends a wave of pain and nausea through his head. Jeff seems to get the message anyway, and turns to Robyn. "Can you stay with him while I bring the car around?" She nods, and Jeff shuffles Dan over to lean against the wall before jogging out the door.

He's not even out of sight before Robyn starts talking. "Is this okay, Dan? I didn't call him; he found out because he called the barn looking for you. And then he called the doctor's office, and they wouldn't give him information, so he came down in person. I mean, maybe you guys are hitting a rough patch, but he obviously still wants to be involved."

"It's fine, Robyn." Dan's kind of relieved to hear that she hadn't called and that she's checking in with him now—it's nice to know that she hadn't totally overridden his judgment. "He's... Evan says he's the world's best teddy bear... nobody better for a job like this, really."

Robyn's obviously paying more attention to Dan's tone than to his words. "You can still change your mind, come out to the barn. But you'll probably just be asleep anyhow, and you'll be happier in your

own bed.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Seriously.”

Jeff’s got his car pulled up in front of the doors now, and he’s coming inside to get them. He looks a little tentative, and Dan realizes that Jeff must have known that Robyn would take the opportunity to double check with Dan. He moves easily to take Robyn’s place when she gestures to him, and Dan lets himself lean a little as they make their way to the car. Dan allows himself to be guided into the passenger seat and then looks up at Robyn. “Take care of the truck, Robyn.”

“Jesus, Dan, you’re not dying. It’ll be parked in the same spot it always is at the barn—I bet it’ll barely miss you!”

“No, she’ll miss me.” Dan tries for a little smile, but it makes his face ache, and he realizes that he hasn’t seen a mirror lately. “Is my face all messed up?”

Jeff’s gone around to the driver’s side now, and he chuckles as he does up his seat belt. “It’s got some really pretty colors on it, that’s for sure.”

“Great.” He’s so tired he can barely make the effort to lift even his eyes toward the window. “Thanks, Robyn.”

“No problem, sweetie.” She crouches down a little so she can see Jeff. “I’ll call tonight when I’m done at work, okay? See if I’m needed?”

Jeff nods. “Yeah, okay. Thanks.”

Robyn backs away and Jeff pulls out, and Dan stops trying to keep his eyes open. He’s a little pissed when Jeff tries to keep him awake, but then he groggily realizes that they’re at the apartment, and Jeff isn’t trying to *keep* him awake, he’s just trying to wake him up.

“Come on, cowboy, time to saddle up. The doctor said you have to go back in if you won’t wake up properly. You don’t want that, now, do you?” And that’s the incentive Dan needs to pry his eyelids open.

“I’m up, I’m up.” He kicks his feet around and sets them on the ground outside the car. “I’m just tired.”

“Yeah, she said you would be.” Jeff has his arm around Dan and is supporting him as he climbs to his feet. “You’re allowed to sleep all

you want, but I've got to wake you up every couple hours. And you can have pain killers, but not aspirin. What have you got in the house?"

Dan sighs. "Aspirin."

Jeff chuckles. "Of course. Let's get you to bed, and then I'll go pick up some supplies, okay?"

That sounds great to Dan, and he manages to make it up the stairs on his own, although he's aware that Jeff is hovering behind him, ready to catch him if he falls. He's got his overshirt off while he's still in the living room, and he ignores whatever Jeff's saying about going to the bathroom before sleeping. His bed is all he wants, and as soon as he sees it, there's no going anywhere else. He has enough presence of mind to not flop onto it, but his careful crawl is as speedy as possible, and then he's burying his head in the pillow and letting his eyes fall shut. He's vaguely aware of Jeff pulling his boots off, and he even manages to roll over when told to in order for Jeff to undo his fly. Lifting his hips for Jeff to get his pants off takes a little more coordination, but he manages it, and even has the strength to grin a little when Jeff makes a comment about it not being his favorite conditions for undressing him. But that's the end of his endurance, and as soon as Jeff stops fussing over him, he rolls over onto his stomach, with his sore wrist stretched out away from his body and his face resting on its uninjured side, and he's out.

When Dan's next aware of his surroundings, it's because Jeff is there again, running his warm hand along Dan's shoulders, and speaking softly but firmly. "Okay, sweetheart, wake up now, okay?"

Dan groans, but instead of pulling away from Jeff's hand his body shifts over toward Jeff, looking for more warmth, more comfort. Jeff doesn't seem to mind. "I've got Tylenol and some soup, or there's paninis if you can chew."

The thought of paninis catches Dan's attention, although when he cautiously moves his jaw, the soreness makes him think that chewing might not be a good plan. He starts to shift over anyway, turning to face Jeff, but he's forgotten about his sore wrist and tries to use it brace himself. The cast on the wrist is one of the temporary kind, more of a splint, and it's really not enough to protect the injury from that sort of abuse. Dan manages to collapse his weight off the arm before he does

any real damage, he thinks, but the pain is still excruciating, and once it starts to fade it's replaced by humiliation at being so stupid. Jeff doesn't seem to be judging him, though, and Dan realizes that he's contorted himself around so that his head is on Jeff's lap, and Jeff is hunched over and cradling him, saying, "Shhh, shhh, shhh," in between pressing kisses to Dan's shoulder. It's not a position with a lot of dignity for either of them, and Dan is a little embarrassed by how much he's enjoying it.

Jeff seems to realize that Dan's back to himself, and when he straightens up Dan does, too, shifting over to sit upright, careful this time to protect his wrist. "Shit." He grimaces apologetically. "Ouch."

That seems like all the explanation that's really needed, and Jeff just nods, then reaches over to the bedside table and pops the lid on the Tylenol bottle. "Won't do much, but it might take the edge off," he suggests, and Dan reaches for the pills. Jeff grabs the glass of water and holds it within reach of Dan's one good hand, and Dan realizes how gross his mouth feels. He swallows the pills and then a little more water and starts trying to build his strength for a trip to the bathroom to brush his teeth.

Jeff apparently has different priorities. "Do you want to try coming out to the table? I can bring soup in here, but if you spill it, you're gonna have to get up anyway for me to change the sheets."

Dan nods regretfully. "Spilling seems kinda likely." Dan's stomach growls as a reminder that it doesn't care where the meal is served, but it would damn well like something to eat, so Dan swings his legs around while Jeff carefully supports his shoulders, keeping the wrist protected. Once he's up, he feels okay but a little chilly, and he looks down at his bare legs.

Jeff notices and makes sure Dan's balanced before heading for the dresser. "Have you got sweats in here somewhere?"

"Middle right, hopefully...."

Jeff opens the drawer and pulls out a pair of navy sweat pants, then nods Dan back toward the bed. "Just to be safe, how about if you sit down for the foot-lifting stage?"

Dan wants to object, but he really can't think of a good argument, so he shuffles backward obediently. Jeff crouches down and fits both of

Dan's feet through the pant legs, then pulls the waistband up to Dan's mid-thigh. Then he helps Dan stand upright, and pulls the pants the rest of the way up. They end up standing pretty close, face to face, although Dan is a little too aware of the rankness of his breath to really enjoy the moment. Jeff backs away a little, looking down as he says, "This really probably is easier with someone closer to your size; if you can stand it, I'm happy to stick around and help as long as you need."

"If I can...." Dan sits back down again. If they're having this talk, or even *starting* this talk, he'll need all his strength. "Jesus, Jeff, obviously I can *stand* it... that's not...."

Jeff looks apologetic. "Yeah, sorry, I didn't mean to get all melodramatic. We were heading for soup, right?"

And that's a quicker shift than Dan was expecting, but yes, his stomach reminds him, they *were* heading for soup, or hopefully for something more solid, if the jaw will allow. So Dan heaves himself to his feet again, so determined to do it alone that he ends up overbalancing, stumbling forward so that Jeff has to catch him anyway. "Fuck." Jeff's right, though; the way he's going, Robyn could get crushed if she tried to help. "Sorry. Everything's a little... off."

"Yeah, well, you've got another couple hours of that before I drag your ass back to the doctor. And as hot as the drawl is under other circumstances, it would be a good sign of your mental competence if you could de-Texas yourself just for now."

Dan's a little shocked at that and tries to think back over what he's been saying. Damn, he *has* been drawling. "Sorry," he says, making it clipped and distinct, and Jeff just shakes his head at him and then points him toward the main room.

Dan makes it to the table under his own steam, and as he pulls out a chair he realizes that he's never sat there before; most of his meals are eaten on the go or on the couch. He feels a bit weird, like a visitor in his own apartment, but that thought leaves his head when Jeff comes over with a bowl of soup. It's Dan's left wrist that's sore, which is a relief, because he's really not up to struggling with a spoon in his wrong hand. He manages a few mouthfuls before his stomach tells him that actually, it'd like a little time to think about this new introduction, and he looks up to see Jeff watching him.

"It's good soup." That seems neutral enough.

Jeff nods. "Zio's—they're more than just paninis, you know."

Dan shrugs. "Soup's okay when I'm off my game, but a panini is a meal!"

"Hey, you ditched the drawl. Good work." Jeff smiles. "If you can make it back to bed without falling over, you'll have escaped the return visit to the doctor." He nods at Dan's still full soup bowl. "But your appetite...."

"Dude, don't start. Appetite isn't one of the warning signs—I was listening."

"No, but nausea is." Jeff is watching Dan closely.

"I'm not sick; I'm just taking a break. It's been a while since I had...." Dan was going to say "anything to eat," but he's not sure he wants to set off that conversation, so he thinks fast. "... soup. It's kinda an old person food, huh?" He gives it just enough of a pause so that he can pretend to be innocent. "Do you eat it a lot?"

Jeff looks a little surprised, then grins. "Damn, didn't take you long.... If I hit you in the head again, will you go back to being sweet, sleepy Dan? The one who *doesn't* imply that I'm old?"

Dan smiles smugly. "Oh, did I imply that? I guess maybe I did... sorry 'bout that." He takes another mouthful of soup and lets it sit in his mouth for a bit before swallowing. His stomach seems okay, but there's no point in pushing things.

Jeff's still watching him closely. "You looked in the mirror yet?"

Dan shakes his head a little, and it only sets off a rumble of pain rather than an explosion. "No, not yet. Pretty bad?"

"The whole side of your face is bruised. Looks like you should have been wearing a motorcycle helmet."

"I should have stayed on the damn horse. I'm still not sure how I did my wrist *and* my head."

"Robyn said the wrist was from you putting your hand out to break your fall, and then Winston plowed into the jump, knocked it over on top of you. She *thinks* it was the standard that got you, but Winston was tangled up for a bit, so it might have been his hoof...."

“Winston, right.” Judging by Jeff’s quick look, Dan should have kept that realization to himself. “I mean, is he okay? Has Robyn called to say anything?”

“She hasn’t called. I’m sure she’ll have checked on him, and she knows where to find you if needed.”

Dan nods and has some more soup. It’s nice, sitting here with Jeff, talking about the day, even if the day was a little more messed up than most. “Your show’s almost done, right?”

Jeff nods. “Yeah, it closes Friday night.”

“Is there a party for that too?”

“Nah, not really. Just a lot of packing up and hopefully a check.”

“Did you sell a lot?”

Jeff nods. “Yeah, it wasn’t bad. Didn’t sell out or anything, but... yeah, enough to keep going, at least. And I got some interest, some people saying they aren’t going to buy right now, but they’d like to see my work in the future.”

“Cool. So... are you out of the riding business, then?” Dan grins. “No way I can convince you to come back and help me with some of these horses? I can probably do exercise riding with a cast, but I’m not gonna be much use for schooling unless I can use my fingers.”

“My mom’s still interested. Last I heard she was seeing if she could rent out her place up there—you know, move down for a trial run.”

“That’d be great. There’s some great horses out there that we could be buying, if we had people to work them—I mean, it seems a bit nasty to take advantage of the bad economy, but...”

“You don’t help people out by *not* buying their horses.”

“Yeah, right.” Dan thinks about bringing up Taylor’s name as a possible hire but decides against it. He’s enjoying the peace too much, and he likes seeing Jeff’s face all warm and relaxed. He has another spoonful of soup, and that’s it. His stomach is on the edge of complaining, and he’s starting to feel his energy flagging too. If he wants to have enough left in the engine to get his teeth brushed (and he very much does want that), he’d better not overdo it.

Jeff notices, of course. “I can put the soup in the fridge, heat it up again later on if you want more.”

“I can put it away,” Dan starts, but Jeff just laughs.

“Remember that we were trying to *avoid* spilling the soup?” He shakes his head. “You can start doing chores once you’re a little steadier on your pins.”

Dan doesn’t argue, and Jeff ducks into the kitchen and then comes back and stands in front of Dan. “Back to bed?” he suggests.

“Bathroom first—my teeth need brushing.”

“You should pee too. And you’re supposed to watch and make sure there’s no blood, although she didn’t seem to think there would be.”

Dan makes a sound to reflect his disgust at his body’s fragility and then uses the back of the chair to lever himself to his feet. He heads to the bathroom slowly but without help, so Jeff can just forget about Dan going back to the doctor’s any time soon.

Jeff seems to be planning to follow Dan right into the bathroom, but there’s really not a lot of space in there, and Dan doesn’t think he needs help to pee. He gives Jeff a look, and Jeff’s return look is full of doubt.

“Okay, I’ll stay outside, but you leave the door open, okay? And don’t be proud about asking for help.” Jeff looks like he knows how likely Dan is to follow that advice.

Dan takes a quick look at himself in the mirror and then looks away. Jeff was right; the whole side of his face is bruised from the temple down almost to his chin. He looks like he got into a fight or took a beating, and neither is a look Dan really likes to see on himself.

The peeing goes okay, but Dan’s energy is leaving him fast, and he puts the lid down on the seat and sits on it after he’s flushed to take a little break. He doesn’t even notice that Jeff’s come in until he feels his fingers being shaped around the handle of his toothbrush. He lets Jeff guide the toothpaste-covered brush to his mouth, and then manages to take over for himself, only feeling a little foolish. It hurts to stretch his cheek out on the injured side, but not enough to suggest a serious injury, and he manages a pretty good cleaning, under the circumstances.

He makes it to his feet to spit and rinse in the sink, and then looks at Jeff. "Thanks. Back to bed?"

Jeff nods and shifts out of the way, letting Dan shuffle by him into the bedroom. The bed is just as comfortable as Dan remembered, and it's nice to have Jeff nearby.

"Jeff?" Dan isn't sure if he wants to know this or not, but since the idea has popped into his head, he thinks he'd better ask. Jeff comes closer, waiting for Dan to continue. "Robyn said you called the barn—said you were looking for me. What did you want to talk about?" Dan's lying stomach-down on the bed again, and he wishes he could turn his head in the other direction so his face won't be visible if Jeff says something bad, but there's really only one side of Dan's face that's suitable for bed contact right now.

Jeff comes a little closer and sits gingerly on the side of the bed. He takes a deep breath. "I wanted to... I wanted to tell you not to give up on us yet. We've got stuff to work on, obviously, but... I don't want to give up."

Dan lets the words sink in for a few moments, makes sure that he understands them. Maybe he waits a little too long, because Jeff is shifting, getting ready to move away, and Dan almost bangs his hurt wrist again reaching out to stop him. "I don't want to give up, either," he spits out in a rush.

Jeff freezes, and then sinks back on the bed. "We don't need to decide anything right now, Dan; you're not at your best."

"*You* are, though." Dan isn't sure if that makes sense. "I mean... I could have done this on my own or with Robyn, or whatever... but... I'm glad you're here." He thinks for a second. "I don't just mean that you're good at being a nurse... I mean, you know...." He needs to simplify this, go back to before he started blathering. "I don't want to give up, either."

Jeff pauses and then exhales. "Yeah, okay. We won't give up."

Dan tries not to think about Evan, about how his opinion on the matter might complicate that little plan. Instead, he smiles sleepily at Jeff. "You want to lie down? Sleep a little?"

Jeff looks doubtful. "I don't want to jar your arm or your head."

“Dude, *sleep*—not fool around. How much jarring can you do in your sleep?”

Jeff looks tempted, and Dan nods to the far side of the bed. “You can even be the big spoon—how’s that for an offer?”

Jeff grins and moves around the foot of the bed. “Yeah, that’s pretty tempting, all right.”

Dan carefully rolls over onto his side as he feels Jeff’s weight dip the mattress, and then there’s warmth and solidity behind him as Jeff eases in. Dan feels a kiss on the nape of his neck, and for a short second he’s tempted to roll over and get something started, because damn, it feels good having Jeff so close. Common sense wins out, though, and Dan contents himself with wrapping his good hand around his waist to grab Jeff’s arm and drag it over to its rightful place by Dan’s chest. Dan laces his fingers with Jeff’s to make sure that the arm can’t escape.

Dan can feel the gust of air from Jeff’s laugh. “Damn, Tex, when you cuddle, you don’t mess around.”

“Damn straight,” Dan mutters, and then he lets himself fade off to sleep.

chapter 25

DAN wakes up and feels like something's missing, and it takes him a few moments to figure out that all that's missing is Jeff.

Dan stretches cautiously and notes a few sore spots where he probably pulled muscles or hit something during his fall, but his wrist has settled into a slow throb instead of shooting agony, and his head... his head actually doesn't feel too bad, just a little tender.

He tests his recovery by carefully swinging his feet over the side of the bed, and there's no wave of dizziness to greet him, so that counts as a win. He's not exactly overwhelmed with energy, though, and he's still sitting there when Jeff comes into the room carrying his cell phone.

"Oh, good, you woke yourself up. I was just coming in to do that. Oh, and Robyn's on the phone—she wants to know if you need her to rescue you."

Dan reaches out for the phone. "Are those the words she used?"

Jeff grins. "No, but I can hear between the lines." He pauses just before handing the phone over. "Evan's on his way back. He wants to come over or to meet us at the house—but you don't have to, if you want to rest up." He shrugs. "I think you've got a lot of people willing to do whatever you want, here, Dan, so... ball's in your court."

Dan isn't sure how to take that news, isn't sure if he's up to another run-in with Evan, but he doesn't know if it's right to keep Jeff to himself once Evan's back in the picture. He's still undecided when he lifts the phone to his ear and speaks into the mouthpiece. "Hey, Robyn. How's Winston?"

She laughs. "I knew that would be the first thing you said! He's fine; I lunged him this afternoon, and there's no soreness at all. How about you?"

“Well, nobody’s lunged me, but... yeah, there’s some soreness.”

Her laugh is low and sympathetic. “I’ll bet. Your face is a mess, and concussions are never fun. How’s the wrist?”

“Still broken, but, you know, nothing that won’t heal.”

“Well, aren’t you the tough little trouper? Don’t forget who you’re talking to, Dan—I was there when you were whimpering in the doctor’s office this morning.”

“I really don’t remember whimpering.”

“Yeah, well, you didn’t remember Winston’s name, either, so we’re not going to be able to trust your memory, I don’t think!”

Dan sighs. He should know better than to argue with Robyn. “Yeah, okay, I’m not a tough little trouper....”

“That’s better.” Her voice gets more serious. “Are you okay there with Jeff? If you aren’t, I can come over, no problem.”

Jeff has left the room, giving Dan a little privacy, but Dan doesn’t really need it. “No, things are good. I... I don’t know. Evan’s coming home, I guess. Things could get dicey. Maybe I’ll save up your goodwill in case I need an escape later on?”

“As if Jeff would abandon you.”

“No, of course he wouldn’t... but, you know... it might be a bit awkward.” Dan hears voices in the main room now, Jeff’s low rumble and somebody else, too quiet to be sure, but quite possibly.... “Shit, it sounds like maybe Evan’s here now... but.... I don’t know; how long does it take to get home from New York? I didn’t even know he was coming.”

“Well, you should go say hi. And Dan, you know... don’t go looking for a fight, okay? Sometimes when you’re defensive, you get a bit aggressive.”

“Thanks, Dr. Phil.”

“You need to get real, Dan! I want you to get excited about your life! If you’re gonna talk to me, you’re gonna have to be honest....”

“Okay, how do you find time to watch afternoon TV? Do I need to schedule more riding for you?”

“It’s the wonder of TiVo, baby—there’s no escape!” She pauses. “Besides, you recognized it!”

She’s caught him again. “Yeah, okay, I’m gonna go be nonaggressive now.”

“That’s good, Dan! You can’t change what you don’t acknowledge. You need to *own* this problem!”

Dan clicks the phone shut. Robyn’s energy is wearing him down a little, and he thinks he’s going to need all the strength he can get if it really is Evan out in the other room. He clambers to his feet and wishes there was a mirror in the bedroom so he could make himself look a little more presentable, but then he figures that’s pretty much a lost cause considering that he’s got stitches and a huge bruise down one side of his face. He runs a hand through his hair to smooth the worst of the bed head and then starts for the door.

He’s about halfway there when the door opens a little and Jeff pops his head in. “Hey, you’re up.” Jeff’s voice is a mix of proud and surprised, and Dan feels like a little kid taking his first steps. “Uh... Evan’s here. You good to come out? Or do you want him to come in here?”

No, Dan wants to keep his bedroom safe. He’ll deal with Evan in the main room. He nods his intentions to Jeff, who falls back to make way for him. Dan’s still not exactly sure how Evan got here so fast and what happened to his business in New York, but he can’t think of a way to ask that doesn’t sound a bit like an interrogation. Or like he’s being defensively aggressive.

He shuffles out to the living room and squints as the glare from the late afternoon sun hits his eyes. Before he can see clearly, there’s a blur of movement and the curtains are being drawn, and Dan sees Evan hovering by the window. He looks... nervous. Tentative. Dan realizes that this is probably just as awkward for Evan as it is for Dan.

“Hey, man. Welcome home.” Dan tries a smile, careful because of his face and for other reasons, and Evan beams back at him then steps a little closer. Dan realizes that the other man is angling around, trying to get a look at the wreckage of Dan’s face. Dan sees the concern there and turns to give him a better look. “It’s pretty gross, I know, but it shouldn’t scar, I don’t think... or maybe just a little bit, the cut up at the

top....” Dan isn’t really sure how much of a role his face plays in Evan’s attraction to him, but it never hurts to reassure.

“Shit, though,” Evan breathes. “It looks like it must really hurt.”

“No, it’s okay.” After all, *Evan* doesn’t need to know that Dan’s not a tough little trouser. “I mean, sore, but okay if I don’t touch it.”

“And he’s standing straight, and he doesn’t sound like he’s coming to us from deep in the heart of Texas, so the brain seems to be healing up all right,” Jeff adds. “But you should still probably sit down, all right?” He nudges Dan in the direction of the couch, and Dan can’t think of a reason to argue.

Evan comes over and sits down in the arm chair and then reaches down into the huge paper shopping bag he’s been carrying. “Uh... I got you some stuff.” He pulls out a familiar yellow cup and then a spoon. “It’s a Frosty. Jeff said you can’t really chew for a bit, so I thought you might want that....” He passes the cup to Dan, who decides that yes, a Frosty sounds about perfect. It’s a bit melted, but not bad, so Evan must have found a Wendy’s pretty close by. Dan feels a bit guilty for eating in front of company without offering them anything, but... the Frosty tastes really good. Evan smiles happily and reaches down into the bag again. This time it’s a sort of extended beanbag, and Dan isn’t really sure what to do with it. Evan catches his confused look. “I don’t know, it’s from the airport gift shop—you’re supposed to put it in the microwave and heat it up. Helps sore muscles, or something.”

Jeff takes it from Evan and starts reading the instructions, and Evan reaches down into the bag. He pulls out a handful of CDs. “The internet said you aren’t supposed to watch TV for a while, so, I don’t know... books on tape.... I just got a bunch; I don’t know if they’re ones you’d want, but, you know—airport bookstore.” Evan still looks a little nervous, like he’s afraid Dan’s going to throw the gifts back in his face, and Dan has to take a moment to wonder just how much of an asshole he’s been to this guy for him to think that Dan would be anything but grateful. Grateful not so much for the generosity of the gifts but for the generosity of Evan’s spirit, to be coming here with an open heart despite the tension of their last encounter. Dan smiles a little, and Evan smiles back, and Jeff relaxes enough to sit down on the couch beside Dan.

And then Evan's just pulling things out randomly: a huge orange ("In case, you know—scurvy...") and two decks of cards ("We need two, because Jeff's a sore loser and he throws the cards all over when I kick his ass, so some might get lost"), a Trivial Pursuit game ("Cause you don't have to read the questions, you can just lie there and be smart and we can take care of the moving and stuff—the internet said your eyes might be sore"), and then Evan's looking a little sheepish. Dan can tell the bag isn't empty, but Evan looks like he's thinking about pushing it away. Then his eyes dart over to Jeff and then to Dan, and he grins, but it's back to being tentative. "And, okay, the next stuff... you know, it's meant... it's not meant as a criticism or whatever."

Dan braces himself. "Yeah, okay."

Evan gives him one more look, as if evaluating, and then reaches into the bag. "Okay, so the problem is I looked at getting a new battery for your phone, but for that model the battery life really isn't all that long, even with a new battery. So I was in the phone store anyway, and, you know... this is really cool."

He pulls out a boxed phone from the bag, and gives a quick look at Dan to see if he's taking the idea all right. Dan tries to keep his face neutral, and Evan continues with a little more speed, as if he's trying to sell the idea before Dan shuts him down.

"It's, uh, it's a smart phone, so you can use the internet and stuff, and that seemed like it might be good, you know, if you're looking at videos of horses, or... I don't know... other horse stuff." He makes a little face as if he wishes he'd rehearsed that part a little better. "But the best part is its battery life, which is the longest available. They claim sixteen days of standby time, but Consumer Reports says only ten days, but either way, that's excellent, right? And there's a camera, still and video, so again, that could be useful with the horses..." He extends the box toward Dan and seems relieved when Dan reaches out to take it. "I actually, uh... I got one for myself, too, 'cause my Blackberry's getting a little beat up, and then, you know, I didn't want Jeff to feel left out..." He's looking even more sheepish now, reaching into the bag and handing a matching box over to Jeff. He shrugs self-consciously, checks Dan for a reaction, and then gets enthusiastic again. "But check it out." He pulls out several matching boxes. "We'll all have the same charger! So we can leave one here and one at Jeff's and at my place,

and I thought maybe one at the barn... and I got one more. I don't really know where that one's going to go...."

There's a moment of silence, and Dan knows that Evan's waiting to see if he's crossed a line, gone from generous to controlling. Dan shakes his head. "Holy shit, Evan—what did the guy in the store think of this? Do they work on commission?"

Jeff lets out a loud laugh. "And what is everyone else going to think, if we have matching phones? Jesus, the matching sunglasses were embarrassing enough."

Evan seems relieved that they're laughing, not angry, and then puts a hurt expression on his face. "Well, I guess I'm not ashamed to share things with people I care about. I'm sorry if you guys don't feel that way."

Dan shakes his head. "We're gonna get them mixed up all the time, be grabbing each other's phones...."

Evan almost pounces. "Oh, no! I don't think so!" He reaches into the bag and pulls out two smaller boxes. Dan's beginning to wonder if the bag has magical properties, like Santa's bottomless sack, but then Evan peers into it to be sure it's empty and tosses it away. Then he holds the boxes up triumphantly. "Different skins! There's a black one and a clear one... and there was a pink one in the store, but, you know, I thought maybe it would be better to have one just stay skinless." He holds out the two boxes toward Dan. "Invalid's choice—clear, black, or naked?"

Dan isn't sure if he wants to go along with this or not, but Evan looks adorable when he's enthusiastic, and the phone really does look pretty cool. "Normally, I'd be all about naked, but if I'm taking it to work, it might need a little protection." He reaches out and selects the black casing.

Evan nods approvingly and turns to Jeff. "Okay, I know you're a fan of nudity as well, but do you want your phone exposed like that?"

Jeff looks like he's considering it, and then nods his head. "You know, I think I do."

Evan smiles. "Well, all right, then, the clear one's for me." He sits back in his chair and watches as Dan takes another spoonful of his

Frosty. "Damn, I really am an excellent shopper."

Jeff shakes his head. "You're a good *buyer*, kid; I think there's a bit of a difference."

Evan just shrugs, and then looks over to where Dan is sitting on the couch. "Are you tired? I've been told that I'm not a very good visitor when people aren't feeling well," and he casts a dirty look in Jeff's direction. "Something about being too energetic, too tiring. But I can sit quietly, if that's okay."

Dan frowns. "Dude, you brought me a Frosty—you're golden. But... how come you're back so soon? This is early, right?"

Evan gives Jeff a quick look, as if trying to judge what's already been said on the topic. "Uh, you know... I decided that it was more important that I be here." He shrugs. "I got the *really* vital stuff taken care of yesterday, and then... I don't know. I was thinking of coming home anyway, and then you got hurt, and you know... I don't... I'm not much good at that, at being somewhere else when someone's hurt."

Dan lets that soak in for a minute, and then he shrugs. "I'm, uh... I'm sorry if I got in the way of your business, but... I'm glad you're here." He takes a deep breath. He might as well get it over with. "And I'm sorry if I was a bit hot headed. You know, about the Taylor thing. I mean... I disagree with you; I still don't think it's fair, but... I know the rules are there for a reason. I can see why we can't just start making exceptions all the time." He looks over at Jeff, then back at Evan. "And I know you have a family and a business to think about and protect."

Evan looks a little pained. "Uh... okay, well, that makes the next part a bit less... huh." He looks over at Jeff as if for support, but when Dan follows his eyes, he can tell that Jeff has no more idea of what Evan's talking about than Dan does. Evan makes a face, and then continues. "I do some business with a guy whose wife is deeply involved in a bunch of animal charities, and I gave him a call and then spoke to her, and... she thinks she has a line on something for Taylor, working with rescue horses, training them up to be adopted? It sounds like it'd be some hands on stuff and some fundraising and PR and volunteer supervision... but the money'd be about the same as where he is now, and it's not far, just a bit north of Oakland, so you know... it could be good." He grimaces again. "But, you know, they aren't sure if

they can afford to hire for the position, so I'd have to throw some money their way. And that's cool, I could totally do that. But, you know... I don't want to violate your... your working-class integrity, or whatever."

Dan doesn't need his brain to be working at full capacity to know that he's fallen tidily into Evan's trap. He sits quietly for a moment, trying to think of any way out, but he really can't find one, and when he looks up, Jeff is intently re-reading the instructions on the beanbag thing, obviously back to his "stay out of it" strategy, and Evan is watching Dan intently. Dan sighs. "You're kind of a fucker, Kaminski."

Evan grins widely. "I actually feel bad, doing it after you already apologized. Really, it would have been a lot more satisfying if we hadn't already made up. Ideally, you'd be at full strength too... but, you know... it's still pretty sweet."

Dan leans over and puts the remains of the Frosty on the coffee table. He takes a deep breath and lets it out, then does it again. Okay. "Evan," he begins. "I would really appreciate it if you would use your old boys' network and your money to help out a friend of mine." But then a flash of hope springs in his bruised brain. "But not yet!" Jeff looks up with interest. "Because Taylor's looking for jobs on his own, and if he finds something that he likes just as well, then he won't *need* your help."

Dan wishes he had a rewind button, some way to take back his request, because it's totally possible that Taylor *will* find work on his own, and then Dan won't have to compromise his values, won't have to let Evan win. Dan has to think about that for a second. How much of his resistance is actually morally based, and how much is just not wanting to let Evan have a victory? He looks at the assortment of presents around him and thinks of Evan buying them in the airport as he was flying home from his important business just to be with Dan, even though as far as he knew Dan was still totally pissed at him. Dan thinks maybe he needs to let go of the need to win. He thinks maybe he needs to try to be as generous as Evan had been. But he also thinks he needs to decide that with a fully functioning brain, and he's pretty sure he hasn't got one right now.

He sighs and leans back in the couch. "Dude, I take it back; Frosty or not, you *are* really tiring." He brings his feet up to nestle

under Jeff's legs, but Jeff catches them and extends them over his lap, which is even better. Dan leans back against the arm of the couch and lets his eyes close.

There's silence for a bit, and then Evan's voice speaking quietly. "Do you want me to head out? Let you get some rest?" He sounds hurt, and Dan's eyes spring open in alarm.

"No, dude... I didn't mean it like that! I just.... Remember when you said you could sit quietly?" Evan nods, and Dan smiles tiredly at him. "Could we just do that for a bit?" Evan nods again, and Dan shuts his eyes. He hears a rustle of movement, and then something shifting against the couch, and he realizes that Evan has moved over and is sitting on the floor, leaning back against the couch next to Jeff's legs. Dan shifts his own leg over so it's closer to Evan, and Evan leans his head back against it. It's pretty nice, really. Dan's not sure how long Evan's ass is going to hold out against the hardwood floor, but that's a problem for another time.

It's not long before Jeff's talking, though, and it's weird that *he'd* be the one to break the tranquility, but Dan doesn't think about that, just tries to ignore the voice, but then there are hands on his legs, gently shaking, and Dan gives up and opens one eye. A little.

"What? I'm trying to sleep, here."

"You're not *trying*, Tex—you've been out for almost three hours."

"Huh?" Dan opens his other eye and looks around—the curtains are still closed, but it does look like the sunbeams that are slipping through are coming from a different angle... and Evan's gone, not on the floor, and as far as Dan can see, not in the apartment....

"He went to get us some dinner," Jeff explains. "He'll be back soon, and I thought you might need a little waking-up time. Plus, you know—I've got to keep waking you up anyway."

"Aren't we past that yet? I really don't think my brain is bleeding."

"The doctor said forty-eight hours. You want to discuss it with her, I can book us an appointment for a checkup first thing tomorrow."

Dan scowls. "I wonder how she'd feel if she knew you were using her as the boogeyman."

“I think she’d find it totally justified. I bet she could tell what an uncooperative patient you were going to be.” Jeff’s words are softened by the way he’s running his hands gently over Dan’s calves. Dan’s never really had a calf massage before, but he’s finding his first one pretty pleasant. Or maybe it’s just Jeff.

“Shit, man, did you sit here for the whole three hours? With my legs on your lap?”

“Evan brought me a book.” Jeff grins. “Actually, he had to bring me two, because the first one he found....” Jeff points his nose toward the coffee table, and Dan doesn’t even have to look to know that another Stevens has found his marked-up copy of *Conditioning the Equine Athlete*. Jeff’s smile is a little wicked. “It didn’t really seem like something I’d want to read if I wasn’t in a position to take immediate advantage of some of its excellent advice.”

Dan groans. “I have *got* to find a better place to put that.”

“Bedside table sounds about right.” Jeff rubs Dan’s legs a little more vigorously now, breaking the mood. “Okay, ready to try standing up?”

Dan obediently swivels his legs around to rest his feet on the floor and sits the rest of the way up. There’s a bit of a head rush, and he’s still achy pretty much everywhere, but he can manage to ignore all that. Unfortunately, he *can’t* ignore Jeff, who has stood up and is hovering over him like a proud but anxious papa, ready to catch him if he falls.

“Dude, I’m fine! I’m not going to....” And he pushes up off the couch, but of course he’s forgotten about his wrist again and puts his weight on it as he lifts up. It’s not as bad as last time, but he still gasps in pain and lurches away, losing his balance. Jeff catches him, helps him straighten up, and somehow the man’s attempt to *not* look smug is even more aggravating than if he’d openly celebrated. Dan yanks his arm out of Jeff’s grasp, and before the movement is even finished he realizes how churlish he’s being. Jeff just stands there, and Dan takes a moment to collect himself, then turns toward Jeff and bends his neck, bracing the top of his head on the front of Jeff’s shoulder. “Sorry,” he mutters. “I’m an asshole.”

Jeff’s hand comes up and rests on the back of Dan’s neck. “Yeah, seems like,” he agrees. He lets Dan atone for a few breaths and then

says, “Do you want some more Tylenol before dinner?”

Dan thinks about it. “Maybe wait ’til after. Once the wrist stops complaining, I won’t really be hurting too bad....”

They both turn their heads when they hear a sound at the door, and Evan comes in, carrying another huge paper bag. He sees them both looking at it, and shrugs. “I got pasta—figured you could just sort of suck it back without much chewing—but I didn’t know what kind everyone wanted. So, you know... one of each.”

Dan nods. Once you take budget limitations out of the equation, it’s a fairly logical way to buy dinner. Jeff gets plates and cutlery and sets the table while Evan unpacks the food, and Dan just stands there feeling useless. Then Evan pulls out his chair for him, and a part of Dan wants to protest, wants to remind them that he’s not a pretty princess, but they’ve both been really good about all this, and the pasta smells fantastic, and he can’t really make himself be bothered. Let them fuss if it makes them happy.

They all sample from the pasta dishes, and Dan can’t really manage the bigger types, but there’s enough variety with the easily slurpable kinds that he’s more than satisfied. Evan tells them a bit about what he was doing in New York, and Dan tries to pay attention this time, and it turns out he *can* understand most of it, even if he doesn’t have all the background information Jeff has. Jeff has some stories about people who’ve come into the gallery, and Dan feels like he can relate to that, too, can picture some of the paintings Jeff is talking about, can see how people would react as Jeff said they did. It’s a bit startling to realize that in spite of all the times he’s felt like an outsider, he’s actually been working his way in, getting to know these men and becoming a part of their lives.

He remembers what Jeff had said about them needing to spend some time together without just falling into bed, and he realizes that, as usual, Jeff had been right. Sex is great and important, but they’ve already pretty clearly established their compatibility in that area; it’s nice to have a night like this, to be reminded that in addition to attraction, they also share affection.

Evan suggests that they move out to his house, since Tat is out of town and Tia’s taking a few days off, and Dan thinks again of being in

Evan's big, perfect bed, and he can imagine the warm skin of Evan's chest under his cheek, the strength of Jeff's body stretched out behind his own, supporting him and making him feel safe, and he has no argument with the plan. Jeff starts putting leftovers away, and Evan and Dan go into the bedroom to pack up some clothes and toiletries for Dan. Dan ends up just sitting on the bed and watching Evan bustle around, and he glances over and sees the picture of Justin on his bedside table. Dan doesn't notice that the action in the room has calmed until Evan crosses over and picks up the picture, running his fingers over the glass almost enviously.

"You two... you were..." Evan stops, as if realizing that there's no need to put the relationship shown in the picture into words.

Dan shrugs. "Yeah, we were."

"It's gotta be pretty hard to move on from that. Everything's gotta seem..." Evan trails off. "Less perfect."

Dan thinks about it and then grins. "I wouldn't say we were perfect. We... we had some pretty big fights. And we spent so much time together—we'd squabble over stupid stuff too." He looks over at Evan, and he knows his face has gotten more serious. "But we just... we always knew we'd make it better. We knew we wouldn't give up."

Evan nods slowly. "Yeah. That's...." He flashes a grin at Dan. "How the hell did you get that way?"

Dan laughs. "Fuck if I know, man... but you know, it's not impossible."

Jeff appears in the doorway then. "You guys ready to go?"

Dan slides carefully off the bed. "Well, are we? Did you get everything packed up?"

"Yes, sir," Evan responds, and he carefully replaces the framed photo on the bedside table. He shoulders the packed duffel bag and follows Jeff out of the room, but Dan hangs back for a second, looking at the photo. He'd worried, at one time, that the feelings of love might fade, that he might forget how powerfully he'd felt. He finds that he hasn't. He still remembers the love just as clearly, but it's the pain that's fading away, leaving the sweetness without the bitter. He picks up the picture in his good hand and smiles down at Justin and then starts for

the doorway. There's a little shelf built into the wall of the hallway, and Dan puts the picture on it. He'll see it there just as often, after all.

Jeff and Evan are waiting for him by the front door, and they escort him down the stairs, Evan carrying the duffel and the paper shopping bag from earlier, repacked with at least some of his loot, Jeff shadowing Dan as if still worried that he might fall. They pile into Evan's car, Evan driving, Jeff and Dan in the back, and Dan feels nervous, fidgety, and he spends most of the trip burrowing through the shopping bag, looking for he couldn't say what.

They pull up in front of Evan's place, and he turns around, smiles, and Dan blurts out, "I want this."

Evan looks at him blankly and then looks down to the orange Dan has been playing with. "Yeah, dude, I bought it for you. It's yours."

It's Dan's turn to be confused, and then he grins self-consciously and looks over at Jeff, then back at Evan. "No, not... I want *this*. Us. I... I want it to work." He nods at Jeff, then at Evan, and shrugs his own shoulders to include himself. "I want *this*."

Evan just looks at him for a few seconds and then looks at Jeff as if for confirmation. He looks back at Dan. "Yeah, okay." He smiles. "It's yours."

Epilogue

DAN wakes up early. He's usually the first one awake, but if he lets himself go back to sleep, that's it; he's out for the rest of the day unless someone rudely insists on him rejoining humanity. Or politely insists on sucking him off—a much more pleasant way to wake up, really. But he can't go back to sleep, not today, because he has responsibilities.

So he slips his head off of Jeff's shoulder and slides out from under Evan's arm and shuffles down to the bottom of the bed. It doesn't have a lot of dignity, really, this part of their sleeping arrangement. He's complained about this before, but Jeff had just smiled and nodded, and Evan had kissed the back of his neck, and they'd both snuggled in a little tighter, pinning him in the middle even more effectively than before. He guesses his dignity will survive.

The floor's chilly, which is weird, because they'd spent the night at Evan's, and Evan has the in-floor radiant heat.... Dan checks the thermostat. Ah. Evan must have been the last one to touch it, because it's set at fifty-five degrees. Evan likes to keep things a bit cool; he says it's better for the environment, but Dan's pretty sure Evan's just trying to get people to snuggle up to him to stay warm. He thinks about changing the setting, but he's leaving the room and Jeff never seems too worried about temperature, so he leaves it.

He grabs his overnight bag and ducks into the bathroom. He runs the water and steps into Evan's huge shower stall, letting the water warm him. If he was at his place or at Jeff's, or even at Evan's on most of the occasions he'd spent there, he'd be happy to wander around unwashed, in whatever clothes he'd managed to salvage from the night before. But this day is different; it's the first time Dan's spent the night with Tat at home. Well, except for when he'd been recovering from his concussion, but he hadn't really been in any condition to do anything to get dirty, not then. The night before, on the other hand.... Dan smiles to

himself as he runs his soapy hands over his body and finds a few sore spots. Pleasant reminders.

He dries off and pulls on jeans and a Henley, then sneaks the door open and peeks out into the bedroom. Evan has shifted over and is snuggled in against Jeff now, and Dan has to fight to keep himself from going over and climbing right back into bed, working his way back into his spot in the middle. Very tempting, but no. He has work to do.

It feels a bit weird to be in someone else's house when everyone else is asleep, and Dan feels like he's sneaking around. He's trying to be quiet, and that's pretty stupid, because the house is well soundproofed and he's nowhere near the bedrooms, but it's still the only way he feels comfortable.

All that changes when he steps into the kitchen.

"Morning, Dan!" Tat sings out, and all three dogs charge over to greet him.

He gives a few quick pats before crossing over to the coffeemaker, which Evan had set on the timer the night before. He takes his first blessed sip of coffee while scrutinizing Tat and her somewhat dubious activities. "Morning, Princess Tatiana. Uh... what's up?" It's her house, after all. It isn't Dan's place to tell her what she can and can't do, but....

"Yeah, uh...." She looks at the counter in front of her, almost covered with a wide variety of ingredients and cooking tools. "Possibly I got a little carried away."

Dan moves a little closer. "Yeah? What are you working on?"

"Breakfast! But, you know, Jeff makes excellent waffles, and he showed me how, and Tia makes great muffins, and I got *her* to show me how, and Evan's really good at French toast, and I got *him* to show me how, and so I felt like I kind of had to make all of them, or else someone's feelings would be hurt. You know, like I didn't like their specialty enough to make it. And then, that stuff's all good, but it's pretty much all carb-y sweetness, so I thought we should have some bacon and eggs...."

Dan nods. "You know, Tat, I don't see my specialty represented. I'm a bit hurt, actually...."

She squints at him, obviously ninety percent sure that he's kidding but ten percent worried that he might not be. "I'm not sure I've ever seen your specialty."

"Oh, yeah, it's pretty tricky. I mean, lots of people eat Count Chocula, but I think it really makes the meal when you eat it with chocolate milk." He nods seriously. "And I like to put the bowl on the floor and stand on a stool and pour the milk from really high, so it gets all frothy. That's my secret trick."

Tat smiles. "Darn, we don't have the ingredients for that. I'll make it for you next time you stay over, okay?"

Dan appreciates her approval of his sleeping arrangements but doesn't want to make a big deal out of it; that's not the way they play. "Well, the first time maybe I'd better help you, okay? It's harder than it sounds." He surveys the chaos. "In the meantime, though... I'm supposed to be changing the brine on the turkeys. Once I'm done with that, I can be your assistant, maybe?" He shrugs. "I'm not much good at complicated stuff, but I can chop or stir... that sort of thing."

Tat's face lights up. "That'd be excellent. Do you need help with the turkeys?"

"I'm not sure. It sounded pretty easy when Tia described it to me, but... how about if you're on standby? You can jump in and save me if needed."

Tat nods seriously, and Dan moves over to the big fridge. He opens it and finds the two roasting pans. It's a bit gross pouring the brine out, because it seems to have somehow extracted kind of a lot of goo from the bird; maybe that's the point of the process. He manages to do it without splashing anything disgusting on himself and mixes up fresh brine, this time with a selection of herbs that Tia had premixed for him. The birds are back in their cold baths in no time. That was the easy part; Dan's really not sure how the actual cooking is going to go, but at least with two birds, they've got back up.

He washes his hands and goes to help Tat. She puts him to work on the bacon station, and damn, the smell is waking his stomach up fast. "You know, Tat, in many families the big Thanksgiving meal is served in the afternoon and is turkey based. This Thanksgiving breakfast idea you've got going on—it's interesting but not exactly

conventional.”

She gives him a pitying look. “Dan, Thanksgiving is a marathon, not a sprint. The breakfast is an important warm-up for the dinner. You’ve got to get your stomach stretched out.” She shakes her head. “And people think you know how to train....” She peers around his shoulder to check on the bacon. “Thanks. Do you think you could chop up some fruit, when the bacon doesn’t need you? It’s for the waffles.”

Dan manages to do both, and it’s fun to be working in the kitchen with another neophyte; normally he’s with Jeff or Tia, and they’ve both got a lot more experience than he does and pretty clear ideas of the right way to do things. Tat, on the other hand, agrees that a bacon-fried strawberry could possibly be delicious, and when he makes a couple and they’re less than fantastic, she just shrugs as though it’s been a learning experience for both of them.

Dan looks up from his labors to see Tat surveying the scene with a frown on her face. “What’s up, Buttercup?”

She wrinkles her nose. “Chris and Anna are still coming over before dinner, right? For a ride? And Robyn too?”

“Well, Robyn’s not likely going to come to the house and then go straight back to the barn, but she was going to ride with us, last I heard.”

“Do you think maybe they’d like to come a bit earlier? Like, for breakfast? ’Cause... we have a lot of food.” Her eyes are bugging out a little. “A lot, a lot, a *lot* of food.”

Dan surveys the counter. “I feel like this is an opportunity for some sort of Brady Bunch lesson in social responsibility, like I should be taking you down to the food bank and having you dole all this out.”

Tat frowns. “I guess we could... but... it’s too much for us, but it really wouldn’t be much for a whole group of people.”

Dan loves this kid. Compassionate but with common sense. Kind of like her big brother. “You’re right. And you’ve already spent a lot of time down there this last week.” The Kaminskis sponsor a community outreach center and kitchen in the city, and they have a program where, instead of having the usual middle-class volunteers prepare and serve the dinners, they train members of the homeless community to do the

work themselves. Tat and Evan had taken their afternoons off from school and work all week to go down and help train the servers. Dan figures that, compared to the bill they were footing for all the food, the contribution of their time wasn't all that vital, but it's another way that Evan is making sure that Tat doesn't grow up inside an ivory tower, and Dan admires that. "But I've had Tia's muffins after they've been frozen, and they're still great. And if the Eggo corporation has taught us anything, it's that toaster waffles work straight from the freezer." He shrugs. "I'm not really sure about the French toast, but I bet it'd be fine."

Tat's relaxing a little. "But then, when would we eat it all? Tia likes to cook stuff for us fresh, not from the freezer."

"Well, maybe you guys could eat out of the freezer on her days off instead of going out for every single meal." He puts on a fake-casual expression. "Or, you know, maybe you know somebody who doesn't really cook, who eats a lot of frozen food.... Maybe that person would take it home."

Tat's face lights up. "Really? We could send it home with you?" She nods, mostly to herself. "Of course we could. And some turkey, too, and maybe we should make some extra potatoes, and...."

"Slow down, Kaminski. My freezer isn't all that big."

She lifts her nose in a fake-snooty gesture. "Well, if you want to be a food waster, I guess that's your decision."

"I'm not saying I won't take leftovers. I'm saying don't make extra just so you'll *have* leftovers." He pulls a batch of bacon off the griddle and puts fresh on to cook before mopping the fat off the finished pieces. He samples one, just to be sure they're all right, and then another, because he doesn't want to take any chances. "Damn, if there's leftover bacon...."

Tat frowns at him. "That's an oxymoron, right? When two words can't really go together?"

Dan smiles. He doesn't know the word, but he can see what she's getting at. "So, no bacon is going home with me is what you're saying?"

"I'm telling you we'd better eat all we can before Evan gets up,

because I think he could eat a whole pig if we let him.” She grins like she’s about to say something she likes. “And that’s pretty much cannibalism.”

“Damn, you’re all about the fun words today.” They get back to work, and when Tat decides that they’re ready, she crosses over to the intercom and punches in the number for Evan’s bedroom. Dan had been thinking about waking them up himself, in his own way, but he’s got to admit that this system is probably a lot more family appropriate.

Tat is making a series of obnoxious noises into the intercom, interspersed with orders. “Wake up, Evan! It’s breakfast! Dan and I have been slaving over a hot stove for you! Jeff, I know you’re up; wake Evan up, okay?” She pauses for a little, then says, “You’ve got your room on ‘private’, thankfully, so remember that I can’t hear you if you’re just talking. You need to get out of bed and hit the button. Come on, Evan, it’s breakfast. No more sleepy time. Wake up.... Evan, your breakfast is getting cold. Come on, boy, up you get, come on... good boy! Good Evan! Up! Up! Up! Up!”

Dan catches motion out of the corner of his eye and turns to see Evan, showered and dressed, in the doorway to the kitchen. Tat’s back is turned, and Evan makes a quick gesture, ordering Dan not to give him away. Dan turns back to his bacon, but he’s keeping a close eye on the Kaminski proceedings.

“Ev-an... Evan, Evan, Evan!” Tat’s sing-song is rising in volume. “Time to get up, sleepy head! This is your wake up call... get out of bed....” And then Evan pounces, and whatever Tat had been about to say turns into an ear-splitting shriek. “Yaa-a-a-a-h! I... ya-a-a-a-a!” Evan’s got a wet washcloth, and from the sound of things, it’s pretty cold. Dan guesses that he’d probably have preferred ice, but the ice maker’s in the kitchen, so he’d made do. Tat eventually collects herself enough to launch a counterattack, and then they’re wrestling over the washcloth, Evan gentle enough to make sure Tat doesn’t get hurt but by no means giving in.

Dan shakes his head and goes over to the intercom. Evan’s room is still selected, so Dan just presses the button to talk to Jeff. “Angry spirits have attacked our Thanksgiving festivities—” There’s another wild cry from Tat, and Dan waits it out before speaking again. “Luckily, they seem to only have the power to turn siblings against

each other. So you're fine to come down whenever."

There's a moment's silence, and then Jeff's amused voice. "Are you sure? It sounds a bit wild."

"It's okay; I'll protect you."

"All right, I'll be right down."

Dan dodges then, as Evan and Tat fumble toward him. "Hey, now. A little respect, please." Evan and Tat freeze, and then there's a literal chill down Dan's spine as both of them turn toward him, their matching hazel eyes almost feral. Dan backs up, holding the bacon-covered spatula in front of him. "No. I'm not part of your little... whatever the hell it is. No."

Then Evan speaks, but he's using that nasty Gollum-hissing voice that he knows freaks Dan out. "You're one of usssss, Dannyyyys. Joinnnn ussssss...."

Tat jerks her head to the side and then back, and her smile is nothing but creepy. "Yesssss, Dannyyyys...."

"Okay, no. Both of you, stop it. You're not funny." He's not scared. He's not. It's just... damn, he hates that voice. And he wishes they'd stop moving toward him slowly, like cats stalking their prey. Or like snakes. Spiders. Something gross and creepy. "Seriously, now... I'm a guest in your home, remember? Hospitality?" That doesn't seem to be getting him anywhere. "Tat... remember when we were cooking together? Wasn't that nice of me? To help?"

"Yessssss." Tat scampers then, all crooked and damaged looking—damn it, she's even got the Gollum movement down. "We likesssss Dannyyyys. We keeeepssss Dannyyyys."

Dan giggles, but he backs up too. Tat is merciless; he should have learned that by now. He turns to Evan. "Dude, hey." He puts a bright smile on. "Wow, we've got great breakfast stuff. Tat was cooking up a storm. I helped. Look... fruit!"

Evan looks like he's maybe weakening, but Tat won't let that happen. "Trickssssy! Dannyyyys is tricksssy, brotherrrr...."

And both faces turn back toward him, eyes practically glowing in the morning sunlight, and they move together, like some sort of twisted

family dance, slithering toward Dan.

The kitchen door opens, and Jeff is there. Evan and Tat freeze and then subtly straighten up, and Dan feels like he's been delivered. "Jeff! Morning!"

Jeff turns slightly befuddled eyes toward him as Evan speaks. "Finally made it down, huh? Tat's been cooking, apparently, so I hope you're hungry."

Tat smiles warmly. "I've got the batter all ready for waffles, Jeff! And there's muffins and French toast, too, and my assistant made bacon. Does anyone want eggs, or is that too much?"

Dan's a little disoriented, but nobody seems to notice. Jeff comes over to inspect and admire the waffle batter, and Evan gets two mugs and fills them with coffee. He hands one to Jeff and carefully sets his own down on the counter before leaning over and wrapping his arms around Dan from behind. He kisses Dan's neck, and then hisses, "My precioussss...", right in Dan's ear, too quietly for Jeff to really hear it. Tat's pretty clearly been waiting for it, though, and she shrieks with laughter when Dan lunges away and starts wildly slapping at Evan with the spatula.

Evan's laughing too hard to defend himself, so Dan gets a few good hits in before calming down. Jeff's watching the whole thing bemusedly, and when Dan collects himself and glances over, Jeff frowns. "I thought you said the angry spirits were sibling based."

Dan thinks about trying to explain, but doesn't really think he could do it without looking like a little girl. "It was... an exorcism. Essentially. Everything should be okay now." He points the spatula first at Evan and then at Tat, firmly making his point that the game is over. "I'm going back over to the hot griddle with all the burning grease—no more silliness from the two of you."

"Yessss, Dannyyys," Tat says, then claps her hand over her mouth. "Sorry, I meant 'yes'," she says through her fingers, her eyes laughing.

Dan isn't quite sure how he ended up with these lunatics. He looks over at Jeff, who is now smiling in understanding. "You never should have told them, Tex. Once they know a weakness, they just can't help themselves. It's a Kaminski characteristic."

“I didn’t tell them.”

Evan laughs. “You just kept leaving the room every time Gollum came on! ‘Hey, anyone need another beer?’ ‘Oh, sorry, Tat, I should have got you a soda.’ ‘Damn, too much beer, gotta go to the bathroom.’ ‘Are there still chips in the kitchen?’” He grins over at Tat. “It wasn’t even me who noticed it—Tat thought you hated the movie. Which upset her, because she was the one who’d chosen it.” Evan knows how to soften Dan up.

But this time it won’t work, because Dan can still remember her satanic expression as she’d stalked him. “I *did* hate the movie!” He points the spatula. “Bad choice, Tat! Bad, bad choice!”

Tat just shrugs. “I guess it *was* rated PG-13—maybe we’ll stick to just PG from now on, okay?”

If it was anyone other than Tat, Dan would have a clear answer to that, telling them exactly what they can “stick” where. But with Tat, he’s pretty much baffled. “Maybe we should,” he manages, and then goes back to his bacon.

He feels a little better when Jeff shifts over to stand behind him. “Morning,” he murmurs, kissing the back of Dan’s neck.

Dan growls in response, because Jeff really hadn’t been too helpful earlier, but he turns his head, giving Jeff access to more neck. Then he turns back, because the way Jeff is kissing him is not conducive to non-burned bacon. Or to traditional family values, considering that Tat is watching them pretty interestedly out of the corner of her eye. Jeff seems to get the message, because his final kiss is just a quick peck, and then he’s back to supervising Tat’s waffle cooking.

Nobody really thinks they have room for eggs, but they do make a pretty good dent in the rest of the food, and Tat’s culinary efforts are suitably admired. Jeff and Evan clean up and follow Tat’s instructions for freezing Dan’s goody bags while Dan follows Tia’s instructions for getting the turkey in the oven. Tia has everything prepared as much as humanly possible, and Dan isn’t sure whether to be relieved or a little insulted that she thought he couldn’t handle it. Then he thinks back to his recent cooking lessons with the patient woman and concludes that the proper response is definitely relief. So he drains the bird out of its

new, short brine bath, stuffs the seasoning in the cavity, rubs the skin with the *other* seasoning (all clearly labeled, of course), and slaps the slabs of bacon on before shoving the whole thing in the oven. The other bird is reserved for Evan's deep-frying fun, so they're ready to go.

Of course, as soon as three of them have their boots and jackets on, the fourth decides that a last trip to the bathroom might be good, and then one remembers that there are special Thanksgiving treats to be brought to the horses, and then the first one decides that a heavier jacket is needed, and maybe somebody should grab some dog biscuits so they don't feel left out at treat time. Jeff and Dan are left waiting by the door; they've gotten used to working around the Kaminski interpretation of "ready to go." By the time they've gathered the dogs and are heading to the barn, they're running a little late.

It turns out okay, though, because Robyn has brought their horses in for them already, so that's less work required. Chris is already there, too, and Ginger, the quarter horse mare he'd brought when he moved out from Kentucky, is in the crossties. Anna's hanging around, chatting with Chris and Robyn. There's no one there who isn't part of the daily crowd, so no special greetings are needed, and in a way it seems a bit anticlimactic, like Thanksgiving should be a bigger deal somehow, but then Dan figures it's just as it should be; they're all lucky that the people they care about are so close. And then that almost trips him up, sends him onto a train of thought that he's been trying to avoid all day—all week, really—but he busies himself with helping Tat dole out the treats, and the moment passes, just as so many others have.

Evan's fussing over his Friesian-Percheron cross, arguing that Samson deserves an extra serving of treat because he's bigger, and Jeff and Robyn are tacking up Juno and Copper, the just-for-messing-around-on quarter horses. Anna and Tat have the two new Hanoverian mares, both injured out of their eventing careers but fit for hacking; their bloodlines are good, and the vet will decide in January whether they're sound enough for breeding, able to give Tat the foals she has her heart set on. And Dan has Smokey. The quarter horse has come to be the pet of all the barn, human and animal alike, and as Dan leads the stocky animal down the aisle, he stretches his nose out to each of his friends; two legs or four, they all have noses and therefore all deserve a greeting. The three dogs even get a little of his attention.

It's not long before they're saddled up and heading out through the pine forest and then up to the hill. Nobody's jumping today or even riding fast, just keeping in the herd and enjoying each other's company. Chris and Robyn are riding close, and Dan's keeping an eye on that; he's warned Chris repeatedly that Robyn isn't fair game for Chris's typical "love 'em and leave 'em" routine, and Dan wants to be sure Chris has been listening. Tat and Anna both seem to be trying to get Robyn alone, probably for a little gossip; Dan wonders if there's been a new development or if they just want to check in. He's not sure he wants to know.

They ride right around the perimeter of the property and then through the middle, and Dan starts to worry that he should maybe get back and check on his turkey, but at the same time, it's nice to be out in the fresh air on a good horse surrounded by good people. He figures the turkey is probably fine, and it's not like he'd really know how to fix it if it isn't. No one else seems to be in a hurry to get in, either, and the horses are all enjoying their exercise, so everyone's happy.

The dogs flush out a small covey of quail, and the Hanoverians spook a little while the quarter horses look on with bored amusement, like parents watching children play the same game for the hundredth time. Samson acts like he wants to charge the underbrush and deal with the threat; sometimes Samson takes his warhorse lineage a little too seriously, and Dan thinks Evan encourages him. "You're not a knight, Evan."

"Well, that doesn't mean you aren't my pretty princess, Danny." Evan's clearly been spending *way* too much time with Chris.

Eventually, they circle back around to the barn. There's some friendly squabbling over positions in the crossties, but it's not like anyone's going to be in them for long; the horses haven't worked up even a little sweat, so they're pretty much just getting untacked and hoofpicked then turned out. Smokey groundties, so Dan untacks him in the yard; it's easier, really, and it's nice to stay out in the fresh air.

Once everyone's turned out, Robyn needs to do a quick check on the other horses in their paddocks, and Anna and Tat quickly volunteer to stay and keep her company. Chris rolls his eyes a little, obviously aware that he's going to be at least one of their subjects of conversation, but he doesn't seem too upset about it, so the women stay

behind while the men head back to work in the kitchen.

The walk is mostly quiet, and Dan wishes that it wasn't, because quiet doesn't seem to be working too well for him, not today. There are too many memories, too many Thanksgivings, all ready to pop into his mind as soon as it stills. And he'd rather that didn't happen. So... Chris.

"Hey, Chris, you're Evan's conjoined twin—so how do you manage to not go to the gym with him? Or do you go and just watch *him* work out?" Chris arches an eyebrow at him, and Dan shakes his head. "'Cause, okay, part of the problem is that you've never taught Ginger to leg-yield properly, but, come on—she was wandering all over that path. Are your legs honestly so far gone that you can't even make her walk straight?"

Chris looks like maybe he knows what Dan's doing, picking a fight as a distraction. Dan had figured he might; it's not like Chris didn't have a hell of a lot more Thanksgivings with Justin than Dan did. "Yeah, Danny, well... some of us are able to just go for a walk and enjoy the scenery without worrying about little details like that." He doesn't seem to have more to say about that topic, but he does have a diatribe about a few of Dan's other character flaws, so that's good, and they bicker most of the way back to the house.

And once they're there, there's turkey work to do and Tia's exhaustive checklist to consult. Then Jeff's heating up apple cider, and Dan's never had that before. He thinks that apple juice is gross cold and can't imagine it being better if it's hot, which seems likely to make it even closer to the piss it so clearly resembles, but Jeff has a series of arguments, starting with "It's cider, not juice," and ending with "Shut up, you'll like it."

That last one is pretty hard to formulate a reasoned response to, so Dan gives up and sits down on the floor to talk to Lou. *She* knows not to drink piss. Although she does drink out of the toilet, so maybe her standards aren't that high after all.

The women arrive then, and it's not that cold out, but they still manage to be rosy-cheeked and beautiful, bringing their lighter laughter and softer voices to the gathering. Everyone has signed up to make a dish, and they've dropped any specialty items off in the kitchen in the

days proceeding, so now there's just some happy negotiations for counter space and fridge access as everyone gets to work. Luckily, Tia's kitchen is roughly the size of Dan's apartment, so there's no real crowding. There's a big stone fireplace down beyond the heavy oak kitchen table, and Tat lights a fire in it and then cracks the French doors a little, because the fire is lovely for atmosphere, but they really don't need the warmth.

There's a lull, eventually, with all the immediate work done, and they pull sweaters back on and go out to the deck to drink their hot cider in the proper environment, and Dan has to admit the beverage isn't bad. Pretty good, really, with all the extra spices; it barely tastes like apple juice at all. Jeff rolls his eyes when Dan points that out, but he doesn't make the juice versus cider argument, so Dan rewards his restraint by snuggling in next to him on the long bench, sharing their warmth. Evan smiles fondly at them, and that warms Dan almost as much as the heat from Jeff's body.

Dan eventually rouses himself enough to go and check on the turkey, and he's not really surprised when Chris follows him in. Chris just stands quietly while Dan does his work, and then he quirks his head to the side. "You doing okay, Danny?"

Dan doesn't really know what to say to that. Okay compared to what? He wrinkles his face up. "Yeah. I guess. I mean, this is a good place. It's... Jeff and Evan..." He hasn't said the words to Chris yet, but he doesn't think it's going to come as much of a shock. "I love them, you know?" Chris smiles softly and nods. "It's not... it's not like Justin. Nothing's ever going to be like Justin. But, you know, Justin wasn't like Jeff and Evan either, right?"

"No, fair enough." Chris's smile is only a little sad. "You've—you've been lucky, finding them. All of them. When you needed them." He smiles again, and it's that "I can't believe I'm about to say this" smile that Dan doesn't see too often. "But it's not just luck, Danny. You're good too, you know? You deserve them—all of them."

Dan ducks his head, and then smiles softly. "And you? Do I deserve you?"

Chris's laugh is quick. "I don't know; you ever done anything really, really bad?" He edges over and wraps his arm around Dan, and

it's more a headlock than a hug, but Dan knows what it means. "Deserve it or not, you're stuck with me."

"Yeah, okay." Dan's smile is real. "I can live with that."

"Good." Chris gets a bit more businesslike. "So I've got to call home at some point today, and Karl and Molly are going to be there—do you want to say hi?"

Dan takes a deep breath. He's talked to Justin's parents a few times since he moved to California, and it's always been pretty emotionally draining, hearing their deadened voices, making Dan wonder if that's the appropriate way to mourn the loss of a loved one, making him feel guilty for having moved on, even though he knows he hasn't forgotten and will never forget. But everyone back there knows that Chris is having Thanksgiving with Dan; it would be a bit rude to not at least say hello. "Yeah, I guess. But, you know—if they're not up for it, don't pressure them at all...."

Chris nods. "With the time difference, they're probably all there now. This an okay time?"

Dan really doesn't want to talk to the Archers—he's right on the edge as it is; he doesn't need them to push him over. But he's not going to be that cowardly. "Yeah, I guess."

Chris looks like he understands, but he doesn't say anything, just pulls out his phone and dials. It sounds like one of his nieces or nephews answers, because Chris's voice is immediately animated and enthusiastic. Dan looks forward to being Uncle Dan if Chris ever has his own kids.

Dan starts on some of the jobs Tia has scheduled for this hour and keeps only a bit of attention on the phone conversation. Chris is busy for a while, apparently being passed around to everyone at the Kentucky house, but finally his voice gets a bit more serious, and Dan figures he's talking to Karl or Molly. Eventually, he comes over beside Dan and passes the phone over. "Molly," he says softly.

Dan takes a deep breath. "Hi, Molly. Happy Thanksgiving."

"Thank you, Dan. You too. You're enjoying the day?"

"Yeah, it's been really nice. We stole the Thanksgiving ride tradition; there aren't as many of us here, but you know, it's the first

year.”

“Oh, that’s nice. And it must be nice and warm out there.”

Dan doesn’t really want to talk about the weather, but he guesses it’s better than the alternatives. “Yeah, it’s not bad. Bit warmer than there. The fall colors weren’t as good, though.” And he really hasn’t got a lot more to say, but he doesn’t feel like he’s put enough time in yet. “Monty’s doing really well. He’s been kicking ass at Intermediate, and we’re thinking of getting him in at least one Advanced before the season ends. Probably show him all Advanced next season.”

“Oh. That’s nice.” It hits Dan that Molly is either drunk, stoned, or heavily medicated. He doesn’t know what to do with this little flash of insight. In a way, it takes the pressure off him, because it probably doesn’t really matter what he says. But maybe there’s something he should be doing. Chris will know.

“How about you?” Dan doesn’t know what he can ask about specifically, what aspect of Molly’s life he would know about that wouldn’t remind Molly of Justin. “Have you guys eaten yet?” Surely that’s safe.

“No, not yet. But it smells good.” And there’s nothing more. Dan’s racking his brain, but then Molly says, “Karl wants to say hello. Happy Thanksgiving, Dan.” And she’s gone.

Karl sounds a lot better when he gets on the phone. “Dan! Happy Thanksgiving. You and Chris having a good time?”

So Karl’s happier, but that’s a bit of a tricky question. Dan doesn’t want to drag the man down, but he doesn’t want to make it sound like he and Chris have forgotten. “We’re all right.” Surely that’s neutral enough. He decides to try the horse thing again. “We went on a Thanksgiving ride today, just like at home. Chris still lets Ginger get away with anything, of course, but everyone else had a good ride.” Chris is listening and rolls his eyes, but he looks like he knows what Dan’s trying to do.

“That’s nice to hear. The youngsters here went out. Of course, the Fosters don’t keep as many horses as they used to, so without the eventers, it was hard to get much of a crowd. How’re our guys doing out there?”

And *that's* something that Dan can talk about for hours. He tells Karl about the achievements, the highs and lows of training, the horses that have been surprisingly good, and those that haven't lived up to expectations, and Karl is a great audience, listening and commenting and even offering some useful ideas for some of the more challenging problems. Dan wouldn't mind talking to Karl like this every day if he could just avoid the Molly prequel.

After they've run through the whole barn, it's clearly time for both of them to go back to their respective gatherings, but Karl seems to still want to say something. After a couple false starts, he finally comes out with it. "Dan, I wanted to... I wanted to thank you again for that painting. It's... when we first got it, neither one of us was sure, but I've looked at it a lot. I understand now why you wanted us to have it. It's beautiful, Dan. It's... some people go through lives like beat-up plow horses, and others... others burn through the jumps, don't they? They inspire all of us."

Dan swallows hard, and takes a moment before he answers. "He really inspired me, sir. I mean it." Another deep breath, but he wants to continue. "Anything I do, anything worthwhile, ever—it's because of him."

Karl doesn't say anything right away, and when he does speak, his voice is tight but not unhappy. "That's a hell of a legacy, then, isn't it?"

"Maybe not yet, but... I swear, I'll keep trying."

"You're doing fine, Dan. Couldn't ask for more."

"Thank you." It's not enough, but Dan hopes Karl knows how sincerely he means it.

They're both quiet then until Karl clears his throat. "Well, I'll let you get back to your people, then. You keep Chris out of trouble for us."

"Well, I'll try, but you know how he is."

Karl laughs. "Just be ready to clean up after him, then."

"That sounds more likely. Happy Thanksgiving, Karl."

"Happy Thanksgiving, Dan. It was good to talk to you."

"You too." And Dan hears the click of the phone disconnecting.

He turns to Chris, who has been peeling potatoes while he listens to Dan's side of the conversation. "Damn. Karl sounds good. But Molly...."

Chris nods. "My mom says she has good days and bad days. I guess it's not surprising that this would be a bad day."

"Yeah." Dan forces himself to get collected. Talking to Karl had been good, really, given him just enough of a vent for his emotions without sending him right over the edge. "Let's get going with this food. Has Evan set up the deep fryer?"

Chris peers out the window, past the deck to the lawn. "Yeah, he's got the pot filled, and the flame is on. Shouldn't be long till he's ready for the turkey."

Dan pulls the raw turkey out of the fridge. "Tia says to let it warm up a little." He consults the list again, and damn it, he's a little bit behind, and that is not acceptable; he will *not* fail in his responsibility, so he gets to work, trying to catch up. Chris helps in his own way, and then Anna comes in, and everything suddenly goes much more smoothly. Tat and Jeff wander in for cider refills and end up shedding their jackets and sitting at the breakfast bar, offering not-so-helpful tips to the people actually working. When Evan comes in for the turkey, Chris goes back outside with him to help, and Dan briefly considers asking if anyone wants to make a bet about which one of them will come back in burnt or dripping with oil. He decides against saying anything.

Eventually, everything's ready. The timing wasn't perfect, and Dan's pretty sure that he's completely overcooked the dressing, but Anna says that a little gravy will solve that, and it's not like anyone will be sorry to have more gravy. There are only seven people and two good-sized turkeys, because the Kaminskis have to have a taste test of some sort every year and because Evan wants lots of leftovers. So there's no shortage of food. Dan and Evan each carve their own turkeys, and neither one is much good at it, but Dan hides his most mangled pieces by slipping them off the table to be eaten by the pack of dogs, so his ends up looking pretty damn good. Evan's looks like it was carved by a velociraptor, but Evan points out that the taste test is an experiment, not a contest, so he doesn't care if people prefer Dan's bird.

"I'm just worried that it's not good *science*, is all," he says, and then he drives his fork into Dan's pile of meat and makes a few slashes with his carving knife. He looks up to see Dan's shocked expression. "*Science*, dude."

Jeff was in charge of wine and vegetables, except for Chris's mashed potatoes and Tat's sweet potatoes; apparently both kinds of tuber are too important to be anything other than a specialty item. Anna did the cranberries and has an apple pie baking in the oven to go with the pumpkin and pecan pies that Dan has assembled as per Tia's instructions. Robyn made enough of her rosemary tofu casserole for everyone to have some as a side dish, and she makes it through the meal with only one wistful look at the turkey. They all eat like it's their job, and they still barely make a dent.

Tat surveys the table with a clear look of satisfaction. "We bought some new Pyrex dishes, with the glass bottoms and the plastic tops." She seems very proud of herself as she turns to Dan. "So we can put little meals together for you and freeze them, and you can just put them straight into the microwave without worrying about the plastic leaching... whatever it leaches." She's apparently put quite a bit of thought into this. "And we can keep them in our deep freeze, because I've seen food from your freezer, and it gets nasty really quick, and then we can just give you a few whenever you need them. Okay?"

Chris frowns. "Uh... for the record... I'm also helpless. And, you know, Dan's been learning to cook, so really, I need the leftovers more than him."

Robyn shakes her head. "No way. I need them. All except for the turkey... you guys can fight over that. Because it's really a pain to find vegetarian frozen dinners—the carnivores can go down to the grocery store and pick up as many frozen meals as they want, but I'm stuck with, like, one kind of pasta primavera. I need variety, Tat!"

But Anna's not going down without a fight. "I'm elderly, and fragile...." But she's unable to continue over the loud laughing and hissing. "Fine, then. I've been cooking all my damn life. I'm done. Give me leftovers or give me death!"

Evan seems pleased that the meal was such a success. "Luckily, I think there's enough for everyone to take some home. And for lots of

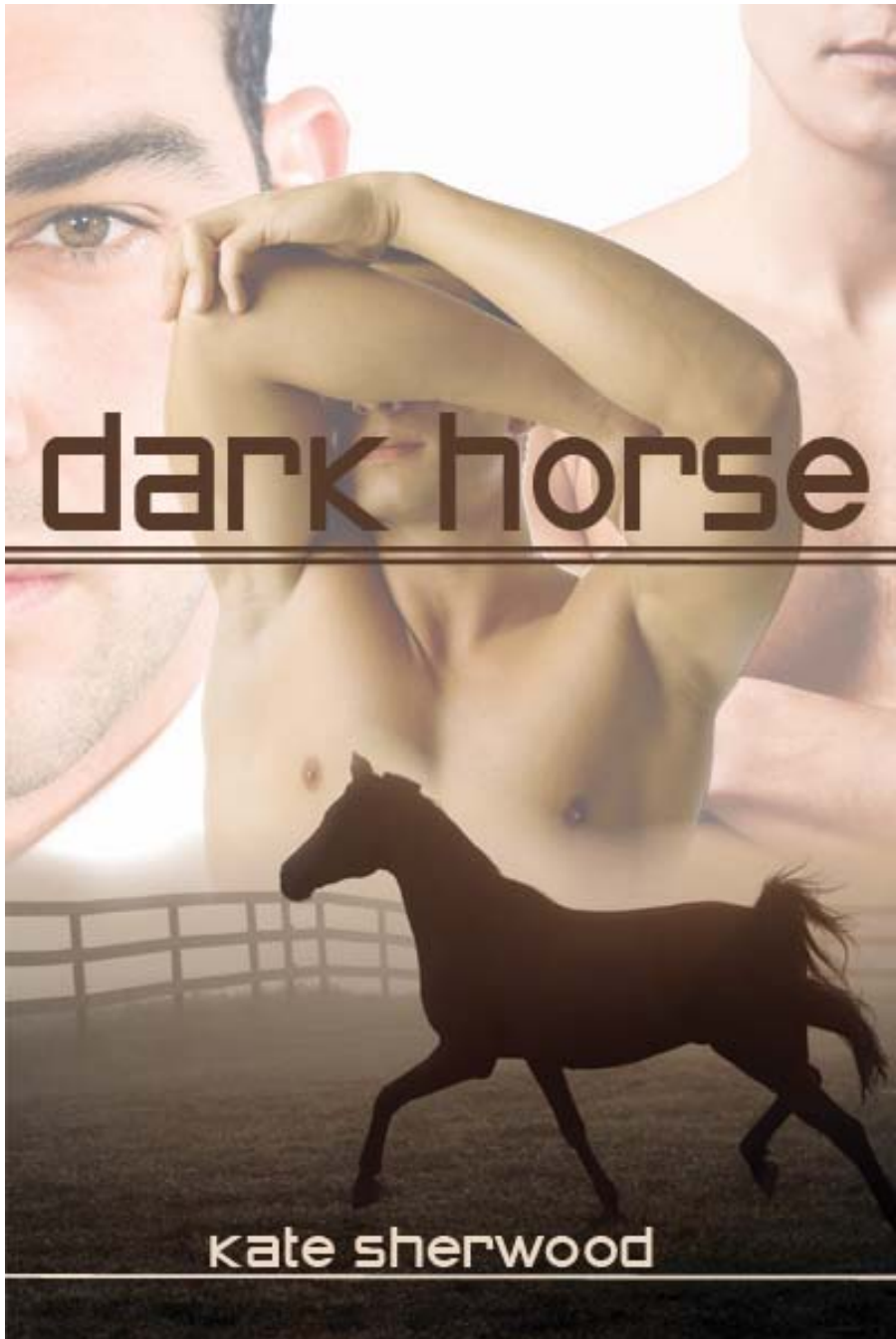
turkey to stay here, because we've got frozen bread dough we can bake up as soon as we want to, and then it's time for turkey sandwiches on hot fresh bread, with load of mayonnaise and some dressing...."

"Mop up the drool, kid." Jeff smiles at Tat. "Maybe you should ask Tia if we can have three turkeys next year?" He looks around. "Or seven. Everyone could cook their own, and we could sample—it'd be the ultimate taste test, really."

Evan looks excited by the idea. "And we could have it like stock cars, one year with everyone having to start with the same kind of bird, but the next year it could be a builder's series, with people choosing their own bird." He nods. "I wonder if anywhere rents ovens...."

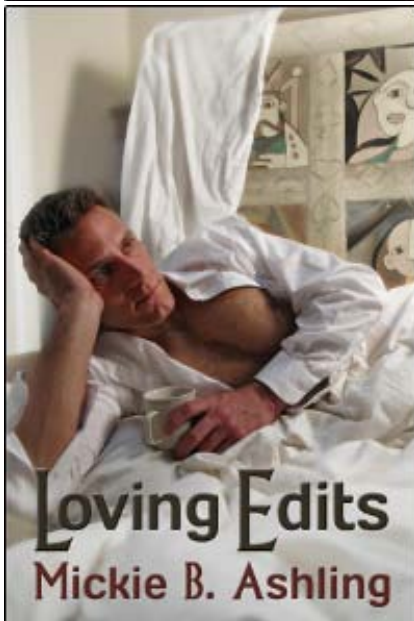
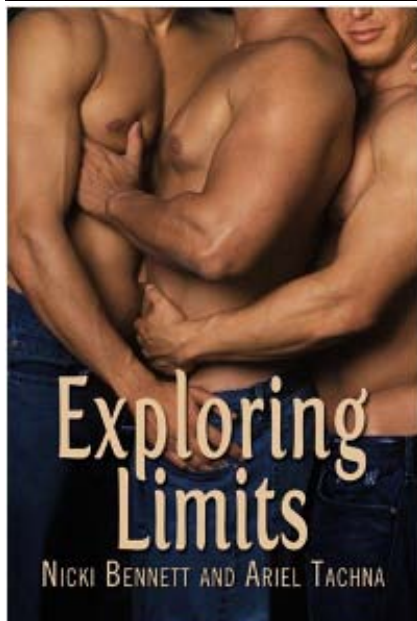
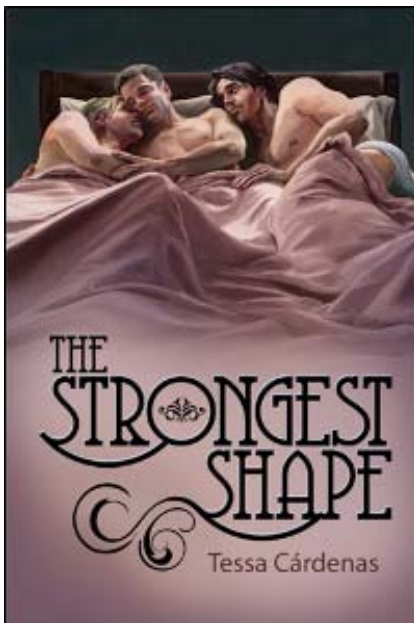
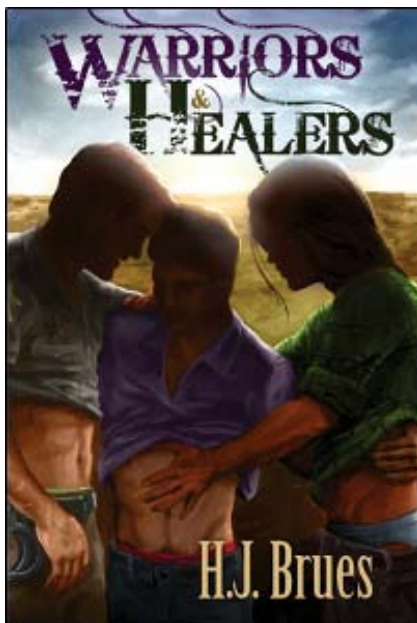
Dan sits back and watches them all as he slips a little bit of skin under the table to Lou. His world has always been stormy, and the last few years were absolute typhoons, but he's been blown off course into a surprisingly safe harbor. It's nothing he could have predicted, and he can't help missing what he's lost, but he knows he's still incredibly lucky to have ended up here. He remembers Chris's words, saying that it wasn't just luck, saying that Dan deserved it. So if not lucky... damn. It's sappy as hell, and he'll never say it out loud, but he looks out at the friendly, laughing faces around him, sees Jeff and Evan leaning back and taking their own moments of reflection, and he knows what he is. It's a good day for it, he guesses. He's thankful.

How the Story Started

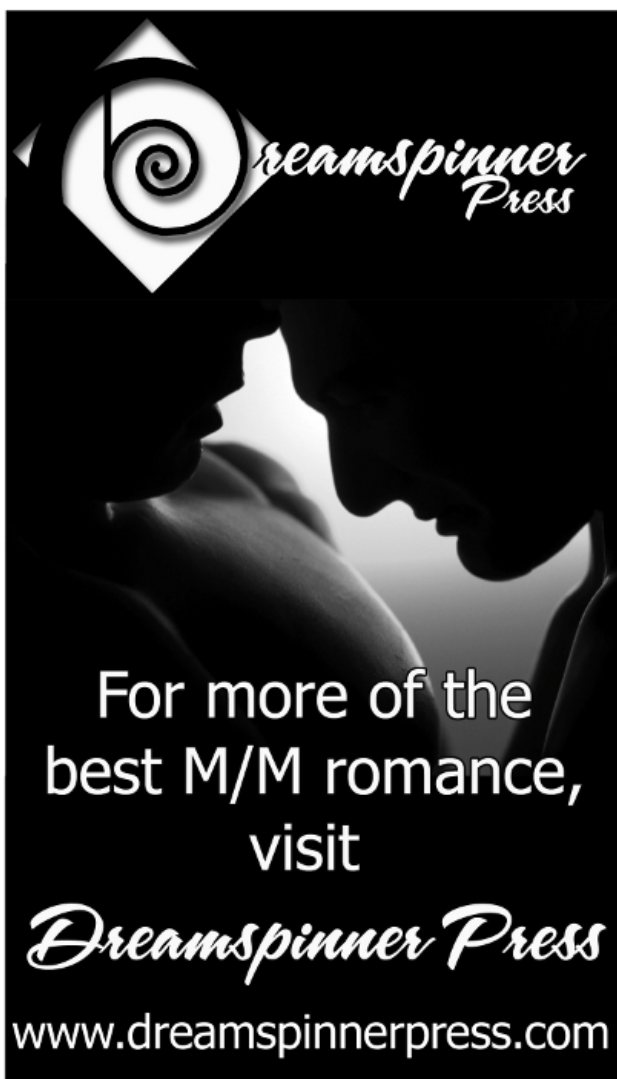


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