



Evergreen Dynasty Series

The Gift Horse

Carson Reynolds would dispute that statement. A gift horse got him into this mess in the first place. His mission: transform a run-down horse farm into the premium facility in the Pacific Northwest and a disorganized horse trainer with a penchant for self-sabotage into a winner.

After six years, Samantha MacIntyre has returned to the scene of a horrific barn fire allegedly caused by her carelessness. She accepts the head trainer position at that run-down facility to prove her innocence and to ride the talented, temperamental horse Carson received as a birthday gift. But first, she must pass the test: compete the horse for one season, impress Carson, and best his sister's preferred trainer.

As Sam and Carson get closer to the truth and mishaps escalate into serious accidents. With the help of an opinionated equine, they face a surprising reality--that love is more important than ambition, money, or blue ribbons.

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THE GIFT HORSE

Evergreen Dynasty Series

Jami Davenport

ROMANCE

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THE GIFT HORSE

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DEDICATION

To Kari of Miari Stables for your wonderful instruction, patience, and faith in me all these years.

To Beth, who breeds some of the best Hanoverian horses in the country, including my own “gift horse.”

And a special thanks to Carolynn Bunch of Carolynn Bunch photography for allowing me to use her photograph of my mare on the cover on this book.

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JAMI DAVENPORT

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Chapter 1 **Nothing to Fear but Her Clumsy Self**

True crime TV was going to be the death of Samantha MacIntyre or at least her business. If her barn manager wasn't hiding in the bushes or lurking in a dark corner, he was stalking Sam's clients searching for forensic evidence of some imaginary crime.

Today Juan was crouched behind her pickup when she walked by leading a horse. The big mare glanced at his "hiding" place and snorted, the equine version of rolling her eyes. Even the horse thought he was one flake short of a bale.

After looking left and right, the sturdy Hispanic man abandoned his stakeout and scurried into step beside her. "You should have stayed in Germany," he whispered.

"Juan, what are you talking about?"

"They think you know too much."

"Me? Hell, I know too little." Sam sucked in a deep breath and counted to ten. "Don't you have work to do?"

"You know more than you realize." Juan's eyes darted everywhere as if waiting for a gun-toting hombre to jump out from behind the barn at any moment. "I say too much. Beware."

"But Juan..."

Juan ignored her, leapt behind a parked car, and maneuvered around Waylon, the barn cat, then dashed for cover down the barn aisle. Rattled, Sam surveyed her surroundings. For what, she didn't know.

Juan had warned of impending danger for several weeks, but today he'd dogged her every step with his doom and gloom predictions. The man might be a nutcase, but she of all people knew how it felt to be an outcast.

Nutcase or not, Juan was a decent barn manager who had a magical way with horses. He also worked cheap, and cheap was definitely the best this place could afford. Besides, she'd attempted to fire him once. He wouldn't leave and just kept showing up for work. She had no choice but to pay him.

Exasperated, Sam stomped toward the barn only to find the entrance blocked by a sharp-dressed man. A hands-free thingy dangled from one ear as he carried on a conversation with an invisible person while tapping out a message on his PDA. This day just kept getting better, and she was already running way late.

"Excuse me." She waved her hands to get his attention. He gave her a cursory once-over and ignored her; nothing was new there. Men never considered her worthy of their attention, which shot her irritation level up a few more notches. "Move your butt, pretty boy. You're in my way," she huffed.

The minute the words were out her mouth she wanted to take them back. Why did she always let her mouth rule her brain?

"Shhh." The man raised a hand to wave her off, not even glancing in her direction.

The horse kept walking, fully intent on mowing him down in her attempt to get into the barn. Sam hauled on the mare's lead rope. The huge animal lumbered to a halt one hoof away from transforming the sharp dresser into a tortilla.

The pretty boy didn't even bother to acknowledge them. Instead he turned his back and continued his cell phone conversation. So typical of a handsome man, thinking the rest of the world could navigate around him. Maybe she didn't regret being rude after all.

Sam cranked her annoyance up a notch and scowled at his Armani-clad back, or whatever type of fancy suit that was, like she would know or care. Though it did accentuate a nice pair of shoulders tapering down to a slim waist, hips, and a great ass.

Blowing out an impatient sigh, she tapped him on one broad shoulder. She didn't have all day. "Hey, mister! Take your nice butt and designer clothes and park them somewhere else." There went that mouth of hers again.

The pretty boy spun around, a tornado of lean male physique, movie-star handsome face, and sleek black hair. She started to back up a step but forced herself to hold her ground. His expression indicated that people never talked to him in such a blunt manner. *Tough*. Sam didn't cater to rich, pretty boys—not anymore. Now, if that sounded like she had a chip on her shoulder, well, maybe she had a little one; but she *was* working on getting rid of it.

His clothes fit him better than her skin fit her. The labels on those clothes guaranteed the buyer would pay ten times more just for the privilege of wearing some snooty designer's name. She sniffed. Dang, he even smelled like a pricey label. Too rich for her blood. And those shoes. No one wore shoes like that around a horse barn. At least not a run-down place like this. Already, a wafer-thin layer of dust coated the expensive Italian leather, and Sam did know her leather. "Skittish as a yearling colt, aren't ya?" She faked a western drawl.

He seemed at a loss for words and just gaped at her. She often had that effect on men and still hadn't figured out if it was good or bad. So far, she'd vote for bad, especially considering her talent for sending men running to the nearby Cascade Mountains in response to her tactlessness.

He found his tongue when Gabbie edged closer. "Keep that thing away from me."

"She is *not* a thing. She's a caring, feeling animal. More than I can say for you." Sam reached up to scratch the mare behind the ears. Gabbie rubbed her head on Sam's shoulder. Men like him were excellent reminders of why she preferred horses.

"Whatever." He started to turn away.

Gabbie's ears pricked forward. She focused her short equine attention span on their uninvited barn guest and took matters into her own hands—or would that be hooves? The mare reached out with her big nose, sniffed at his chest, and wiped a wide swath of horse slobber on the lapel of his jacket. He stared at the animal in horror and backed up until his body was plastered against the closest stall. "I said keep that thing away from me."

Patting the mare, Sam bit back an amused laugh. Obviously, the man was a city boy and not used to horses. Huffing one last time for good measure, she guided Gabbie past him.

“Who *are* you?” His demanding tone didn’t foster cooperation or good will.

Glancing over her shoulder, Sam bit back a smart retort. “I could ask the same of you. You’re on private property, boarders and students only.” She made a show of looking him up and down. “I can tell that you’re neither.”

“I can tell that you’re treading on thin ice.” His phone rang again and saved her from further conversation with Mr. Personality. Frowning, he moved away from the door to gain a little privacy.

Fumbling with the lead rope, Sam tied Gabbie in the barn aisle. Her hands were shaking. Her heart was pounding. She might talk big but inside she was a chickenshit, a fact she kept well hidden from casual acquaintances.

The barn cat rubbed around her legs. She picked him up and held him close, taking some comfort from his furry little body. Waylon purred in response.

She glanced back in the pretty boy’s direction. He’d retreated to a safer spot outside the barn door. He wiped at his suit with a handkerchief. The sunlight reflected off his black hair, turning it a midnight blue. His stubborn jaw and firm lips drove home the impression of a man who prided himself on his control. Even his hair didn’t dare deviate from its salon-perfect style. No stubble on that handsome face. He probably shaved twice a day. Too perfect for her beer and peanuts taste.

She’d grown up as the only female in a family of rough and tumble males. And this guy was nothing like her brothers, jocks every one of them. Besides, whenever she was around men like the one currently decorating her barnyard, she went into defense mode and drove them away with her smart mouth and sloppy appearance. To date, none of them had come back for a second round. Reject them first then they can’t reject you was her motto.

She sneaked another look at the pretty boy. He *was* incredible. Even if he wasn’t her type, he’d certainly inspire a few fantasies to warm her lonely nights.

She stared harder. There was something familiar about him. The man tapped his foot, consulted his watch, and glanced around. His stern mouth

drew into a thin line as he checked his watch again. Maybe he couldn't fathom anyone having the nerve to keep him waiting.

One of her riding students was something of a local celebrity. Every week or so, some rich guy would show up and hang around the barn to be at her beck and call. Pretty boy must be the sucker of the week.

That assumption flew out the window when he turned his head, giving her a good view of his profile. He looked enough like Jake Reynolds to be his... *Oh, shit.* Her hands flew to her face as the realization hit her.

Jake's brother.

She'd screwed up big time. Again. Her and her smart mouth. She just couldn't keep that darn thing zipped or her foot out of it. Instead of slamming some wealthy groupie, she'd insulted Carson Reynolds, the very man who held her future in the palm of his hand. Stupid girl, the family resemblance was as obvious as a straight guy in a gay bar.

Now what? Should she apologize or pretend ignorance? An apology gave him the upper hand. Feigning ignorance seemed the safer, though more cowardly, path.

Heck, he was a guy. She'd dazzle him with her smile and win him over with her long legs. *Right, Sam, and horses will grow wings and fly out of the stable. Get real.* Men didn't see her as a female but as a buddy with boobs and little ones at that.

Sam pushed a wayward strand of hair out of her eyes. She didn't need a mirror to imagine how bad she looked. She'd been mucking stalls all morning, so her clothes were far from pristine. Her butt and thighs threatened to burst from her tight-fitting Wranglers. Her ragged t-shirt had been one of her brother's hand-me-downs. It hung on her like a sack. Everything about her appearance added up to a big fat zero on a scale of one to ten. Not the way to make a good impression on an obviously finicky man who was suck-the-breath-out-of-your-lungs gorgeous.

Oh, why couldn't he be more like his brother and less like Bridget, his pain-in-the-ass sister? Jake dressed casually and didn't mind a little dirt and hard manual labor. This brother didn't look like he'd ever pounded one nail, mowed one blade of grass, or hit one baseball.

No matter, years of training horses for the rich and shameless had taught Sam how to suck up to wealthy people. She'd swallow her pride and do it again, anything to ride her dream horse. Shoot, she'd even shine his shoes

and polish that tight butt of his. *So much for not catering to the rich boy.*

Gabbie pawed impatiently. Sam's attention turned to the opinionated mare. His mare. And her mare to ride. Unless she'd just burned that rickety bridge, or it'd been taken out by a natural disaster—her mouth.

She'd never mastered the fine art of tact, being raised in an all-male household the majority of her life. Her mother had spent more time at the barn than in their home. When her father had finally had enough of his wife's obsession with horses, they'd divorced. Dad got custody of the kids with not one argument from Mom.

Sam straightened her shoulders, held her head proudly, and plastered a friendly smile on her face. Maybe he'd chalk her earlier rudeness up to PMS. Then again, he probably would not. She'd most likely have to grovel for his forgiveness.

Well, whatever it took, she'd do it because this was her best option. Returning to this place hadn't been easy, but she needed to uncover the truth, and it was too late to back out now. She had to save her career and prove she wasn't a pathetic failure haunted by a long series of screw-ups and that long-ago tragedy.

Why some women were smitten with horses from birth, she didn't know. She only knew she was one of them. She'd sacrifice any comfort known to the civilized world to smell their distinctive horsy smell, to pet their soft noses, to be privileged to ride on their broad backs. If she gave up now, she'd lose the very animals she lived and breathed for, and that would like signing her own death sentence.

The clock was ticking. She had a balloon payment to meet, a career to resurrect, her innocence to prove. Despite Juan's warnings, the only danger in her life was self-inflicted. She had nothing to fear but her clumsy self.

Chapter 2

The Non-Wedding Anniversary

Carson Reynolds looked over his shoulder at the outrageously rude female and the super-sized horse. He was in a mood, and her actions hadn't improved it. Even worse, he'd let her get under his skin. That just didn't happen—not in *his* carefully crafted world.

Irritation surged through him, irritation at being called away from a productive Saturday at work then being made to wait, irritation with his brother, his family, his life, and now at her, especially her. Yet, he couldn't seem to quit staring. He'd never seen a woman quite like her.

Calamity Jane had tied the horse in the middle of the aisle by securing it with a rope attached to each side of the halter then to posts on either side. She glanced over her shoulder, cradling a huge barn cat in her arms, and aimed a dazzling smile at him. She turned back to the horse after placing the enormous cat on the ground.

Carson pursed his lips and watched as she leaned down and picked up the horse's front foot. Bent over like that, she gave him a great view of her behind. Was she deliberately tantalizing him? Oh, Lord, he didn't need that. Not on a Saturday afternoon or any afternoon.

Carson frowned and considered her position—literally. His irritation faded as he imagined possible uses for said position. Barring messy emotions, he could have a little fun with the owner of that nice ass and sassy mouth. He'd always been a leg man, but a guy would have to be blind not to notice her obvious ass-ets. Okay, bad pun, but humor had never been his forte. Just ask his brothers.

Now that he looked closer, her legs were heaven too, long and sweet, and encased in tight jeans worn low on her hips.

Carson mentally chastised himself for such improper behavior. Imagine him, Carson the Tight Ass studying a woman's butt. Next thing you knew

he'd be imagining wicked sex acts. His youngest brother, who'd christened him with the "Tight Ass" title years ago, would be in absolute shock. It'd upset the status quo in their family. After all, Carson didn't date, not seriously. And he never, ever stared at a woman's butt.

Carson didn't have his middle brother's smooth charm or his baby brother's raw sex appeal. He was just Carson, the dull, workaholic brother with an over-developed sense of responsibility and, until recently, the Midas touch when it came to making money.

As if she sensed the heat of his gaze, her entire body froze. She glanced back at him and stole his breath. A landscape of conflicting emotions traversed a face free of cosmetics. She might not be considered beautiful by today's standards, yet he found her striking from a minimalist point of view, albeit one with a bent for grunge.

His feet, by their own volition, propelled him to within ten feet of her.

He forgot her earlier rudeness the minute her tawny eyes, with no pretenses and no secret agendas, met his probing gaze. Oh, man. How refreshing. Those eyes laid a welcome mat at his feet and invited him inside. Like a warm cozy cabin in the woods, he wanted to sit down, take off his shoes, relax and stay a while. An unexpected sensation rippled through his body and scared the shit out of him.

Stop it, Carson; you're doing it again. His internal warning device sent out a red alert. He was treading in dangerous emotional territory.

Calamity pushed tangled hair the color of rich caramel off her face. Damn, her eyes matched her hair. He'd never seen eyes that color before. Technically, they'd be called brown, but were almost a dark gold. They gave her the look of the girl next door with a naughty twist. He found them so hypnotizing, his romantic tendencies started to run amok.

Somewhere in the barn a horse kicked the side of its stall and startled him out of his trance. Suddenly aware he'd been ogling her like some horny teenager, Carson prodded himself into speech as he took a step closer. "Do you always crawl around underneath monster horses?" *Add that to your list of clever pickup lines, Car. It's certain to be an outrageous success with the ladies.* Not that he needed pickup lines. He usually needed "nice to meet you, now I'm going to run like hell" lines.

She chewed on her lower lip. A whiff of pure female without all the extraneous trimmings wafted toward him on a breeze. She smelled fresh and

wholesome and... He sniffed again. *Horses*. She smelled like horses. The scent wasn't altogether unpleasant.

Carson almost laughed. This was getting out of hand. It wasn't like him to behave like this. He lounged against the stall door and adopted a nonchalant pose. "If you don't mind me asking, *who* are you?"

"Samantha MacIntyre."

His mouth curved into a smile he couldn't control. He gazed into her eyes and fought the unwelcome urge to wallow in their depths. Carson clenched his jaw. He didn't wallow in depths. And he didn't like his safe, controlled world disturbed, especially by a smart-mouthed woman who smelled like Trigger.

"You must be Jake's brother, Carson?"

Ah, that explained her change in attitude. He allowed himself a gloating smirk as he navigated into safer waters. So she'd figured out his genealogy. "Yes, that's me." He caught her worried expression before she concealed it and felt a twinge of guilt. *Way to go, Carson, dig that knife in deeper.*

"I'm sorry about earlier. I thought you were...were...uh someone else."

"Obviously, I'm not. Do you treat paying customers like that?" Carson stabbed her with a penetrating gaze. His persona as a ruthless, tough businessman slipped into place.

"Hey, Carson!"

Carson turned to see his brother standing outside in the sun. "We'll talk later." He gave Sam one last scathing look and joined Jake in the sunshine. He wasn't finished with her yet, but the appearance of his brother reminded him that he had more immediate concerns.

Something was up with Carson's sweet but ambitious sister-in-law and disgustingly happy, newlywed baby brother; and that something included him. Today of all days, he didn't appreciate their meddling in his life. He'd rather bury himself in his work and forget that it was his thirty-fourth birthday and his ten-year non-wedding anniversary.

"Good to see you." Jake grinned and clasped his hand.

Carson ignored the greeting and jabbed a finger toward Sam. "How long has she been working here?" He scowled one of his signature scowls.

"Almost a month." Jake laughed. "What's the matter? Did she throw you off-balance?"

"Me? No, of course not," Carson spoke too quickly. He was as balanced

as a man flailing on an unstable tightrope over a pit of hungry alligators.

Jake raised an eyebrow. "Bull. She does that to everyone, even me."

"So, who is she?"

His brother slanted him a sly grin. "Why? You interested?"

"Absolutely not," Carson barked with too much force.

"Sorry, forgot myself for a moment. She'd never lower herself to being arm candy. She doesn't have Reynolds Corporation stamped on her forehead nor is she a merger or an acquisition, so why would you be interested? She's just a woman."

Carson ignored Jake's innuendos about his workaholic personality. He liked his personality just the way it was. It fit him and his life. "I'd hardly call her *just* a woman."

"She does look like she dropped out of a B-rated western movie, doesn't she?"

"One with a miniscule wardrobe budget," Carson quipped. Sam jogged past him to retrieve something from her pickup parked near the barn. She looked like a walking disaster with her caramel hair in disarray, her smudged face, and grungy jeans. Funny, he hadn't noticed all that earlier. He'd been too busy looking at her lioness eyes and a few other things. That was strange in itself. He hadn't looked at a woman—really looked—in a long time. And why her? Damn, he needed to get laid. Soon. And not by her.

"I wonder how well she cleans up or if she cleans up?" he blurted out before he could stop himself. His face grew hot, right to the tips of his ears.

Jake jumped on his reaction like a rabid dog. "I know what you're thinking." His brother slapped him on the back and laughed heartily. "Welcome back, bro. You've rejoined the ranks of testosterone-driven males. I didn't know you still had it in you."

Carson glared at his brother. "You have no idea what I'm thinking. My mind doesn't live in some gutter like yours. Hell, it's hard to tell if she's even a female." So why was he indulging in a brief fantasy involving her, a shower, warm water, and soap while bent over?

"Yeah, sure. Whatever." Jake rolled his eyes. "And as far as her personal hygiene, you'd have to ask her."

"I think I'll pass. I doubt she'd be amused, and I don't consider castration, especially mine, a viable form of entertainment."

“Watch it, Car. I might have to accuse you of having a sense of humor.”
Jake was enjoying this way too much.

“Never happen.”

Jake raised one skeptical brow.

“You’re skirting the issue? Who is the cowgirl?”

“She’s hardly a cowgirl. She’s a horse trainer and a damn good one. We were lucky to get her to train at this place considering the shape it’s in. Harlee saw her ride in Europe. She thinks she’s incredible.” Harlee was Jake’s wife who had at one time groomed horses in Europe for a living.

“I see.” Actually he didn’t, and for some reason he wasn’t sure he wanted to be enlightened. “What was so important that I had to drop everything and run out to your horse farm on a Saturday?” Carson glanced at his watch for effect.

“Not *my* horse farm,” Jake pointed out. “Remember? It’s all in the family.”

“Your family. Not my family.”

Jake frowned, pain etched on his features. “You’re still my brother.”

“Of course. For the hundredth time, I don’t blame you, and you know that. You did what you thought was right and so did I.”

“Yeah, but my actions split the family in two, and you paid for it.”
Jake’s voice was laced with guilt. “So did the business.”

“It’s all water under the bridge now. Besides, things between Dad and I had started going downhill long before that incident.” Carson dismissed Jake’s confession with a wave of his hand. He didn’t want to talk about it. The wounds were still too raw, too fresh, and too damn deep for that matter.

Seeking a little space, Carson moved a few steps away and stood near the board fence. He took in the surrounding farmland with a sweeping glance.

Originally, he’d been against his father purchasing this rundown horse farm. Granted, the land was an excellent investment, a prime piece of real estate within easy commuting distance of the freeway and downtown Seattle, though not particularly designed to clear a profit. It was merely a frivolous write-off, which gave their sister the semblance of a job doing what she did best—spending money. The purchase price had put a huge dent in their liquid assets.

A large barn badly in need of repair or even better, bulldozing, sat near

the middle of the property. An indoor riding arena was attached to one end, an overgrown pasture to the other.

Board fencing, once painted white but faded to a dull grey, crisscrossed green pastures. Broken sections had been replaced by wire fencing leaving a mismatched conglomeration adding to the seedy ambiance. To one side of the gravel parking lot was the foundation of another barn, one that had burned to the ground years ago in a fire that killed several horses and the former barn owner.

Eva, a self-proclaimed psychic and Harlee's friend, insisted the place had bad karma. Maybe it did.

Overlooking the property was a seventies ranch house occupied by Jake and Harlee. If the place had been Carson's, the only things he'd leave standing would be the large oaks that lined the driveway.

The shell of a new equestrian facility stood partially completed, a skeleton of what might have been. It didn't look like any progress had been made since he'd been replaced as project manager over a year ago, though Mother Nature had contributed her own changes. Raspberry vines wound around the steel supports and small trees reclaimed the land. The hot summer sun wilted the weeds and turned the grass brown.

Jake moved to stand beside him. He didn't say a word. Perhaps, there was nothing to say but the obvious.

Carson turned away from the fence. What had happened here shouldn't concern him. His family had made their choices just as had he. He'd chosen the almighty dollar; they'd chosen each other. Regret rattled the bars he'd placed around his heart, but pride kept that cell locked.

Chapter 3

A Girl's Gotta Do...

Having his fill of painful reflection, Carson turned to his brother. "So why did you call me?"

"It's a surprise." Jake perked up. A crooked smile crossed features so very similar to Carson's.

"What are you talking about?" Carson didn't like surprises. He preferred his life neat and planned to the nth degree.

"Actually, it was Dad's idea."

"Dad's idea? Since when does he plan surprises for me?" Hell, he could count on one hand the number of times he'd talked to or seen his father in the past year.

"Well, part of it *was* my idea. I mean, what do you get the guy who has everything for his birthday?"

"How about nothing?" Carson suggested.

"You know that won't fly in our family. We all agreed it had to be so unusual that you'd never buy it for yourself."

Carson stiffened. *Uh oh*. Beware of baby brothers known for their wild, unpredictable streaks bearing gifts. "I'm not sure I want to see this."

"You'll love it. Once you get used to the idea. Harlee will explain it."

"Coward. Letting your wife do your dirty work."

"Damn right. You won't hit her." Jake blew out a breath as his wife joined them on cue. She must have been eavesdropping around the corner.

"Harlee..."

"Oh, Carson. So good to see you. You are going to love this!" His petite blond sister-in-law gushed like a broken water main. Her nervousness betrayed how much he was really going to love it. She looked over her shoulder and called to someone out of his eyesight. "Sam, we're ready."

Sam? Carson frowned. Calamity walked into the sunlight leading the

equine version of an elephant. It was the same animal she'd been grooming earlier. Not that he'd paid much attention to it. He'd been too busy gawking at her. He narrowed his eyes, suspecting a trap. His gaze swung to the cowgirl.

Sam patted the huge animal and ignored him. Her stiff posture betrayed her discomfort.

"Happy Birthday!!!" Jake and Harlee yelled at once, slamming him back to earth so hard he bounced.

"This is a joke, right?"

"Nope, all yours. Her name is Gabriella. We call her Gabbie."

Gabbie? Sherman, as in tank, would be more appropriate. "Look, thanks but take her back. I don't even like horses. Nor do I want to ride one."

"This horse isn't for you to ride. She's too valuable."

Carson's interest peaked. Well, now they were talking. "She's a race horse?" That might be fun. He could see himself now, sitting in the clubhouse at Churchill Downs on Derby Day, drinking mint juleps, rubbing elbows with influential people.

"No, of course not. She's a dressage horse," Harlee corrected him.

"Dressage?" Carson wished he could feign ignorance, but he'd grown up in a family of horsewomen. *Unfortunately.* To him, dressage was a bunch of obsessed women dressed up in top hats, tails, black boots, and white breeches that only looked good on emaciated models. These overweight, middle-aged females pranced around a ring on horses big enough to rival locomotives. It was as exciting as watching a tree grow. "What would I want with a horse like that?"

"You'll see."

Carson didn't want to see. Not today, tomorrow, or ever. He smelled a rat, a substantial, overfed Reynolds family rat.

"By the way, Carson, this is Sam MacIntyre," his sister-in-law added pleasantly.

Carson nodded stiffly. "We've met." He directed one of his best, irritated CEO glares at her, but she refused to look at him. Dismissing her, he turned his attention back to Harlee. "This horse really doesn't win money at horse races?"

"Nope."

“That thing is big enough to pull a wagon and star in beer commercials.”

“Sorry, not this mare.” Harlee shook her head and started laughing. He hated being laughed at.

“I don’t get it.” Carson glowered, feeling put out and put upon.

“She’s a show horse. Sam shows her, and you sponsor her.” Harlee nodded in Sam’s direction.

“Sponsor her?” Could this get any worse?

“Yeah, in other words, you foot the bill, she does all the work, and you get all the glory.” His brother’s shit-eating grin added to his irritation.

“Does she win money at these shows?”

“Not usually. Not much.” Harlee shrugged in apology.

Carson ignored his younger brother. “If you don’t win money then what’s the point?”

“The point is that you’ll own her. You know, pride of ownership. Knowing you’re doing something for the sport. That kinda thing.”

“Are you nuts? I don’t even understand what this sport is, let alone care about doing something for it.”

“You’ll learn.” Harlee squeezed his arm. “It’s very artistic. This form of horsemanship has been around for centuries.”

Carson didn’t care if it’d been around before the big bang and created by Rembrandt and Van Gogh in their spare time.

“Jake, Harlee, thanks, really, but I don’t want the animal.”

Harlee giggled and batted her overly mascaraed eyes. His sister-in-law had never grasped the fine art of subtlety when it came to applying makeup. She subscribed to more is better. “Too late. Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“Especially when Dad wrote the check,” his smug baby brother added with a sly grin.

“Bridget must have set him up to this. It’s some scheme of hers to get someone else to pay the bill on a horse she wants.”

“Nope, Bridget had nothing to do with it. She’s still flitting around Europe. This was Dad’s doing.”

Carson didn’t know what to say. The father he’d grown up with wouldn’t have done something like this. But after his father’s heart attack a few years ago, so many things about the man had changed. Not only had his priorities done a 180, but he did weird stuff like this gift horse. Not to

mention, he'd made this sudden shift from ruthless businessman to a socially and environmentally responsible CEO.

A good case in point was the San Juan debacle. Carson couldn't grasp his father's motives today or on that fateful day over a year ago when they'd taken opposite sides in a family business dispute.

But now, his father had given him a horse? He couldn't begin to imagine why. The old man must be playing some perverse joke on him.

* * * *

"So, pretty boy, huh?"

Sam jumped and sent the brush in her hand clattering across the barn aisle. Turning to confront her fate, she met Carson's dissecting gaze.

"Well, it's the truth." *Sort of.* His nose did appear to have been broken once or twice, and his looks leaned slightly more toward the rugged side than the prissy side. Still, if the pretty boy title got under his skin, she'd file it away and use it when needed.

He leaned toward her in an attempt to intimidate. "No one has ever called me that."

"I see. And what would you like me to call you, *sir*?" She leaned toward him, demonstrating her own brand of intimidation. She'd grown up in a household of real men; rich pansies didn't intimidate her.

"With a little respect."

"You got it." She bit back a sharp reply. After all, she did want to ride his mare. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

"Good. I want this horse sold. I assume you can handle that task?"

"Sold? She's your birthday present."

Carson shrugged. "I don't want a horse."

"You can't sell her. She's come so far. She trusts me. I'm just finally getting through to her." Sam's stomach settled in her boots. She closed her eyes briefly. She'd let herself get too attached to a horse that didn't belong to her. Again. If she wanted to be a professional, she needed to keep her distance from the horse and its owner. Not that she'd ever get attached to that tight ass, even though he was hot.

"If you can't do it, I'll find someone else."

"Well, of course, I can, but are you sure?"

“Absolutely. I’ve got to straighten this out with my family; then we can discuss the details later in the week. We’ll formulate a plan to get the optimum return on their investment.”

“Okay.” That sounded like as much fun as a skin graft. No sense getting worked up about it. He wouldn’t be selling the horse in the near future, and he’d soon find that out. Sam knew who owned the horse on paper, and it wasn’t Mr. Personality.

Carson turned to walk away. *Tight ass*, Sam mouthed the words. Carson whipped around as if he’d heard her.

“Have a nice day.” She grinned at him over her shoulder as she turned back to the horse.

What would a smile do to that humorless face? She couldn’t begin to imagine such a foreign expression on his lips. Did he ever laugh or joke or act like one of the guys? She doubted that, too.

What a shame for such gorgeous looks to be wasted on a guy like him. He should be fat, balding, and short to go with his stellar personality.

Either she’d kill him or they’d end up friends. She voted for murder by slow, excruciating torture.

Chapter 4

To Be or Not to Be

Carson stepped out of the elevator and strode down the familiar hallway. He paid scant attention to the rich dark wood and priceless paintings. Such displays of wealth and power meant little compared to what lay ahead.

His father's assistant was gone at this late hour. The entire 45th floor was eerily silent. Yet, the security guard had told him that his father was still in the office and to go right up. He was expected. Expected? How could his father be expecting him?

Carson paused as he passed his old office. *Strange*. His name was still on the door, and it was ajar. Feeling sick, he peeked inside and braced himself.

How odd. It was exactly as he'd left it. A picture of him and his father in hardhats during the dedication of this very building still hung on the far wall, a testament to a moment in time when he'd been on top of the world.

Shaking his head, he continued down the hall. The plush carpet extinguished the sound of his footsteps.

Carson's hand shook as he reached for the door of his father's office. He hadn't been here in months. Sighing heavily, he pulled back his hand, wiped his sweaty palms on his pants, and grasped the doorknob. Try as he might, he couldn't bring himself to turn it.

Damn, this was ridiculous. It was just his father, that's all, a man he'd known since birth. Yet, he'd have been more comfortable facing a full-blown firing squad. Carson inhaled deeply and gathered his courage. Turning the knob, he opened the door, as his stomach executed a cannonball off the high dive board. He swallowed hard.

Joe Reynolds stood with his back to the door, looking out the 45th story window.

Carson wrung his hands together, a nervous habit he'd never indulged

in—until now. He waited and resisted the urge to fidget, knowing that Joe couldn't be hurried. The seconds ticked to minutes. A rubber band of silence stretched between them, ready to break any agonizing second and snap him with its painful sting. Carson cleared his throat again.

Joe didn't bother to turn around. Claspings his hands behind his back, he continued to study his million-dollar view of downtown Seattle and Elliot Bay with the Space Needle and Olympic Mountains in the background. If it was possible to hear silence, Carson could hear it. It thundered in his ears louder than the crowd at Seahawk Stadium during a playoff game. Each second lasted an hour until he swore it seemed time had ground to a screeching halt.

Carson couldn't stand it any longer. "Dad?"

His father's back stiffened. "Yes?"

Carson took a tentative step closer. "Dad, I..."

"What took you so long?" Joe didn't move or turn around.

"Excuse me?"

"In another week, I would have had to track you down."

Carson wondered if he'd fallen down a rabbit hole. "You've been expecting me?"

"Of course. You're here about that damn horse."

"You know I am." He'd get it over with and get out of there.

Joe turned and faced his son. For a fleeting moment, his father's face reminded Carson of a bleak, gray winter sky. He looked old and tired. It struck a nerve deep inside.

A split second later, Joe crossed the room in strong, powerful strides. Gone was that fleeting impression of vulnerability, if it'd ever been there. The man in front of him was the same imposing, powerful, ruthless man he'd always been.

Joe moved to the mahogany bar next to his desk, poured a scotch for both of them, and turned to face his son. "Sit down."

"What I have to say won't take that long." Carson accepted the proffered Scotch and forced himself to take only a sip, even though he'd rather guzzle the whole thing in an effort to dull the pain and get a little liquid courage.

"*Sit. Down.*"

Carson sat. When his dad talked in that tone of voice, no one dared cross

him.

"I appreciate the gift, but I can't keep it."

Joe Reynolds set his jaw and frowned. "Of course you can."

"I don't know the first thing about horses." Carson forced himself to meet his father's direct gaze.

"You'll learn. You're a smart man, aren't you?"

Carson ignored the jibe. His father was probing for weaknesses. "I have no use for a horse."

"It'll get you out of the office."

Carson kept his voice neutral. Inside, conflicting emotions raged a silent war against each other. "You could've done the same thing with golf clubs."

Joe actually chuckled. "It'll broaden your horizons. At least, that's what your mother thinks."

"I like my horizons just as they are, and I don't need my family meddling with them."

"Since when don't the women in this family meddle? They consider it their form of gainful employment."

"Yeah, don't I know. Tell Mom I appreciate her concern, but my business takes all my time. Just like Reynolds Enterprises once did." A fist tightened around Carson's chest and constricted his breathing. Even after a year and a half, it still hurt. He searched Joe's face for a sign of remorse or regret and found none. But then, his father was the consummate poker player.

"About the horse. I—"

"I carry the papers on that horse. She's yours for the next six months. After that, I don't give a damn what you do with her."

"Why are you doing this?" Carson couldn't fathom why Joe would force him to keep this animal.

"I'm done discussing the horse." Joe's face hardened to granite. He regarded his oldest son with the same steely-eyed determination he used when taking over a company. No doubt he was slated to be his father's next takeover.

"If you don't want to discuss the horse then our business is concluded."

"Not according to your mother, it's not."

"Let's keep her out of this."

"I'd love to if I could. Hear me out, or that woman won't give me a

moment's peace."

Carson opened his mouth to decline, but the words wouldn't form. He missed his family, his father most of all. "I need to get back to work."

"It's Friday night." Joe sighed and rubbed his temples. He blew out a resigned breath. "You are your father's son."

"And that's a bad thing?"

Joe met his gaze. "Work. Work. Work. Your life is nothing but work. I taught you too well."

"Is there a point to this discussion?" Not so long ago, his father would've considered Carson's obsessive work ethic a plus, not a minus. Damn, how things had changed.

"It's time to end your leave of absence."

"I'm not on a leave of absence. I resigned when you threatened to demote me, remember?"

"I didn't accept your resignation. *Remember?*"

"I don't work for you anymore."

"Of course you do. Family always has a place."

"You accused me of mismanaging the equestrian center project. How am I supposed to take that?"

"Like a man and admit your mistakes." No one could cut a person down to size like dear old Dad.

"You said I put business ahead of family."

"You did."

"You assigned me an impossible task. You know I didn't believe in that project. How was I supposed to appease Bridget and keep within budget? You gave her veto power over my decisions." *Shit*. Did his voice just crack?

"Bridget needed a chance to prove her merit."

"Yeah, and I bore the brunt of that decision." His blood began to boil. "Then you said my subordinates complained about my high expectations, my coldness, my refusal to bend or compromise, my rigid adherence to what I believed was the right path."

Joe raised one eyebrow and almost smiled. "You remember all that?"

Carson nodded. Remember it? He had nightmares about it in vivid, living color. "Dad, you used to consider those my strengths, not my weaknesses."

His father smiled with sadness. "I used to consider life a game to be

won, not a rare gift to be savored.”

Carson stared at this stranger who’d become his father. He wanted that ruthless, unyielding businessman back. At least he understood that man and could relate to him.

“While I was recovering from my bypass, you were in charge. You were conservative, too much so. You didn’t change tactics when all signs pointed to disaster on some of our biggest projects, didn’t use your head to find creative ways to make them work or get out while there was still time. You didn’t listen to your people. Then there’s the San Juan mess. You went against family, and your selfish actions split this family in two.”

That was really the crux of the matter. He’d committed the ultimate sin in his father’s eyes, but he hadn’t done it for himself. He’d done it for the good of the corporation, the family. The old Joe would have understood. The new Joe didn’t see it that way.

“You almost broke the company, Carson.”

“Our other holdings were doing well until you allowed Jake to halt the San Juan resort development. My gamble could have paid off.”

“Possibly, but you drained our other holdings of valuable assets. Even then, you didn’t stop. You blindly forged ahead. You kept throwing good money after bad and never deviated from your bullheaded plan.”

“I would have been fine if we hadn’t sunk most of our liquid assets into Rosehill.”

“Rosehill was an issue, but you didn’t make adjustments when that resort development ceased.”

“Then why do you want to hire me? I can’t do anything to please you, I never could.” Carson started to stand, but Joe put a hand on his son’s shoulder. He pushed him back in his seat with surprising strength.

“Listen. You owe me that.”

“Alright.” Carson cursed his weakness where his family was concerned.

Joe was quiet for a moment. Carson waited and sipped his scotch. He might as well have been drinking lighter fluid, as little as he appreciated it.

“I’m giving you a second chance with the Cedrona equestrian development.”

“There is no development. I saw it. Nothing has happened since I left. It’s a no-win situation.”

“The development needs to continue and fast. We can’t absorb another

loss like Rosehill. Even worse, we have several contracts for horse shows on the grounds starting a year from this summer. If we don't fulfill them, the lawsuits alone could be our undoing."

"Who solicited contracts for horse shows on show grounds that don't exist?"

His father gave him that look.

"Don't answer that. Bridget?"

Joe nodded. When she had a mind to, his sister could sell sagebrush to Montanans.

"Of all the irresponsible, stupid..."

"Carson. It's done."

"Maybe, but there's more to it than that, isn't there?"

"You know there'll be no peace in the family until your mother and Bridget get their way, and Cedrona is a reality."

Carson was beginning to see the light. "Jake can't deal with Bridget, can he?"

"She's a little difficult."

Carson snorted. "A little?"

"Bridget isn't happy with Harlee and Jake's management of the old farm. For starters, she wants Samantha MacIntyre fired, and she wants you to do it."

"What? Me? Tell Bridget to fire her."

"No one has ever been able to tell Bridget anything. She's bossy, opinionated..."

"Yeah, no joke. I can't work with her either." And he wouldn't—couldn't—work with his father.

"You handle her better than anyone."

"The equestrian center was her brainchild. She's going to butt in at every moment, but she won't want any responsibility. All talk, no action." Like that was any surprise. "Sorry, I'm not interested." Carson crossed his arms over his chest.

His father's face grew rigid. Pale blue eyes, so like his own, radiated the warmth of a Mt. Rainier glacier. "Let me explain this in professional terms instead of personal terms. I know what shape your business is in. You're hanging on by a shoestring. This could be the edge you need."

"Of course you know what shape my business is in because you put it

there. Every move I make I hit a roadblock. No one wants to deal with me because they don't want to face your wrath."

"Are you accusing me of undermining your business?"

"I've been suspicious of it for quite a while now. I feel as if I've been blackballed."

"That would be ruthless and underhanded of me, especially considering I'm your father." Joe shrugged. "Why don't we work together instead of against each other?"

"You can't influence everyone. I have some lucrative prospects in the works. I don't need the Cedrona project."

Joe shook his head. "Don't bullshit me. I make it my business to know your business."

"Don't waste your time."

"Your mother and sister think you can make this work. I have my reservations. Personally, I don't think you're up to the challenge. After all, you'd have to show exceptional creativity—a trait you sorely lack—by pursuing alternative sources of financing and scaling down the plans."

Carson opened his mouth to take the bait then clamped it shut. No, he wasn't going to bite, not under any circumstances. He didn't need to prove anything to his father. Not today or any day. Carson rose to his feet, and this time his father didn't stop him. Instead, he walked him to the door. "You have a week to make a decision."

"I don't need a week. You have my decision."

"One week, Carson. Don't quit on me again."

"You gave me an impossible task made even more impossible by Bridget's involvement."

"Last year when things got tough, you quit. I never would have labeled you a quitter."

"I'm not."

"Really?" There was a calculating gleam in his father's eyes? "Prove it."

Carson hesitated with his hand on the doorknob. He closed his eyes for a moment. "All I want to do is get rid of that damn horse. I'll be back in six months."

"You'll be back within the week."

"Take care, Dad." Without a glance back, Carson walked out the door.

He hurried to the elevator, and took it to the parking garage. Once in his

car, he slammed it into gear and screeched onto the street. Guilt and regret sliced through him, leaving an ache in his heart. He missed his family. He missed working side-by-side with his father to continue the legacy built by generations of Reynolds men and women.

What would happen to Bridget if Cedrona weren't built?

God knows; Bridget certainly couldn't hold down a real job. She flitted from one thing to another. Riding horses was the one thing at which she excelled, along with shopping, spending money, and collecting retired show horses.

Then there were his father's recent health issues. Shit, did his offer have to do with that? Was his father really sick or dying?

How had all this crap come to rest on his shoulders?

Until two years ago, he'd never known failure. Not that he hadn't feared it, and feared it with an intensity that would have paralyzed a weaker man.

He'd been the golden boy, the perfect son. Everything he did, he did to impress his father and further prove that he deserved the trust his family placed in him. Every accomplishment, every dollar he'd made, every deal he'd brokered, he'd done for his father.

All his life, his parents held him up for his brothers to emulate. Not that they had emulated him. They'd resented him at times. At other times they'd been grateful that he shouldered the burden and left them to play and party. He was the oldest son, the heir to the throne, the man in control. He'd never questioned his future, never deviated from his family's expectations, and never shirked his responsibilities. People said he was driven, too ambitious. He didn't care as long as he never failed his father and his family. Then his world had tilted on its axis. His father wasn't a part of his life anymore. He'd lost his best friend.

He should've seen the writing on the wall back then. He recalled good old Dad's reasons for inviting Carson's baby brother back into the family fold. Jake would be the company's heart and soul, while Carson was the brains and had the business savvy. Those words stung at the time and still did. How could Jake be the heart of that business when Carson had devoted his entire life to its success at the exclusion of all else?

Before the heart attack, his dear old Dad could've cared less if his company had a heart or a soul. Then the rules changed. Carson was transformed from a World Series contender to a basement dweller with one

swift kick to the ass. And now, he'd just turned down his chance to get out of the minor leagues.

His father had him right where he wanted him. Even worse, he was stuck with an expensive four-legged investment that would drain what remaining resources he had. Then there was the matter of that sassy horse trainer. Especially that horse trainer, the one his sister wanted fired.

His life couldn't get any more complicated or confusing.

Chapter 5

The Guilt Trip

“Julie! Stop! Right now!”

Anger sizzled through Sam and burned so hot she smelled the acrid smoke and felt the heat from the flames. Any hotter and she’d spontaneously combust.

The teenage brat yanked Poet to a halt in the center of the arena a few feet from Sam. The unfortunate horse ground his teeth on the bit. If this kept up the poor animal wouldn’t have any teeth left.

“This horse is being a jerk.”

“No.” Sam forced calmness into her voice. “He is doing exactly what you’re asking him. You need to ask correctly; then he’ll give you what you want.”

“I am,” Julie pouted.

Sam wanted to yank her off the horse and strangle the selfishness out of her.

“Okay, let’s try it again. Do a ten-meter circle at the end of the arena, and then ask him to leg yield down the long side. Keep your weight centered; don’t twist your body.”

“I’m not!” Glaring defiantly at Sam, Julie muscled her horse into a trot. The sweet bay gelding complied, trying to please. She circled and trotted down the center of the arena.

“Push him off your left leg, look to the right, and guide him over to the wall. Don’t drop your outside rein.” The teenager looked straight ahead and pulled the horse off-balance with her right rein, contorting his body in such a way that it was impossible for him to move sideways. Frustrated, Julie gave him a sound smack with the whip and jab with her spurs.

Sam clenched her fists. “Straighten him! Stop using that whip! You need to ask him correctly. Don’t punish him for your mistakes.”

And so the lesson went, the surly teenager argued with every word, and Sam bit her tongue. She longed to grab that whip and use it on the brat.

Glancing to the side, she spotted Julie's father, a prominent Seattle businessman leaning against the rail. He frowned at her admonishment of his darling daughter. He'd done a lot of frowning during this lesson.

"Cool the horse out, Julie, and call it a day." Sam had had quite enough, so had the poor animal.

As she walked out of the arena, the father called her over. Even his expensive suit couldn't disguise the sleaze factor of the man.

"What kind of performance was that, Ms. MacIntyre?"

"Excuse me?" Sam disliked this pompous man as much as his daughter, but she needed the money. His daughter took three lessons a week along with her sister. So wealthy it was obscene, their parents bought incredible horses for their children and spent countless dollars on shows, equipment, and training. Currently, Sam trained six horses that were owned by Julie's parents or friends. That put a lot of money in her pocket, money she desperately needed. Though, there were times when she wondered how much more she could take, money or not.

"I don't like your tone with my daughter. She'd better be ready for that show in two weeks. We're expecting big things."

"Mr. Schrader, I assure you. She'll be ready if she applies herself and stops blaming her horse for her mistakes."

"I paid enough money for that damn animal that it should be able to trot around that arena on its own. You've been working with him. See to it that he does what she tells him to do." Adam Schrader moved closer to her. Even his overpowering cologne couldn't drown out the rank coffee smell on his breath. "So have you considered my offer?"

Sam backed up a few steps. "I'm sorry, but the mare is sold."

"What? I told you I'd work something out with you."

"We had a serious offer."

"My offer *was* serious." His little pig eyes narrowed.

"The owner couldn't afford to turn it down."

"You can't afford to turn *me* down."

"I'm sorry, but you indicated you weren't willing to pay her price." The cheap bastard couldn't have bought a plow horse for what he'd offered for Gabbie.

"I offered Jaye a fair price."

"She's sold. I'll be glad to find another horse." Sam met his angry glare with a steady gaze, yet she trembled inside. The man wielded intimidation like a sinister sword.

"I wanted that one, and you knew it. This is not good, Ms. MacIntyre. Without me, you'd be nothing. Don't forget who's given you an opportunity to ride some very nice horses. This is how you repay me?" He stamped his foot like a spoiled child and leaned closer.

Sam leaned back, almost gagging over his rancid breath. "I'm sorry. I sold the horse to Joe Reynolds." Someday, she'd build her business to the point where she never had to deal with the Schraders of this world.

Schrader frowned, his anger turning to surprise. "Joe Reynolds bought that horse?"

"Yes, he did."

"For his daughter?"

"No, for his oldest son."

"Carson? Incredible." Schrader shook his head. He rubbed his double chin as he took stock of this new development and what it might mean to him. Or more likely, how he could exploit it to his advantage.

"Please understand I was in an uncompromising position. I didn't have a choice." Sam abhorred lying, but sometimes it served its purpose. She'd begged Harlee to help her find a buyer for Gabbie so Adam Schrader couldn't buy her. She never dreamed that Harlee's father-in-law would come through with the money.

"You can't afford to make me unhappy. So tell me, how are you going to rectify this?" The disgusting man smirked as he lounged against a stall door and lit a cigarette. Sam stared at him in disbelief. *Smoking? In a barn? Her barn? Her Horses?* Her mind zeroed in on the glowing red tip of that cigarette with the single-mindedness of a guided missile.

"Put it out," she warned through gritted teeth.

He ignored her and made a show of inhaling then blowing smoke in her face. He tapped the cigarette on a nearby saddle rack, watching as ashes fell to the ground.

Overwhelming fear rippled through Sam, stripping her tenuous control and stealing her sanity. She stomped on the ashes as if they were a campfire blazing in the middle of the aisle. Small tremors rolled through her body.

Her throat constricted as the despicable man swam in front of her blurry eyes.

Oh, no. No. Not that. Control. Stay in control. She reached out blindly and gripped the side of a stall.

"Overreacting, aren't you?" Schrader grinned, a predator moving in for the feast. "I've heard you have an affinity for fire, especially when it pays big dividends." He smirked and delivered the final blow. "Too bad about that little casualty."

Sam wrapped her fingers around a nearby manure fork and imagined it was Schrader's neck. "Put. It. Out."

"When I'm ready." Schrader eyed the manure fork, as if he thought she'd use it on him. She just might.

"No! Put it out now!" she shrieked. Her voice cracked and revealed a weakness she never meant to expose, most of all to this man. Smoke drifted toward her. Her hands shook. She gasped for breath.

Schrader raised one eyebrow. "Take it easy. I won't burn your barn down. I'll leave that up to you."

Shaking with rage, she raised her voice. It sounded shrill and on the edge. "You bastard. Put out that cigarette before I cram it up your—" She waved the manure fork in front of his face, brandishing it like a sword.

"Adam, good to see you." Carson snatched the manure fork from her hands and stepped between the two, effectively cutting off any further remarks.

Sam fumed and stared at his broad back. *Asshole. Jerk.* How dare he interfere? This was her battle, not his. A small voice of reason reminded her who owned her dream horse. She slapped her errant conscience down and ignored it. Ranting was more satisfying.

Sam pushed on Carson's back, but she'd have better luck moving an old-growth fir with her bare hands. He was rooted to the spot. In fact, he infuriated her by ignoring her, but not before he cast a scathing warning over his shoulder. Even she wasn't stupid enough to cross the invisible line he drew in the sand. She stood behind him, jaw clenched, her hands in tight fists, fingernails digging into her palms.

"Adam, I need you to put out that cigarette. We can't have smoking in the barn. You know what sticklers insurance companies are." Carson leaned on the manure fork, a deceptively casual pose. He might sound friendly and

unthreatening, but the hint of steel in his voice contradicted his harmlessness.

Sam admitted to being a teensy bit impressed. Even so, she preferred a good butt chewing over Carson's brand of persuasion. She wanted to ream Schrader until he couldn't sit down for weeks.

"No problem, Carson. I didn't realize it was an insurance issue." Schrader glanced at Sam. "If I'm asked nicely, I'm more than happy to cooperate."

"Let's step outside. You can finish your smoke out there."

"Good thing you came along. She was about to spear me with that fork. She's rude and rough around the edges." Schrader's voice drifted back to her location in the barn aisle. "What was your brother thinking to hire someone like her?"

"The old trainer left them in a bind. You know how irresponsible these horse people are."

"Don't I ever." Schrader looked pointedly at Sam. "I still can't imagine what your brother was thinking."

"She appears to do an adequate job."

"She'd better do more than adequate with that attitude and reputation."

Carson said something Sam didn't catch, but it made Schrader laugh. She wanted to throw something. *Men*. They were making fun of her, and she knew it.

Several minutes later, Schrader and the princess brat tore down the driveway in his luxury car. Sam braced herself as Carson strode toward her. Lines of determination were etched on his handsome face.

"You could be a little more tactful, Samantha." His admonishing tone grated on her stretched-too-thin nerves.

"I won't tolerate smoking in the barn."

"Tolerate? Hell, you'd think the guy committed a felony."

She advanced on him, but he held his ground. "Maybe he did! What do you know? Have you ever seen the results of a barn fire? The horses...The smell..." A strangled sob escaped her lips, and she looked away.

He sobered and had the good sense not to push her. "Can't say I have." His voice softened, as did his expression.

"You don't want to. It'd melt the coldest heart." She swiped at a lone tear that slid down her cheek. "Hell, it'd even melt yours."

“Are you calling me a cold-hearted bastard?”

“If the heart fits, freeze it.”

Carson’s jaw grew rigid. His eyes blazed with anger. At least the man did have some emotions. “I’m not letting you bait me into an argument.”

“What’s the matter, pretty boy? Afraid you’ll lose?”

“No, I’m afraid I’ll reduce you to a pathetic, simpering pile of X chromosomes.”

“Bullshit.”

Carson shrugged. His calm demeanor clicked back in place. She didn’t like it. She wanted to shake up his world, make him scream or yell or do something that betrayed his humanity. “You’d be wise to control your smart mouth and temper around Schrader.”

“Is that a threat or a warning?”

“A suggestion. I know what he’s capable of.”

“Mr. Schrader is a friend of yours?” It figured. Two peas in a pod. Of course they were friends.

“Adam? Not really. Actually, I barely tolerate the guy, but I play the game. The man can be a formidable enemy. He could ruin you, Sam. You don’t want that.”

“I can take care of myself. I have been for years.”

“I doubt you’ve run across someone like him.”

Sam snorted. “I can handle him. I don’t need your help.”

Carson crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. “I’m not offering my help. I’m offering advice. Schrader’s dishonest, ruthless, and pushes the legal limit. We pretend to be friendly, but I’m sure he likes me as well as I like him.”

“Really? I’m impressed. Rich. Handsome. And a brain, too. Incredible.”

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re mocking me?”

“Because I am. Mr. Reynolds, I have work to do. Are you here for a purpose other than to harass me?”

“I’m here to see my horse. What did you think?”

“So much for an absentee owner,” Sam muttered under her breath. “I thought you were selling her?”

“It would appear that I’m not. At least not in the near future.” He studied her with a shrewdness that made her swallow her next biting remark. “What is a horse like that worth?”

“Right now?”

“Does it make a difference whether it’s now or later?”

“Yeah, it makes a big difference. Right now, she has a reputation as being difficult and inconsistent. I think I can earn her trust and make her into a competitor.”

“How long will that take?”

She was tempted to tell him it’d take years, but honesty was one of her flaws. “I think I can have her winning consistently by next year. By then she could easily be worth a quarter of a million or more. This horse has Olympic potential.”

“You have until the end of the summer.”

“What? I...”

“This may not have been my idea, but I don’t do anything halfway, not even something I’m forced into.”

“Now, why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“I expect to see this horse performing up to my expectations. If it doesn’t, I’ll hold you responsible.”

“This is a horse, not a motorcycle or a sports car. I’ll do the best I can, but there are limits.”

“I’m certain there are. See to it that you don’t find those limits with this horse. My brother and sister-in-law put a lot of faith in your abilities. I’m not that gullible. I’m impressed by results.”

She raised her arm in a mock salute. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

“Smart ass.”

“Tight ass.”

“Shouldn’t you be riding my investment rather than trading barbs with me?”

“Oh, but this is so gratifying.”

“It’d be more gratifying to see what I’m paying for. My brother filled me in on your training fees.”

“What’s the matter? Will it make a dent in your small change?”

“No, not even close.” He shot back.

“Well, you’re a little late to see her ridden today. I’ve already finished with her. If you’d like to make an appointment for another day, I’ll be certain to accommodate your busy schedule.”

She gave him credit for countering her every jab. They volleyed words

back and forth like neither wanted to be the one who dropped the verbal volleyball.

“I’ll be back at eight tomorrow morning to see my horse perform.” His icy tone left her frostbitten. The man was gorgeous when he was pissed. Her heart raced a few laps around the block and left her breathless.

“Yes, sir.”

He turned to leave.

“And, Carson?”

He paused in mid-stride and glanced over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“You don’t have to check your smile at the door. There’s no penalty for enjoying yourself.”

He grumbled something and left the barn. Sam broke into laughter. By the time she was finished with that man and his horse, she’d find a way to burrow under his cool professionalism and make him laugh. Not because his happiness mattered to her, but because he’d be more pleasant to deal with.

For a man who didn’t give a darn about horses, he showed more than a casual interest. Of course, that shouldn’t surprise her.

What had he said? He didn’t do anything halfway, even things forced on him.

Chapter 6

The Big ‘If’

Carson strode down the sidewalk at his normal brisk pace. No dawdling or wasting time. Bridget’s twin, Brad, the family comedian and charmer, accused him of never smelling the roses. Hell, he didn’t even like flowers, why would he take time to smell them?

Resentment coursed through him, resentment toward his father, mother, hell, resentment at his entire family for putting him in this position. Carson: dependable, responsible, serious. Always expected to be perfect, never allowed to be himself, never able to follow his dreams, only the dreams others had for him.

The sad fact was that he had no idea who he was other than his father’s creation, molded to take over the reins of the family empire. Now, he found himself mired in self-doubt, a foreign emotion and one he didn’t enjoy.

Carson frowned and locked his self-pity in the deepest corner of his psyche. He didn’t indulge in excesses, be it pity, alcohol, laughter, happiness, or even sex. He left that to his brothers. He guessed that was why women flocked to Jake and Brad. Not that they didn’t chase him, too, but he was always their last choice. Then once they got to know him, they considered him way too dull for words. Money can only go so far.

Usually, he didn’t care, but lately his mind kept drifting to Sam.

Why did that scruffy horse trainer bring out the testosterone in him, of all the women in his world? She wasn’t beautiful and classy or charming and witty, or even clean. She’d never be an executive’s hostess or a stylish date on his arm at the symphony. Symphony? He snorted. She probably listened to twangy country music. He liked safe, predictable, and controllable. Samantha MacIntyre didn’t fit that mold and never would.

Women found his stiff demeanor and workaholic personality boring. A woman like her would find him as amusing as a slug on the sidewalk once

the novelty wore off. Been there, done that.

As a closet romantic, Carson was cursed with the unfortunate tendency to fall in love at the drop of a hat. He guarded this secret more closely than the Secret Service guarded the president. Each time he'd fallen and fallen hard, he'd brushed his broken heart off his sleeve and buried himself more deeply in work.

Ten years ago had been the last time he'd succumbed fully to this weakness. He'd said "I do" but she'd said "I don't" in front of 300 of their closest friends and family. To make matters worse, she chose to share with the guests exactly why she "didn't."

In the aftermath, the pieces of his shattered heart could be found scattered from Portland to Seattle. He'd been riding the commitment-free wagon ever since, and he'd no intention of falling off.

Yet, he couldn't deny the truth. Sam attracted him on several levels. From the most basic—a physical attraction, to something much more complicated and frightening. Especially for a man who'd imprisoned his heart in an armored truck.

He'd seen a new side of her today, which disconcerted him even more. She had some major phobia when it came to fire. A sassy smart-mouthed Sam he could handle, but a vulnerable, emotional Sam was another thing entirely.

Carson slowed his pace and looked, really looked, at his surroundings. In front of him was that run-down brick brewery building that he knew so well. *The Evergreen Brewery*.

As a child, he'd spent countless hours with his grandfather, crafting ideas, drawing plans, and dreaming about restoring the old building. Granddad had always been there. When both his parents had been too busy to attend his games, he'd been at every one. When his fiancé left him at the altar, it had been Granddad who had taken him to a bar and gotten drunk with him.

On his last day on earth, his grandfather still hadn't given up reviving the original source the Reynolds family's wealth. This pile of bricks had been more than a building to Benjamin Reynolds. Ben's grandfather had traveled to Seattle, destitute and alone with only youth on his side. He'd worked the docks and the forests, saved every penny he could and started this brewery on a promise and a prayer.

Now the building was deserted and in disrepair. The crumbling concrete in the parking lot had long ago surrendered to over-zealous weeds. Moss and ivy covered the grimy bricks. The windows were boarded up and the doors were barred.

Carson trudged onward. Sadness weighed him down. He missed discussing tactics with his father. He missed the excitement of making more money, bigger deals, taking risks and winning. He'd excelled at it, lived for it, and breathed his every breath with that goal in mind.

Now it was all gone.

It didn't matter. He didn't need any of that anymore. This was a new life, a new venture.

He didn't need his family. He didn't need to banter with his brothers at family meals or tease his sister about putting on weight. He didn't need to help his mother plant her beloved roses. He didn't need to discuss business or sports with his father. He didn't need the headache of renovating the old family brewery or rescuing that disaster of an equestrian center. He didn't need the nightmare of trying to pull ReynCorp out of the gone-concerns to the going-concerns.

Most of all, he didn't need *her*, the current bane of his existence. And he sure as hell didn't need that damn horse.

Who was he kidding?

Well, except for the damn horse.

* * * *

Gabbie stuck her head over the stall door and watched a man creep down the dark aisle. She recognized him immediately by his smell, though his scent was different than usual. She sniffed again, catching the odor of an animal in fear. Gabbie flared her nostrils. She didn't smell any predators. She surveyed the area with her sharp eyes and close to 360-degree vision. Nothing sinister lurked in the shadows.

He tripped over a bucket and spouted some angry words in a language she didn't understand but had heard before. There were such things as light switches. He should know that. The man's gaze met hers. His menacing expression caused her to back up a step.

She sniffed again. She smelled fear in his perspiration. The dark person

stole into the tack room, only to emerge a few minutes later with a pocketknife in hand.

* * * *

Rainbow swatches of color swirled in a kaleidoscope of changing images until the colors faded to shades of red and orange. Red everywhere, rivers of red flowed from the cracks in the walls. Oranges illuminated the room and licked through the open door. The angry colors wreaked havoc and sought revenge, leaving destruction in their wake, generating an intense heat and swallowing all resistance.

Nothing survived.

Left behind were blacks and grays, charred remnants of what was and never would be again. Scattered amongst the ashes were crumpled forms, indiscernible until a person took a closer look at the twisted limbs and sinew and hollow-eyed faces.

Sam bolted upright in bed, the sleep wrung out of her by the nightmarish, charcoaled images that had ripped through her unconscious mind. Something was ringing. Incessant ringing that wouldn't stop. She groped for the phone, sending several items on her cluttered nightstand flying across the room. She picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"You should have listened to Juan." The voice sounded synthetic, sexless.

"Who is this?"

There was dead silence and then a dial tone.

Sam ran for the bathroom, slammed into the doorjamb and banged her elbow. Crying out from pain, she crouched in front of the toilet and wretched.

Finally, she leaned her head against the cool tile on the wall. Her elbow throbbed, but she didn't care. When would this nightmare end? God knows, she'd tried to escape, but she couldn't hide in Europe forever. Someone had framed her. She needed to know who.

Steeling her resolve, she hauled herself to her feet. She'd rebuild her life and career. No more running. Not this time. She'd face her fears and find a way to prove her innocence. She didn't have a choice. She had debts to pay and a career to resurrect.

Sam stumbled into a warm shower, hoping to wash away reminders of a

haunted past and visions of an uncertain future.

* * * *

After tying the big mare in the cross ties, Sam ran a stiff brush over her burnished red coat. With each stroke, her troubles faded a little bit at a time. Something about grooming horses always relaxed her. She guessed it followed the same lines of why dogs were great therapy in nursing homes or why petting a cat lowered people's blood pressure.

The mare blew softly and nibbled on the zipper of Sam's vest. Freud would consider her orally fixated. Sam considered the mare busy—busy with her mouth, busy with her body, just busy. If she could find the key to channel that energy into something productive, they'd be an unbeatable combination.

It was a big "if."

Carson lounged against the nearby stall door; his ice blue eyes intent on her. Despite the fact that he made her nervous, she welcomed his strong, quiet presence after her disturbing early morning.

Sam stole a look at him. His eyes drilled hers with an expression she was afraid to decipher. They smoldered, the ice melting to a hot blue flame. She couldn't figure out why. After all, she hadn't uttered one word to piss him off—yet. It couldn't be attraction, could it?

No, not her. She was the girl next door, a tomboy, and every guy's buddy. She didn't make rich, lethally handsome men smolder. Never.

Gabbie nickered and drew her attention. The mare watched Carson out of the corner of her eye and swung her big butt in his direction, effectively pinning him against the stall. Sam caught his panicked expression over the top of the mare's rounded rump.

"What's she doing?" he choked.

"Gabbie likes men. She's a hussy. " As if on cue the mare swished her tail in his face. "She's trying to seduce you. She's in heat."

"In heat?" His voice climbed surprisingly high. "Make her stop."

"And ruin all her fun?"

"Hell, yes, I have no desire to be the love object of a 1500-pound, over-sexed horse."

"Ah, Carson, you'll hurt her feelings."

“I don’t give a...” The rest of his response was muffled by a mouthful of tail.

“It does give a new meaning to piece of tail.” Sam chortled. She gave the mare a push to move her butt away from his chest.

Carson slid out from behind the horse and positioned himself out of range. He brushed horsehair from his clothes; then he gave her his full attention. “You didn’t really say what I thought you said, did you?”

She nodded and graced him with her most innocent grin.

“Great. Wonderful. As if my brothers aren’t bad enough.”

“What does that mean?”

“You don’t want to know. Are you going to harass me or ride that thing?”

“Whichever you prefer. You’re the boss.”

“I prefer you ride her or whatever it is you do with her. So far she eats, poops, slobbers, and rubs her hairy butt on me. Does she do anything productive?”

Taking the mare’s reins in her hands, Sam headed for the arena and called to him over her shoulder. “Hold onto your shorts, pretty boy. I’ll show you her special talents.”

Chapter 7

Surveillance

Gabbie turned her head and eyed Carson as Sam swung into the saddle. She blinked big brown eyes at him and made a soft rumbling noise. Good lord, the animal was flirting with him. Appalled, Carson backed up a step.

"You're not much for animals, are you?"

Carson shrugged. "Guess not."

He'd had a dog once, a Labrador, growing up. He'd loved that dog. Every night Amos had slept at the foot of his bed. On Carson's tenth birthday, the dog died from a rare form of cancer even though the best veterinarians in the Northwest tried to save him. He'd never had another pet since.

He glanced up. Sam studied him with eyes that saw too much from her perch on the horse's back. His stomach flipped in response, too reminiscent of how Marcia had made him feel. He didn't like it. It undermined his control. Carson looked away and feigned indifference. "Are you going to ride or waste more of my time?"

Sam stiffened. A pang of guilt slithered through him at his rudeness. Turning Gabbie away from him, she gave the mare a soft boot in the side. "Quit gawking, girlfriend, let's get to work."

With a heavy sigh, Gabbie moved into a ground-covering walk. That horse was as much of a princess as his sister. That type of female plagued his life. Except Sam. No way was she a princess. She was someone he'd like to see naked. Someone he'd like to touch once he got her naked. Someone he'd like to bury himself in so deep that he'd be lost forever.

Shit. He grimaced. Enough of that thinking.

With the horse a safe distance away, Carson leaned against the rail and watched. After one more hopeful glance in his direction, Gabbie picked up the pace, ready to show off for him.

Around they went. Around and around and around. One endless boring circle after another.

Carson's eyes glazed over as he watched Sam ride the elephant in those never-ending circles. So far, this dressage stuff didn't do a thing for him. He covered his mouth to conceal a real yawn and wondered what his father had gotten him into and why.

He'd be fossilized before he found this exciting. He couldn't believe people did this for *fun*.

Yet... Sam did something different. It was almost as if she turned up the intensity a notch or shifted into another gear.

Carson leaned forward.

The horse might be as big as a truck, but she was as light on her feet as a ballerina. She moved with an ease and grace that belied her size. Carson had played enough sports to appreciate an outstanding athlete, even in a horse suit. Watching the two of them, he almost understood what Harlee and Sam saw in this horse. She was an impressive animal, even if he found her career less than exciting.

His attention shifted to the rider. The woman rode as if she was an extension of the horse. They were one mind, one body, and one purpose. Her long legs encased in black boots draped around the animal's midsection. That gorgeous ass sat deep in the saddle, while her hips moved in time with the horse's back. Forward and back. Forward and back. Forward and back.

Carson wiped his brow. The temperature in the arena shot up about twenty degrees. He removed his coat and slung it over the rail. The horse caught the motion out of the corner of her eye and executed an impressive vertical then sideways leap. Sam, caught off guard, slid to the side and hung there, balanced precariously on the huge creature's back. Carson heard a snap. The saddle flew one way; Sam flew the other in an impressive flying dismount that ended with her butt firmly planted in the arena dirt.

Before Carson could make a move toward her, she leapt to her feet and shot him a menacing glare. He swallowed a smile. Her body seemed to be fine, but her face was bright red.

A smart man would have kept his mouth shut, but what fun would that be? "So is that what you meant by showing me 'her stuff?'" His hearty laughter echoed through the arena.

"Shut up," Sam grumbled as she stalked over to the saddle lying on the

ground.

“So when does she start her career on the rodeo circuit?” Carson continued to grin like a fool. Good thing Brad and Jake weren’t around. They’d misconstrue his amusement as interest.

Sam ignored him and stared at her saddle half buried in the arena dirt. She bent down and examined it more closely. Carson admired her ass. Even though it was covered in dirt, those tight breaches looked damn good on her. Frowning, she looked up at him. He pasted an innocent smile on his face in case she’d caught him staring like some horny teenager. He braced himself for the inevitable.

“Carson?” She sounded tentative, puzzled, definitely not pissed.

He blew out a breath and moved to stand beside her, hoping his relief wasn’t obvious. “What?”

Sam pointed at the saddle on the ground and lifted her golden eyes to meet his. “The stitching attaching the buckles broke.”

Carson yanked his gaze away from her face and knelt down, studying the leather. He was no detective, but it looked like it was just worn. “You didn’t notice this when you were saddling her? You don’t do some kind of preflight check?”

“This is a horse, not a 747.”

Carson shifted his gaze to the monster horse calmly dismantling the arena gate with her teeth. “Coulda’ fooled me.”

“I didn’t see it, okay?” Sam shot back testily.

Carson raised an eyebrow and took in her disheveled appearance. “No surprise there. Details are not your forte.”

“Don’t you think it’s odd that both buckles broke at the same time?”

“Not if one was hanging on by a thread, and the other was carrying all the weight.”

Sam rolled her eyes, clearly exasperated. She looked damn cute when she was annoyed. “Take the saddle into the barn, I’ll get Gabbie.”

Carson hid his grin and picked up the saddle, while Sam crossed the arena to retrieve the errant mare.

He walked into the barn. A strong scent wafted toward him. He wrinkled his nose and frowned. A fresh pile of horse manure sat in the otherwise immaculate aisle. Then he noticed the man crouched down in a nearby stall. Carson’s eyes narrowed. *Damn*. Just what he needed, some

two-bit thief hiding in a barn full of prima-donna, middle-aged, neurotic women and pampered horses. It wasn't exactly great for business, not that the business mattered to him.

"Get up and get out of there."

A small Hispanic man came storming into the aisle holding a pitchfork in one hand and a can of Pepsi in the other. He was ranting in a tirade of Spanish. Carson knew a little Spanish, but not those particular words. He doubted they taught them in traditional Spanish classes.

Carson raised his voice to be heard over the man. "What the hell were you hiding in that stall for?"

"You ruin it!"

"Ruin what?"

That seemed to anger him all the more, as his crazed ranting took on a new decibel level.

"Who are you?" Carson yelled.

"None your business!" The man answered in English laced with more colorful Spanish. His extravagant gestures spoke even louder than his voice.

Carson advanced on the man with the intention of bodily removing him from the premises when Sam hurried into the barn leading Gabbie.

"What's going on?" She glanced at Carson then back at the ranter. "Juan, what's the problem?"

Juan continued his rant, the words escaping his mouth so quickly that even Sam seemed to have a hard time following him. She tossed the reins at Carson. "Here, hold her." He stared at the reins in his hand then back at Sam as she hustled Juan out of earshot.

Carson regarded the mare with suspicion. She eyed him with big doe eyes and moved closer. Oh, no, she wasn't wiping horse slobber all over him again. He backed up, and the mare followed until she pinned him in a corner. Carson looked to Sam for help. She stood with her back to him. He couldn't hear Juan's words but his exaggerated gestures told him more than he needed to know.

After a few more minutes of enthusiastic conversation, Juan stomped off. Seconds later a tractor tore down the driveway, dust billowing in its wake. Sam watched until the last of the dust disappeared and turned to face him.

"Who the hell was that?"

"He's the barn manager."

"Barn manager? Him?" Carson pointed in the direction Juan had gone.

"He should be fired."

"Oh, yeah. Really? Well, if you think that maybe you should try firing him."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I can't fire him. He won't leave."

"What kind of a business are you running here?"

"None of your damn concern." Sam's eyes flashed fire. He should have been ignited on the spot. Unfortunately, it ignited another part of his anatomy.

"Like hell it isn't. My family owns this place and my horse's welfare is at stake. Besides the man was quite insolent, and he was behaving suspiciously."

"Of course he was. *You* interrupted his surveillance, and he takes his work very seriously."

"His surveillance? Is he some kind of undercover cop?"

Sam shrugged. "How the hell would I know? Do you think he'd tell me something like that if he *was* undercover?"

Why did he get the feeling she was toying with him? "He was hiding in a stall. What was I to think?"

"He always behaves like that. So what, he does his job. You, on the other hand, are an interfering idiot."

"Excuse me?" Carson jammed his fists on his hips and assumed a belligerent position. It was a difficult stance to assume with a horse's nose affixed to his chest.

"You heard me."

"I was hoping I didn't."

"But you did, pretty boy." Sam angled toward him and stuck her chin out in stubborn defiance.

Someday he'd find a way to make her quit calling him that. "Is it idiotic to expect a person to do his job?"

"He does do his job. He just has some interesting quirks."

"No shit." Carson frowned. His hands fell to his sides. He kept a wary eye on the mare as she bumped him with her nose.

"He's the best barn manager this place can afford."

"Did my brother hire him?" Gabbie nibbled on his collar, wadding most of it in her large mouth.

"On my recommendation."

"I assumed he was a criminal or some unsavory type by his behavior."

"Criminal? Are you nuts?" Her blood pressure rose with her temper. For once, Carson was grateful that the horse's large body shielded him from harm.

"Well, we really should know if he's acting in an official capacity or what." Carson didn't buy that Juan was a cop or an agent of some kind, but he wasn't willing to completely discount the possibility either.

"Butt out of my business. Don't you have something else to do? Like a tract of land to rape and pillage? A bunch of factory workers to lay off or loyal employees to give the boot without a retirement package? How about a virgin to deflower?"

Carson rubbed his chin. "I don't think I've ever done that." He knew he shouldn't be toying with her. Surely, he'd been possessed by some demon. Like an enraged lioness, she poised for the kill.

"You stupid, rich, spoiled, arrogant, obnoxious, self-absorbed, ignorant..." Her chest rose and fell in indignation, distracting him. *Damn.*

He jerked his eyes back to her face. "What's the matter? Running out of adjectives?" Now he'd done it.

She was primed for battle like a marine in a foxhole with the enemy in his sights.

If he wanted to live, he'd better apologize to her and Juan.

Carson held up his hands in mock surrender and inadvertently smacked the mare in the face. Gabbie released his soggy collar with an indignant snort. "Sam, I'm sorry. I really am. You're right. I had no business butting into the operation of this stable. Now would you mind getting this horse away from me?" The mare was snuffling at his shoulder. Then she attempted to remove a button from his polo shirt.

"Yes, I mind." She turned her back on him and started throwing brushes from her grooming kit.

"You're still mad at me." Carson pushed against the horse's chest. It was like pushing on a Sherman tank.

"Duh."

"Sam, please take this horse. I'll apologize to Juan."

She ignored him. He moved to one side. The mare effectively sidestepped and cut off his escape route.

"On bended knee..."

A brush whizzed past his head and hit the wall behind him. The mare snorted at the noise but didn't back away.

"...with an expensive bottle of wine."

"Tequila." Her movements weren't as jerky.

"Okay, Tequila."

She glanced over her shoulder. "I don't know. He's been known to hold a grudge for a long time, like close to eternity."

"Pleeeeeeaaase." Now she'd reduced him to begging.

"Obscenely expensive?"

"Yes."

"With a worm and everything?"

"Two worms."

"Three worms, and you have a deal."

"Three it is."

Heaving a sigh, Sam straightened and took the reins from him. She put the horse in reverse and it backed off a few feet. Carson darted out of range then regarded the two females with equal suspicion.

"I'd better get to work. I'm late, and now I'll have to change."

"Poor baby."

"You don't seem properly sympathetic."

Sam actually laughed. "You'd better go, Carson."

"Right," he nodded and strode down the aisle. He faked a cocky walk just to gain back a margin of pride.

* * * *

Sam watched him go. So what if he thought Juan's obsession with crime was legitimate? He deserved to be misled after his arrogant assumption that he could order her employees around. Yet, he'd been so adorable in his begging that he'd melted her fury faster than an ice cream cone in a fireplace. And she loved the way he was with Gabbie. His inability to deal with the mare made him more human.

She'd glimpsed something he hid well from the world, a vulnerability

she couldn't put her finger on. Yet, she'd witnessed its brief appearance with her own eyes. Knowing he had weaknesses and self-doubts made him all the more dangerous. She'd be wise to keep a distance. She didn't need a man mucking up her life. She had a goal to achieve and this time nothing would stop her.

Unfortunately, that very goal required her to suck up to this man in order to keep riding Gabbie. It was a small price to pay to keep the mare safe from the abuse of those who wouldn't understand her and to achieve one's dreams.

Every dressage rider who wasn't independently wealthy needed a rich sponsor. The sport cost too much money to compete at the top without that bottomless bankroll. Carson Reynolds appeared to have that type of dough, and Sam needed it.

The tack room door opened a crack, and her long-time friend and loyal student peeked his head out the door. Jaye Gordon had been born into old money back east. He'd moved out west after his blueblood parents discovered he was gay. Sam didn't know the details, and Jaye never talked about the situation. For a while he'd lived off a small trust fund and what he made selling horses. The trust fund had long since disappeared. Now Jaye imported horses from Europe and sold them to wealthy clients all over the Northwest while searching for the ultimate sugar daddy to support his expensive tastes. Despite his faults, Sam loved him like a member of her family.

"Is he gone?"

"Yes, he's gone."

"Did you dress him down properly? Not literally, of course." Jaye's infectious laughter vibrated through the barn. "Then again, I'd love to see that hunk naked."

Sam ignored that comment. "Yes. He's really sorry. He saw Juan hiding in a stall and assumed he was a burglar."

"He does appear suspicious with all his lurking about and such."

"Carson owes him an apology and a bottle of good tequila."

"If the tequila's good enough, Juan will get over it. You, my dear, need to milk this for all it's worth while you have the upper hand."

"Jaye, I'm not going to do that."

"One can't have a filthy rich, gorgeous man indebted to one without

seizing every opportunity.”

Sam giggled. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I know.” Jaye was silent for a moment. “Maybe you should consider your father’s offer to be his bookkeeper and leave this all behind you. Start fresh in a new career where no one knows your past. Even though that hot hunk has the hots for you...”

“He does not. Why would he be interested in me?”

“Why not?”

“Because he can see my faults as clearly as if they were displayed on Safeco Field’s electronic reader board. And he doesn’t like what he sees.”

“Yes, he does. Unfortunately, once little bitch sister fills him in on your past, you’ll be back to mucking stalls to make ends meet.”

“I know.” Jaye was right, and she hated to admit it. She’d never live down the past as long as those doubts remained in everyone’s minds.

“When’s she back from Europe?”

“Who knows with her. Could be tomorrow, could be next year. She’ll be dying to tell him every sordid detail. She won’t spring it on him right away. She’ll use it when it’s necessary, but not before. After all, timing is everything. Watch out for that one. She’s dangerous.”

“I know. Believe me, I know.” Sam managed a smile. “According to Juan, she’s not the only one.”

Jaye seemed to be all ears. He loved nothing better than good gossip. “Really? What makes you say that?”

“He keeps insisting that I’m in some kind of danger.”

“Does he give you any details?”

“Nope. Just that *they* think I know something.”

“They? Who are *They*?”

Sam shrugged.

“What could you know?”

She bit her tongue and chose not to tell him about what she did know or suspect. “I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

“You can’t recall anything about that night that might vindicate you?”

Sam shook her head and prayed she was better at lying than she was at organizing. “Nothing.”

Jaye dismissed the subject with a dramatic wave of his hand. “You’re letting him get to you. That man has a vivid imagination.”

“You’re telling me.”

“He seems to fancy himself an amateur private detective. I’d ignore him if I were you.”

“I’m trying.” She *was* trying. She really was, but what if Juan’s warnings had some validity

Then she’d be in deeper shit than she’d been in when she’d fled to Germany six years ago.

Chapter 8

The Brewery Blues

Carson didn't believe in coincidences, and a big one had just arranged a meeting with him in a swanky, downtown Seattle lounge.

"Can you give me some time?" Carson took a sip of his fine malt whiskey and tried to look nonchalant.

"How much time? I have buyers breathing down my neck right now. That's a prime downtown spot." Edward O'Brian toyed with the ivory handle of the cane he'd leaned against the table. He lifted his eyes and met Carson's. Ed's body might be failing, but that mind behind those piercing gray eyes didn't miss a thing. He knew how badly Carson wanted that brewery.

"Ed, you were business partners with my grandfather."

"That I was. I had the utmost respect for him, which is why I've come to you first. My price is beyond reasonable."

"I know. I can't dispute that."

"I wouldn't make this kind of offer to anyone else. I want you to have it."

"It's a generous offer, but I don't have that kind of cash or credit."

"You could turn around and double your money on the property in a day."

"This isn't about money, Ed, and you know it. It's about my obligation to my grandfather."

"Family always has been your Achilles heel, Carson. When will you live your life for you?"

"I have been this past year." Carson stared at the gold liquid in his glass.

"That's not how I see it."

"How *do* you see it?"

"I see you still living your life for them. Everything you do is geared

toward proving to your father that you're worthy, and he made a mistake."

Carson wanted to say bullshit, but that was hard to do to a man who was telling the truth so he steered the conversation back to the brewery. "My family shouldn't have sold that brewery."

"Your father sold it to me when the timber industry was going through some tough times."

"He thought you'd honor my grandfather's dream and continue with his plans. Instead, it has been allowed to rot for years."

"Times change, Carson, and as they say 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions.' I fell on hard times, too."

"But you hung onto it all this time and refused every offer. Why sell it now?"

"I need the money. Bad stock market investments and mismanaged funds by my CEOs in recent years have taken their toll." Now it was Ed's turn to study his scotch.

"Your CEOs are your sons."

"Stepsons. Spoiled and without my savvy for business. Do you know how many people depend on me for their livelihood? I won't see them out in the street as long as I'm alive. Like you, my weakness is also my family. I'm selling off everything before I die; then I'll split the proceeds between them. That leaves their greedy wives with nothing to fight over once I'm gone."

"I need some time. I wasn't prepared for this." What an understatement that was.

"Time is one thing I'm short on right now."

"I understand." Just one look at Ed's gaunt face and ragged breathing told Carson all he needed to know.

"Your father could get that kind of credit, Carson. Why don't you ask him?"

"Never." Carson fisted his hands. "I can't do that. Did my Dad set you up to do this?"

Ed smiled. "I can't imagine why he would do such a thing."

Carson could imagine, in fact, quite a bit. "Give me some time to formulate a plan."

"How much time?"

"Six months."

"I'll need a non-refundable amount of money to hold it for your protection as well as mine, Carson. If something happens to me, the vultures will swoop down and pick every bone clean. I want to sew this up tight as quickly as I can."

Carson frowned. He thought of the horse, not exactly a liquid asset, and took a huge gamble. "I can come up with \$250,000." It'd take a lien on every piece of equipment he owned and the equity in his condo. If the horse didn't sell in six months, he'd be ruined, and he'd lose the brewery. He was painting himself in a corner, and all roads led through his father's office, but he wasn't ready to concede defeat just yet.

"That's not much."

"It's the best I can do."

"If you don't pay the amount in full in six months, the down payment is forfeited."

"You're a shrewd businessman."

"Your grandfather wouldn't expect anything less from me."

And his father would be salivating at this recent turn of events. He had Carson right where he wanted him.

And *that* was no coincidence.

* * * *

Sam heard a car pull up outside. She glanced at the clock. It was almost 10:30 P.M. No one rode this late at night. She put down the bridle she was cleaning and peered out the door of the tack room. Carson's conservative black sedan was parked near the barn door under the security light. A car door slammed shut. He strode down the aisle talking animatedly on his cell phone. Not wanting to invade his privacy but trapped in the tack room, Sam flipped off the light, pulled back into the darkness, and peeked out the door as Carson walked by.

"Mom, I'm not trying to hurt Dad. No, I'm not being stubborn. No more than he is."

Stopping in front of Gabbie's stall, Carson drummed his fingers on the stall door. "No, I didn't throw his offer in his face. He presented it to me as if he was doing me a favor." Carson was silent for a long minute. His finger drumming grew more intense. Sam could make out Gabbie's expression in

the dim light. The big mare flattened her ears and gave Carson her best 'we are not amused' glare. After all, the man was interrupting the princess's beauty sleep. Sam had to cover her mouth to stifle a laugh.

Carson absently patted the annoyed mare's muzzle. One ear flicked forward. "If that was his way of making amends, you could've fooled me. Yes, I know how important this equestrian center is to you and Bridget." Carson nodded at no one. "I know. I know it's been a dream of yours for years. I'm not being selfish. I know how important Cedrona is to you, but he's setting me up. I know he is."

Carson jerked back his hand, as if he'd just realized that he was petting a horse. He turned and paced up and down the aisle. Sam ducked behind the doorjamb. She was trapped and blew out a sigh of relief when he didn't look her way. "I do care about you. Hell, I even care about Dad. Why can't I get through to you? I understand the financial issues. I know. I read the papers. I know we shut down our last sawmill and that three of our IT companies went under."

"Yeah, I heard that, too. Two developments that didn't get developed. Not good. I know."

Carson paced by again, not noticing the door was ajar. The anguish on his face surprised her. So the pretty boy had problems just like the common folk. Imagine that?

He muttered a few more indecipherable sentences and flipped the cell phone shut. His shoulders slumped, and his expression seemed baffled. Sam fought an urge to wrap her arms around him and absorb some of his pain. How utterly stupid. She wasn't the comforting type, and he wasn't the type to be comforted.

She heard more footsteps then heard Matt Brandland's voice. Dr. Matt was her long-time veterinarian and something of a friend. Carson had met him a few days ago. "Carson, what a surprise to find you here so late at night. Is everything okay?"

"I was going to ask the same of you. Making a house call?"

"Vets always make house calls. Our patients rarely come to us."

Carson chuckled. "I can imagine. Is there a problem with one of the horses?"

"Jaye had a horse with a bit of colic earlier. I'm just checking him out." Dr. Brandland peered into the stall next to Gabbie's. "He seems fine."

Sam strained to hear more as the voices faded down the aisle way. How odd Jaye hadn't mentioned an issue with one of his horses when she'd talked to him a few hours ago.

"Good night, Carson. I think I'll head off to bed."

Carson called goodnight. Sam peaked around the corner of the door. He stood near Gabbie's stall. He waited until the vet's truck drove down the driveway then reached in his pockets. He took out a breath mint and offered it to the mare. Gabbie sniffed at the strange offering and lipped it off his palm. She made a great show as she chewed it then frisked him with her big nose for more food. He laughed as she pushed at him. Carson stroked her neck and straightened her mane. Gabbie pressed her face into his shoulder. He leaned his head against her neck, talking in a low voice. It wasn't right to witness such a private moment between a man and his horse, but she couldn't make herself look away.

"You don't know how good you have it, girl." Carson straightened and scratched her behind the ears. "Who in the hell would've ever guessed I'd have a horse as a pet." He shook his head in disbelief, patted Gabbie one final time, and left the barn.

Sam heard the crunch of tires as he drove down the driveway.

Chapter 9

Family Ties That Bind and Choke

The next evening, Carson found himself in his brother's living room. He wished he'd done an unCarsonlike thing and feigned an acute illness caused by some air-born plague.

Harlee's rat dog, Igor, was perched on the nearby chair. The dog's beady little eyes assessed him as if he expected him to steal the silverware. He glared at the dog, and the little shit growled at him.

Carson brushed some lint—or was it dog hair—from the couch then decided to stand. He looked around the room at the seventies decor. An epitome of bad taste, Carson would've torched it if it'd been his. Yet, his sister-in-law didn't seem to notice, and his youngest brother didn't seem to care.

This big sprawling ranch house had been part of a grand estate in the sixties. Now it resembled a grand step back in time to a day when tacky was king, right down to the overdone Mediterranean cabinets, orange countertops, and avocado appliances. The only thing it had going for it was a view. Acres and acres of untouched farmland and forest spread in every direction. In the distance Mt. Rainier dominated the skyline. Views like this, once commonplace, were now rare in Western Washington.

Carson sipped his wine—he'd brought his own bottle—and stared out the window. Igor tapped his leg with one hairy paw, ready to make up. Carson bent down and absently scratched the ugly little canine, and wished he were anywhere else.

He'd accepted this invitation to dinner because Bridget was back from Europe. She'd expect nothing less than her brothers' full attention as she held court and recounted her adventures. To decline would have caused him more grief than it was worth.

Besides, after the encounter with Juan, the meeting with Ed, followed by

a guilt-ridden conversation with his mother, it was already a shitty week. He might as well end it on a lower note.

* * * *

Bridget didn't stop talking from the moment she walked in the door, which was fine with Carson. He ate the cholesterol-laden meal in relative peace. Harlee *could* cook, even if every bite hardened his arteries to the danger point.

Harlee served after-dinner drinks and dessert at the table. His sister's chattering fizzled, and she became unusually silent. His siblings cast nervous, covert glances at each other.

Only then did Carson clue in to trouble being afoot. He'd walked into a trap with no immediate way out. He braved the silence for several moments and waited for one of them to muster some courage. It didn't happen.

Carson sighed and accepted his fate. "Okay, spill it."

Bridget swallowed and wrung her hands. Brad tapped his foot, looked out the window, and whistled as if he hadn't a care in the world. Harlee concentrated on painting her fingernails bright red. Jake tipped a beer to his lips and gulped down half the bottle.

Carson had had enough. "Cut that out!" He placed his elbows on the table and leaned forward.

"Cut what out?" Jake put down his beer and looked at him.

"That. What you're doing." Carson pointed an accusing finger at his youngest brother.

"I'm not doing anything except drinking. But hey, that's me—the bad boy of the family."

"You're nervous. Around me of all people."

"I'm not nervous. Hell, I've known you all my life. You've never made me nervous." Jake twisted his napkin in knots as he avoided Carson's gaze.

"I am now for some reason." Carson's accusing glare took in all his siblings.

Brad slumped in his chair and studied the label on his beer. "Don't know what you're talking about."

"Dammit, quit treating me like a stranger. It's me, Carson, your big brother. Remember, the tight ass?"

Jake almost laughed. “Yeah, I remember.”

Carson pointed an accusing finger at his youngest brother. “I’m the guy that taught you how to play ball...”

“You told me to catch that damn football, or you’d ram it down my throat.”

Carson turned to Brad, the middle brother and Bridget’s twin. “And you how to fish...”

Brad sat up straighter. “You threatened to use me for bait.”

His sister was next. “And you how to swim...”

“You threw me in the deep end of the pool and waited for me to drown.”

“Well, you’re all here, aren’t you?”

“No thanks to you.” Brad grinned. “A guy can’t pick his relatives.”

“Guess not.” Carson pursed his lips. “What the hell is going on?”

The sibs exchanged guilty looks. Jake must have lost the silent contest of wills. “Car, we need to talk about Mom and Dad.”

Carson sighed with resignation. “I knew this was coming.” He just hadn’t expected it tonight. He’d counted on Bridget being selfish enough to insist the entire night revolve around her. It was a major miscalculation on his part.

“You know Dad’s not well.” Bridget’s accusatory tone made him feel as if he was personally responsible. *So far, so bad.*

“Yeah, so I hear.” Now he was the one picking at the label on his beer and cheap beer at that. The twins had wolfed down his bottle of good wine before he’d had more than a sip.

“Well, he had another incident a few days ago. He ended up spending the night in the hospital.”

A few days ago? After they’d had their little discussion? Carson stuffed his guilt into a box and sat on it, attempting to silence that annoying and persistent voice. That particular emotion had become far too familiar to him lately. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“His doctor says he needs to cut back. He’s under severe stress with ReynCorp doing so poorly and all.” For extra effect, Bridget wiped a lone tear from her cheek. “Mom wants him to retire, but he won’t. Not without someone he trusts taking over the reins.”

Jake rose to his feet and gave Carson another beer. As if getting him drunk would make any difference. “You have to come back.”

“You—” Carson stood and poked Jake in the chest, but his younger brother held his ground. “—have to rise to the occasion. Handle it. All of you. Not me. I’m out of it.”

“You’d endanger Dad’s health for your own selfish revenge?”

“Bridget, revenge has nothing to do with it.”

“How can you be so cold-hearted, Carson?” His sister, in full drama queen mode, sniffed and wiped another tear.

“I’m not. He doesn’t want me.” Carson leaned against the china cabinet, crossed his arms over his chest, and regarded them with irritation.

“He all but begged you to come back.” Jake accused.

“Who told you that?”

“Mom. She’s disappointed in you.”

“Mom put you up to this, didn’t she?” The siblings exchanged knowing looks. “Why isn’t she here instead of the Reynolds Gang?”

Three sets of shoulders shrugged, while three sets of eyes looked everywhere but at him.

“Why didn’t she call me and tell me about Dad?”

Again, there was no answer.

“I did see him last Friday night. He did ask me to come back, take over Cedrona, but he wasn’t even close to begging. In fact, quite the opposite.” Carson sat down on the edge of his chair, leaned forward, and pierced each of them with a homicidal glare.

“Well, with Dad it’s hard to tell. He probably was begging. After all, the health of The Empire is at stake.” Brad had christened Reynolds Enterprises “The Empire” when they’d been small kids. Back then it’d been the Evil Empire because it devoured their father’s every waking hour and kept him away from home; now it appeared to be devouring his health, too.

“Don’t you understand? Any of you? I can’t do it. I can’t work with him again. One of you can step up to the plate.” Carson addressed Jake. “If you don’t want to do it, let Brad.”

“Brad’s too irresponsible.” Jake pointed out.

“Now, wait a minute.” Brad stepped in to complain. “That’s not true. I just have some big projects that need my attention. You’re the one, big brother.”

“Forget it. How about you, Bridget?” As if he didn’t already know that answer.

“Bridget’s too flakey.” Both brothers responded in unison.

“I am not—”

Brad cut her off. “Okay, fine. If you won’t do it for Dad or us, do it for your own gain. Money, for one. Besides,” Brad had an evil gleam in his eye. “you, dear big brother...” Brad spread his arms wide to take in the room and the great outdoors. “...would enjoy hoofing it with nature.”

Not a great choice of words in Carson’s opinion. “Sorry. This is not for me. I’m a city boy. Dust makes me sneeze, and I can’t stand the smell of horses. Give me smog any day.”

“Yeah, well, you sure find reasons to hang around here.” Leave it to Jake to expose his weakness.

“I’m protecting my investment.”

“Bullshit.”

Bridget sniffled and grabbed Jake’s arm. “I knew this was a mistake. We’ll have to make it without him.” Her eyes gleamed with wet tears. She looked up at Carson. “I’m sorry, Carson. It’s too much to impose on you like this. Please forgive us.”

Carson narrowed his eyes. Bridget was such an excellent actress; he often had a hard time determining her sincerity. Another tear slid down her cheek, formed a drop on her chin, and fell to the floor. “Daddy’s going to die if we don’t relieve the pressure and rescue The Empire.” She choked back a convincing sob.

“It’s okay, Bridge, we’ll figure out something. We’ll stick together and find a way without Carson.” Brad patted her shoulder and adopted a concerned expression. “After all, we *are* family.” The accusing arrow he shot his oldest brother hit its mark. Guilt stabbed through Carson’s body. Obviously, their mother wasn’t the only one who was good at dishing out the guilt.

“Poor Daddy.” Bridget wailed as if someone had murdered her best friend. Huge tears rolled down her cheeks. “He’s not going to make it another year with the stress he’s been under. And Mom, she won’t be able to survive without Daddy. We’ll all be orphans. But I understand. You have your pride to think about.” Bridget buried her face in her twin’s shoulder and bawled like a sick calf.

Carson’s stomach lurched despite his sister’s overdone dramatics. No one in the family had ever been able to deny the Reynolds’ family princess

when she turned on the tears.

Okay, heel time. As in he was a big one. All he had to do was oversee the building of an equestrian center for a year. It couldn't be that difficult. There was the small matter of the budget and the not-so-small matter of dealing with Bridget, but he could do both and prove his mettle in the process. If he pulled this off, his dad would never be able to deny his abilities.

Hell, when he'd been with ReynCorp, he'd built multi-million dollar office buildings and luxury condos. Horses would be no-brainer clients. Literally. This would be child's play. He'd get outside a little, too, maybe get a real tan. He hadn't tanned since his college baseball days. Besides, his guilt could use a reprieve. As an added bonus, he'd see to it the brewery was part of the deal—somehow. ReynCorp might be in a financial bind right now, but his dad still had clout. With his backing, he'd be able to swing financing. It was a win-win, right?

"Okay, I'll—"

Brad interrupted him. "You're wasting your tears, Bridget. Carson doesn't have the guts."

"What?" His brief feeling of goodwill vanished in a haze of anger.

Brad blew him off and turned to Jake. "It's just like Dad said. Carson's not a risk-taker. He won't move out of his comfort zone. Everything has to be safe, tidy, and a proven moneymaker. Cedrona will require determination and imagination to make it work. Good ol' Car isn't exactly proficient in those areas."

"Now wait a minute. I said I'd—"

"Yeah, I know," Jake agreed. "Sorry, Car, we shouldn't ask you to take chances. We know you aren't comfortable in that type of situation."

About ready to spit nails, Carson fumed. "I *said* I'd do it! Damn it!"

The siblings froze, as if they couldn't believe he'd given in that easily. For a split second, silence reigned, but Bridget cracked first. Emotional control had never been her forte.

"Oh, Carson!" His sister flew at him and threw her arms around his neck. All traces of tears had vanished. "This is so wonderful. I can't wait to tell you about Mom's and my plans for the place. We have such grand ideas."

"Yeah, and no money," Carson reminded her dryly.

"We'll get money. I'm looking into grants and investors. Just wait. You'll see."

"Grants? For an elite horse facility that caters to the wealthy?"

Bridget shrugged.

The brothers crowded around, pushing Bridget out of the way and slapping him on the back.

"I knew you wouldn't back down from a real challenge, Bro," Jake grinned and turned to Brad, holding out his hand. "Pay up, Brad. I win."

Shit, they'd actually bet on his response. Brothers, you can't live with them, and you can't murder them.

Jake pumped Carson's hand. "Carson, you'll love it here. It's so much more peaceful than your downtown condo."

"And your spirit needs a rest," Bridget added. Her hysterics had mysteriously disappeared the moment he'd caved.

"Huh? My spirit likes asphalt, traffic noise, and crowds." Carson's eyes narrowed with suspicion as he regarded his siblings. He must have heard them incorrectly.

"Really. You'll love it here."

"I'm not staying here." Carson's gaze swept the tacky room with distaste. He hated orange.

"Someone in the family needs to stay here. We're moving out this weekend. It's all yours. It'll be much better with you on-site."

"Where are you going?"

"Harlee and I are spending the next year in the San Juans while I work on some projects for ReynCorp."

"It'll be a working vacation," Harlee added.

"That's nice, I'm happy for you, but I'm not staying here. I'm just building a barn and horse arena. Nothing else."

"Oh, we forgot to mention that you're overseeing the current business, too. You'll need to be nearby."

"What's wrong with Juan?"

"Besides the obvious?"

"I'm sure that doesn't affect his job performance."

"He manages the day-to-day stuff, such as seeing that all the stalls are cleaned and the horses turned out and fed. All you have to worry about is the maintenance and the financial aspects. There's really not much to do."

The place practically manages itself. In the meantime, you'll get a good feel for how an equestrian center runs firsthand. It's valuable experience for the new facility."

"Bridget can do it. She's the horsewoman."

"Oh, no, I can't. You want me to manage money? I'm flakey and irresponsible. You've said so yourself, many times. Don't worry. I'll offer plenty of advice."

"But, I—"

Jake pressed the house key in Carson's hand and shoved him out the door. "You can move in anytime next weekend. We'll leave the furniture for you."

The door slammed in Carson's face. He heard a cheer on the other side of the door. He'd been had. His family had sucked him back into their affairs. And damn, it felt good. It also felt terrifying.

Chapter 10

Going for a Ride

“He’s going to be living in *your* house on *this* property?” Sam propped her hands on her hips and stared at her friend.

“He wasn’t thrilled at first but he finally agreed to it.” Harlee smiled in triumph, as if she was making Sam’s day instead of ruining it. “He has to work out the details with his father, but that’s just a formality.”

“Harlee, I’ll take care of the place. He doesn’t need to stay here.”

“I can’t impose on you like that. Your teaching and training come first. It’s just too much.”

Not nearly as much as Carson living up the hill from her. *That* was too much. The thought made Sam cringe. He’d probably attempt to rid the barn of dirt. “You’re leaving me alone with that man? Even worse, his sister?”

Harlee grinned. She was getting way too much of a kick out of this. “He’s great with finances.”

“I don’t care if he’s Midas himself. I can’t have him underfoot all the time ordering me around.” She’d see to it that he knew his place and stayed out of her business. After all, whatever game he was playing, he didn’t need a woman for anything more than a friend. “I’m not thrilled about this.”

“You’ll be perfectly safe with Carson on the property. He might seem a little finicky, but he’s pretty handy when he puts his mind to it.”

“Carson? Handy? We can’t be talking about the same guy.” Sam threw back her head and laughed. She doubted he knew which end of a hammer to use.

Harlee just shrugged. “Cedrona is back on track. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“I’m happy about that part, just not the Carson-in-my-backyard part.”

“He’ll be a great neighbor, wait and see. You’ll be surprised.” Harlee glanced at her watch. “I hate to drop this on you and take off, but I need to

get back to packing. We're leaving in a few days. Is there anything you need?"

"Not that you can help me with."

"You have my numbers. You can call me."

Sam watched Harlee as she escaped from the barn and almost ran up the road. What was she going to do with Carson living so close and butting into her business all the time? This was a disaster in the making. She should have stayed in Germany and... And what? Been a groom the rest of her life? Maybe if she'd been lucky, ride a few auction horses for prospective buyers.

Sam sighed. No, this had been the right choice. She had to face her demons and win. Someone knew something, and it was up to her to find out.

Yeah, but she could have chosen a different barn.

Her eyes slid to the foundation of the old barn. She was crazy to torture herself everyday with the reminder of that tragedy. Did people believe that coming back here was her way of doing penance and atoning for her sins? Except, they weren't her sins. She'd known it all along. After those two phone calls, someone else knew it, too.

Juan? Or was he being his usual paranoid self, and it had nothing to do with her. No one knew why she'd come back to the States, not even Jaye, her closest friend. No one that is except for an anonymous person on the other end of the line six months past. Was it the same as the person from a few days ago? If not, then there were two people who knew something.

She had to find the smoking gun, that vital shred of information that would prove beyond any doubt that she hadn't been responsible.

She might be careless and messy, but never when it came to the horses' well-being and safety. Never. Only on little things, things that didn't count, like washing her white show clothes before a show or polishing her boots or spit-shining her tack or...

"Samantha?"

Sam whipped around at the sound of that familiar voice. A not-so-welcome ghost from her past stood less than three feet away.

"Reliving old memories? You *are* a glutton for punishment." The tall, blond man indicated the overgrown area that had been the focus of her thoughts. "I can't believe you had the guts to come back to the scene of the crime."

"Hans." Sam's defensive instincts kicked in, and she backed up a step.

“What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see if the rumors I heard were true. “I can see they are. Welcome to the area.” He smiled his smooth, cultured smile. His deep voice vibrated with the German accent he’d perfected years ago. She knew it was BS. Without a doubt, he was of German descent, had spent time in Germany, but he’d been born and raised in the US. While in his employ, she’d heard him speak in anger without a trace of an accent many times.

“It’s a little late for that. I’ve been back for months.”

“So I understand. I just returned from Florida—where all the best dressage riders and trainers spend their winters—so my greeting is as timely as I can make it.”

He didn’t have to tell her what wintering in Florida meant to a dressage rider. It meant you were at the top of your game, rubbing elbows with Olympic medalists and heiresses. In Florida, a \$100,000 horse was either a mediocre horse or a bargain. Judging from his bronzed skin and healthy glow, Florida had been good to him. The man didn’t look a day over thirty-five, though he was a good fifteen to twenty years older than that.

“Well, now that you’ve fulfilled your duty, I have work to do.” Sam turned to leave, but Hans’ fingers tightened around her arm. She shook off his hand and glared at him.

“Not so fast, Samantha.”

“What do you want with me? Haven’t you extracted enough blood? You crucified me with our friends and clients, ruined my reputation, drove me away from my home, and took away all my business.”

“I was emotionally distraught. I wasn’t thinking.” Hans grinned, that old grin that used to make her grovel at his feet for a little attention. Now she felt nothing but disgust. “I suspect you miss working with me. We were a good team.”

"Sure we were. I did all the work, you got all the credit and the glory."

He raised one eyebrow. "Still holding a grudge, I see."

“A *GRUDGE*? You condemned me! I thought you believed in me. No one felt as badly about that fire as I did, but you couldn’t be satisfied with that, could you? You had to lay blame, drive the final nail in my coffin. You destroyed everything I’d built and worked for my entire life.”

“You’re being over-dramatic. You could have stayed and taken the heat—no pun intended. Instead, you ran like a coward.”

“That’s not fair, and you know it.”

“Do I? I lost everything in that accident, too, Samantha, but all you could think about was your own losses.” His tone switched to its superior, lecturing mode. God, he’d lectured her one too many times.

“I begged you to believe me.”

He shrugged, as if her words were of no consequence. But then it’d always been that way between them. Hans had been the swan and she’d been the ugly duckling that never became a swan. All his swanky friends swarmed around him, invited him to all the right parties, and catered to his every whim. She’d stayed behind, caring for his horses and living with the knowledge that she didn’t measure up to his exacting standards. He never once invited her to go with him. He’d been ashamed of her, even though she’d been his star pupil.

“I have work to do, Hans. I’m sure you understand.”

“Are you asking me to leave?”

“Would a boot in the butt be more obvious?”

His blue eyes went from warm to icy in a microsecond, demonstrating one of his most “charming” traits. “Good bye for now, Ms. McIntyre. I’ll be back. Admit it, you need me. Without me as your coach, you won’t make it as a rider. You don’t have what it takes to do it on your own. You’re too self-destructive and insecure. All the latent talent in the world can’t overcome your deficiencies.”

“Thank you for that generous evaluation. Pardon me if I don’t pay you for it. Now, I think you should leave.” Sam’s fingernails dug into her palms as she clenched her fists tighter.

“Do your new clients know about your penchant for carelessness? What about your employer? I hope their insurance is paid up on the horses and the facility.”

“Go!” Sam’s voice rose to a screech. Her fingers itched to wrap themselves around that stubborn neck of his and wring some compassion into it. “Out! Now, damn it, before I turn you into a gelding!”

Hans watched her outburst without emotion and raised one perfect eyebrow, reminding her of Carson. He seemed satisfied that he could still get to her. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. I’ll be back, and it’ll be by invitation—yours or someone else’s.” Turning on his heel, he strode to his car without a backward glance.

Sam watched him leave. She couldn't have moved if she'd been in the path of a speeding train. His callous behavior knew no limits. She'd seen it over and over again with clients and working students. He slit her open and left her bleeding, but she wouldn't allow him to deal a fatal blow. She was stronger than that.

She couldn't turn back time and stop what happened that night. Heaven only knew how many times she'd wished to be able to do just that. Not only had clients' horses been killed, but she'd lost her beloved horse in that fire. Cipher had been her partner, her best friend, and her last link to her mother. A tear trickled down her cheek. Damn it. She didn't cry. That was for weak-willed women, and she wasn't one of those.

Sam forced herself to focus on matters she could control. How dare he insinuate that she would be nothing without him? Six years in Germany with a top trainer had taught her a lot about riding. She wasn't that same scared, insecure, naïve little girl he'd known and manipulated.

Besides, she'd been back six months and managed to build up a moderately healthy business for herself despite the damage the fire had done to her reputation. In fact, several of her clients had been with Hans before he'd left for a winter in Florida. That thought gave her smug satisfaction, but it was short-lived. The man was a magician when it came to horses. He could hop on a plow horse and make it look like an Olympic champion in a half-hour. Okay, she was exaggerating, but not much. At one time, Hans had been a powerful ally. Now, he was her competition and possibly her enemy. No matter. She could do it without him. She'd make Gabbie into a winner. He'd see. They'd all see. But a small voice of insecurity nagged at her, the one Hans knew how to play like a fine-tuned instrument. What if he was right? What if she couldn't do it alone?

* * * *

Sam heard a noise in the barn aisle. Feeling and behaving every inch the coward, she stepped back into the darkness of a stall in case it was Hans coming back for round two.

She peeked around the corner. Carson walked down the aisle carrying a bottle of tequila. He almost smiled when he saw her. Her heart did something weird. If she'd been prone to such things, she'd say it fluttered,

but that couldn't be possible.

"Who's the guy pulling out of the driveway?"

"Oh, him?" She dismissed Hans with a wave of her hand. "Just a former acquaintance and a local trainer. He came to welcome me back to the area."

Carson's sharp eyes didn't miss a thing. "I don't think it was a positive experience."

Sam shrugged and gestured at the bottle in his hand. "Is that for Juan?"

"Yes, it's my peace offering."

She laughed. "Is it a good bottle of tequila?"

He held it up for her inspection. Sam stared at the label, which didn't mean a thing to this country girl. "So, does that mean it's good?"

"The best." He grinned, as if quite proud of himself. She felt a pinch of pleasure that she'd caused him to smile, even if only for a brief moment.

"Juan will be pleased."

"He should be." He met her eyes, and her heart did its telltale flip-flop. She cleared her throat and busied herself by sweeping the aisle. Carson dogged her every step.

His grin grew broader and cockier. "Admit it. You think I'm okay."

Sam grimaced and tried to turn away. Carson put a hand on her arm and navigated her around to face him. She held the broom in front of her like a shield.

He grinned. "Oh, yeah, you do. It's killing you to admit it, but you do like me."

"What difference does it make?"

"Well, it does make working together a little easier."

"Nothing is going to make working with you any easier, especially with you breathing down my neck 24-7."

"So Harlee told you the news?"

"Yes, about an hour ago."

"I expect your utmost cooperation."

"Nothing less, sir," Sam clicked her heels together, tapped her broom on the ground, and saluted.

"Kissing my feet is adequate."

She considered telling him to kiss her ass, but he'd probably take her up on it just to be contrary. Why derail a good argument with a teaser like that?

"I'll need some background on dressage and equine facilities. You can

assist with that.”

Sam sighed. The only assistance she wanted was to assist him in leaving her barn. “Sure, when do you want to start?”

“Have you eaten?”

“No, not yet. I’m just finishing up here.”

“Me neither. Let’s start now, over dinner. I’m starved. I’ll even treat.”

“Carson, are you sure you want to do that? You must have other places to be.”

“No. Not really. Why would I want to be anywhere else when I can be here trading insults with you?”

She found it hard to believe that he didn’t have better things to do. Yet if that was the case, he’d be doing them, not standing in a horse barn with an expensive bottle of tequila and a cheap date. Of course, he hadn’t asked her on a date. He’d asked her to dinner for business reasons. She’d be wise not to read anymore into it than that.

“Give me a moment to take a quick shower and change.” She leaned the broom against the wall and combed her fingers through her tangled hair.

“I’ll wait in the car. I need to make a few calls anyway.”

Sam took the steps to her apartment two at a time. Stripping on her way to shower, she left a trail of dirty clothes through the living room, hallway, and bathroom.

The warm water did little to sooth the wild hammering of her heart. This guy did it to her like no other man she could recall. Jeez oh criminy. She didn’t need to be some lonely rich guy’s temporary entertainment. Yet, he was part owner of her dream horse and soon-to-be financial manager and developer of this facility. She’d be wise to cultivate a professional friendship with him. But what she really wanted was to cultivate something else.

Her riding demonstration a few days ago hadn’t impressed him. When the new facility was complete in a year, she wanted to be the head trainer. Harlee and Jake had hinted that she would be, but nothing was set in concrete. She suspected Carson would have a say in it, too. There was also his sister. Unfortunately, Sam knew where she stood with her, and it wasn’t in her good graces.

Fifteen minutes later, she slid into the passenger seat of his Jaguar sedan.

"I've never known a woman to get ready that quickly." He cast a quick look in her direction before starting the engine.

"Well, you've never known this woman." Sam pushed her still wet hair out of her eyes and did a quick check of her jeans and t-shirt. She breathed a sigh of relief that she'd grabbed from the clean pile, not the dirty pile.

"Regardless, it's a rare and admirable trait." Carson raised one perfect black eyebrow and smiled, a real smile that reached his eyes. God help her, the man was just about the best thing in slacks when he smiled like that.

This was not good. She didn't have much experience with men in a romantic sense. She'd spent her life with horses and four brothers. Neither was conducive to a long-term boyfriend, which explained why she was reading too much into this and feeling like a teenybopper with a crush.

"Where to?" Sam pictured one of those snooty places where there weren't any prices on the menus and the waiter insisted you sniff the wine cork.

"You decide," he offered magnanimously. "I can be flexible and creative."

"But it's your treat." She could be magnanimous, too.

"All the more reason for you to decide."

Sam considered that for a minute. All right, she'd take the pretty boy to a place where he'd be a fish out of water and see how he fared with her type of people. "Have you ever been to Character's Corner?"

"Is that a restaurant?"

"Of sorts." She bit her lip to contain the wicked laughter that bubbled inside her.

His quick glance betrayed his suspicion of her motives. She'd make tonight an unforgettable experience. Even better, just in case he was getting ideas about them heating the sheets together, this place would discourage him and, hopefully, her. Once he walked in the door, it'd be painfully obvious how little they had in common on a personal level.

"Which way?" He glanced at her for direction. She'd give him directions, all right.

"Hang on, pretty boy, this country girl's taking you for a ride."

Chapter 11

Characters in a Corner

The second he pulled into the parking lot, Carson regretted Sam picking the spot.

The obnoxious twang of country music blared throughout the rustic old building and sounded like two alley cats fighting in a garbage can. The place smelled of stale beer and cigarette smoke. The tables were done in mud brown Formica and the seating consisted of old wooden chairs with no padding. In one corner several bikers played pool; in another corner a rowdy group of young men cheered and groaned over a baseball game displayed on the plasma screen TV.

Sam chose a table away from the action and plopped into a battered chair. Carson followed suit, not that he had any other options.

“Hey, Sam, the usual?” The fat, balding combination waiter/bartender grinned at Sam, displaying his few remaining teeth.

“Sounds good, George.”

“Only the best for my Sam.” George scribbled on his pad and swung his critical gaze to Carson. After looking him up and down, he grimaced. “You ain’t gonna ask for one of them fancy microbrews, are ya?”

Carson’s mouth snapped shut. George tapped his pencil on his order pad and stared at him with censure. Carson imagined what George saw: a man in a pristine white polo shirt, slacks with a perfect crease down the middle, polished leather shoes, and a Rolex watch. He squirmed a bit as he realized how out of place he must appear.

“No, I’ll take a Henry’s.” Carson forced an affable smile on his face. He could play the good ol’ boy part when needed.

George wasn’t buying it. “I suppose you’ll be wantin’ a glass.”

“I can drink from a bottle.” Carson leaned on the table, striking a casual pose. His elbows stuck to it.

“Saints of mercy, thank the Lord for that.” George harrumphed and walked off.

“Slumming it, huh?” Sam slanted him a teasing glance that lit up her golden eyes with mischief. Their gazes locked. His body reacted, while his head sounded the red alert. He yanked himself from the brink just as he felt himself diving in headfirst.

“Do you come here often?” Carson took a paper napkin from the holder and attempted to wipe off the table.

“Often enough.” Sam held her head up high and presented him with a level gaze. “This is my kind of place.”

“I noticed.” At least his parents would never find him in a place like this. His father’s lackeys had been attempting to track him down ever since that fateful dinner with his siblings last night. He’d stayed one step ahead of them all day. Granted, another talk with Dad was inevitable, but Carson needed a little more time to plan his strategy.

George slammed a bottle of Henry’s in front of him and a glass of beer in front of Sam. The man gave the table a few swipes with a wet rag and sauntered off. Carson’s elbows still stuck to the table.

“Why is this *your* kind of place?”

“It’s cheap, and the beer’s cold. I also know most of the regulars.”

“Well, that’s what counts.” Carson flinched as the jukebox volume doubled. He glared at the idiots pumping quarters into the thing then turned to Sam. “Next time I pick the place.”

Sam shrugged, but amusement lit up her eyes. The evil witch was enjoying his discomfort.

“Did that song just say what I thought it said?”

“What did you think it said?”

“Something about saving a horse and riding a cowboy.”

“Yep, that’s what it said, buckaroo.”

“I’m not a cowboy,” Carson said loftily. “You know how I feel about horses, and I haven’t owned a pair of cowboy boots since my childhood.”

“Too bad, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

“Nor do I care.”

Sam leaned across the small table until her face was inches away. “Loosen up, Carson.”

Carson shook his head and sat back. *Fat chance.* The last time he’d

loosened up, he'd paid for it the rest of the weekend, thanks to brother Brad.

Sam sipped her beer then placed it on the table. "Tell me about your day."

Carson studied the beer bottle. Oddly enough, he wanted to tell her. "I've been shanghaied into rescuing a sinking ship with no more than duct tape and sticky notes to repair a hole the size of a Volkswagen." The words slipped from his mouth before he could stomp on the brakes.

"It's amazing what a person can do with duct tape."

"It can't fix this."

"Cedrona?"

Carson nodded. "My whole family is conspiring against me. It wasn't an issue before..." Carson hesitated.

"Before what?"

"Before my dad had a heart attack. After that everything changed." Carson drained his beer in one long gulp.

"Like what?" Sam swallowed the last of hers and signaled George for another round.

"I don't know him anymore. It's like my dad's gone, and this stranger took his place. We used to understand each other, have this special bond. Now, we barely converse, let alone in a civil manner." Carson shrugged, unable to find the words to explain his confusion. "Even weirder, Mom and Dad have always had this 'you go your way and I'll go mine' relationship. Now, they're madly in love with each other, which makes them insufferable. Mom wants everyone to have what she has."

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"It is when she tries to ram it down your throat. You see, I think they're trying to make up for all that time when we were kids, and they barely noticed our existence. It's disconcerting to have them meddling in my life. My sister's bad enough." Carson took a deep breath and plowed onward, filling her in on the details. She listened—really listened—and didn't pass judgment or give opinions. She just let him talk. And talk he did. More than he'd ever planned on telling her or anyone else in his life for that matter. He left out the small detail that his sister wanted her fired.

When he finished, she offered no hollow words of sympathy or encouragement. Instead, she reached out and squeezed his hand. "You can do it."

For a brief moment, he felt better, as if she gave him strength and raised that dark cloud of doubt that surrounded him. This warm feeling trickled through his body and left him feeling content.

That moment passed. Thank God. He didn't need her strength. He had enough of his own, and he'd get through on his own. Carson pulled his hand away from hers.

He didn't know why he'd been compelled to spill his guts to this particular woman. In fact, her ability to get beneath his surface petrified him. He'd said too much and opened doors best kept closed. "We've been talking about me all night. You seem out of sorts." Carson steered the conversation to her. After all, it was only fair. She'd been listening to him blabbering for close to an hour. He'd said more than enough.

Sam shrugged. "I'm fine. Just a little tired. It's been a long week."

Carson didn't believe her. "What's going on?"

She smiled. "Nothing you can fix, cowboy."

She might be right there. Lately, he wasn't much good at fixing his own life, let alone screwing with someone else's.

* * * *

"You don't need to follow me upstairs." Sam glanced at Carson over her shoulder as she bounded up the steps to her apartment, anxious to put some space between the two of them. "Thanks for dinner."

"Sam, you're forgetting something," Carson called after her.

Turning, Sam noticed her sweater dangling on his index finger. "Oh, sorry." She hurried down the stairs to grab it. Her foot missed a step; she skidded, fell forward, and grasped for a handhold.

Instead of a handhold, she slammed into Carson a few steps below her. The force of her gravity-bound body catapulted him backward. He held on to her as his backside slammed into the opposite wall, halting his backward progress. Sam's knees crumpled from the impact. Unable to keep his balance and support her added weight, Carson slid down the wall. His butt hit the ground with a thud.

Sam's breath was knocked out of her. She crumpled into a bruised heap straddling his lap with her head buried in his chest. Her empty lungs fought for oxygen until her breathing came in grateful, ragged gasps.

Carson's chest rumbled under her ear. He must be talking to her, but she couldn't hear the words. The rumbling continued. Her brain finally registered it as laughter. His. And she was making an idiot of herself. Jerking her head upward, she clipped his chin. Carson yelped something unintelligible.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt—" His intent expression stopped her brain in its tracks. He wasn't laughing anymore. Deep-set eyes as blue as a cloudless sky penetrated her defenses and stripped her emotions bare.

"You *are* a walking disaster, Woman. Are you okay?" His husky voice reverberated through the empty barn aisle.

Sam nodded, still dazed. Her survival instincts kicked in and warned her to run for safety. She pushed against his chest with her palms. Carson's muscles flexed under her hands, hard and toned. The man was ripped, and she'd so hoped his expensive clothes had concealed a soft body. Wouldn't you know he'd have a perfect body to go with that perfect face and perfect tight ass?

She pushed again. He didn't budge. She opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind for toying with her. "Let me g—"

It didn't happen. Instead, Carson's face moved closer. Her face moved closer. His eyes grew darker, more focused. He held her tighter. The world spun a web around them, shutting out her doubts, tamping down her fears, and wrapping her in warmth that kept out the cold of loneliness. A special tapestry was woven around them made up of who they were, had been, and would be.

The world ceased as she knew it, and her life changed in one fleeting second.

Did he feel it, too, this incredible *thing* between them? Sam held her breath and attempted to still her pounding heart. Her body didn't listen any better than her common sense did.

His lips hovered so close they breathed the same air. She wrapped her arms around his neck. Her fingers slipped into his black hair, silky to the touch. She'd figured such perfection required a gallon of hairspray. He must be blessed with hair that did exactly as he commanded it. Not that she was surprised.

Carson moved closer and banished her thoughts of hairspray with his presence. The faint scent of his expensive cologne, mixed with his clean

masculinity, assaulted her senses. The man's eyes locked on her lips. She shivered, and her body leaned into his, refusing to behave. An unmistakable hardness rubbed against her crotch. She pressed against him, needing more. He groaned and held her tighter. That strong, firm mouth touched hers, moist and inviting. It softened and shaped to her lips. No tongue, just an achingly gentle pressure gliding from one corner of her mouth to the other. Yet, it was the most sensuous kiss she'd ever experienced. Sam parted her lips and waited for more. Her eyelids fluttered shut. She floated somewhere between reality and fantasy, and she never wanted to leave. She clung all the tighter and ran her tongue along his upper lip.

He moaned, the deep, guttural moan of a man losing control and so unlike him.

"Shit." He stiffened underneath her. She nuzzled him again, teasing his mouth with her lips and tongue, begging him to let her inside. "Sam. No." He drew back and loosened his grip on her body. He looked as flustered as she felt, most likely an unfamiliar emotion to him.

He took a deep breath as if to gather his composure. "You okay?" His voice sounded rough and husky, even a little shaky.

His eyes studied her face, looking for something. Her stunned expression seemed to amuse him and restore a measure of his confidence. An almost smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. Then his mask of cool professionalism slipped into place, and her heart sank.

She searched for a sassy retort and was unable to find any, so she just nodded. Underneath those expensive clothes, perfect hair, and cultured manners lurked a real man. She'd just had a taste of him. Unfortunately, she wanted more because she had a major sweet tooth where he was concerned. This wouldn't—couldn't—do.

He released her from his arms. For a split second she didn't move and just stared into his eyes.

He cleared his throat.

She stared.

He cleared his throat again and looked pointedly downward at Sam spread-eagled across his lap. Heat spread through her cheeks, and she scrambled to her feet. Carson stood with an easy grace that contradicted his hard fall and hard on. He looked cool and unruffled, as if that kiss hadn't shaken his world the way it shook hers, yet she was certain it had. He

leisurely brushed the dirt from his slacks. Taking her arm, he helped her up the stairs.

Sam tried to insert her key in the lock, but the dang thing didn't want to fit in that little hole. Carson took the key from her hand. His thumb lingered for one slow, lazy circle on her palm. He managed to unlock the door, yet his fingers seemed as unsteady as hers.

"Not bad for a pretty boy, huh?"

She couldn't let him see how much he'd affected her. "Not bad, but I've had better," she lied. There was no reason to inflate the man's already over-inflated ego.

His expression hardened. Something that looked like hurt flashed across his face. "Good night, Sam." Giving her a final, unreadable look, he stalked down the stairs and out of the barn.

Sam stared after him, not seeing a thing in her mind except deep blue eyes that revealed just a hint of gentleness before reverting to their stern camouflage. No way could he have believed her last statement. A man like that had to know the effect he had on women.

She touched a finger to her lips as if she could still feel his presence. Something beautiful and fragile fluttered inside her like a butterfly struggling to be released from its cocoon.

* * * *

Gabbie had watched as the two humans engaged in some odd courting ritual. She tossed her head and offered a disapproving snort. Too bad humans didn't have tails. All a mare had to do was swish her tail in a stallion's face. He got the point. After which a couple well-placed kicks kept him in line. Horses didn't have to do all that groping, moaning, and slobbering on each other.

Chapter 12

The Interfering Sister

Carson threw the last of the suitcases onto the mauve bedspread in the master bedroom of the ranch house. He hated mauve. It clashed with the orange carpet and gold drapes. Not to mention, the Mediterranean bathroom cabinets needed to be thrown into the Mediterranean. Just looking at the room's color combinations made him queasy and insulted his discriminating tastes. It also reconfirmed his belief that his baby brother was color blind, love blind, or both.

It was summer. Thank God. He'd spend most of his time outside. Already this place was ruining his appetite.

The dreaded meeting earlier that morning with his father had been blessedly brief. Dear old Dad had been all business. They'd discussed salary, benefits, the Cedrona budget—or lack of, and the terms of his employment, which included assistance in purchasing the brewery assuming that he was successful with Cedrona. It had taken all of fifteen minutes. Carson had walked out not knowing if he was being controlled or in control.

With a sigh, he opened the sliding glass door and stepped onto the balcony. At least Harlee's decorating experiments hadn't extended outside the house's four walls.

Moving into this shrine to the seventies wasn't what really troubled him. Cedrona troubled him, and Sam troubled him. She'd be too close, not only in physical distance, but in a way that a man who prided himself on his control didn't like to explore. He didn't feel in control around her, last night a case in point, and right now he needed control and order in his life.

She was the most undisciplined and disordered person he'd dealt with in a long time—maybe ever. They were polar opposites and not compatible at all. He liked his women classy and refined, not rough and sloppy.

Carson's mind drifted back to lush, pink lips and tawny eyes. His body

rose to the occasion, at least one part of it. He battened down that hatch and steeled himself against the storm.

He wasn't succumbing to Sam only to have her dump him a few months later after she discovered how boring and driven he was. For nine years he'd contained his compulsion to fall in love with every decent woman he met. His attraction to her threatened to undo all the progress he'd made. It wouldn't happen. He was a stronger man than that.

He'd thought it was a good kiss. Hell, not just good, but mind blowing. He couldn't believe he'd misread her so thoroughly.

Damn. Wouldn't you know it? He'd disappointed her. He always disappointed women. It wasn't that he couldn't perform. Nope, that'd never been a problem. Or that he performed too quickly. No matter how hard he tried, no matter how good they claimed he was, they always left him for some other man or cheated on him. He supposed it could have something to do with his priorities. Such as, work came first.

"Hey, Carson!" His sister waved to him from the front lawn. "Let me in. The door's locked."

Against his better judgment, Carson obeyed her request.

"So to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? I hope you're here to redecorate."

"God knows it needs it." Bridget, dressed in her usual expensive designer attire, sauntered in the door. She stopped for a moment and wrinkled her nose in distaste at the clashing colors in the living room. "We need to talk. How about the deck? I can't stay in this room and keep my lunch where it belongs."

"I know the feeling. This place is a great diet aid." He stood back to let her pass. "After you."

Carson followed her onto the deck and seated himself on a plastic chair. He made a mental note to bring the teak deck chairs from his waterfront condo.

"So how'd it go with Dad?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

"What kind of deal did you have to cut with him?"

"Phase one of Cedrona has to be completed within budget in a year. After that, he'll finance the brewery for me if I can come up with the rest of the down payment."

"Are you sure it's worth it? I mean you've already promised Mr. O'Brian everything you have down to your big toe."

"Including my big toe."

"I thought you only had six months to buy him out."

"I do. I'm going to renegotiate in six months with a large down payment. I'm counting on that horse being worth what I'm told she'll be worth."

"If she made the Pan-Am team next spring, she'd probably bring half a million or more."

"I'd have to wait until spring? I can't wait that long. She's costing me a manure-sized pile of money."

"Well, she's a horse, not a race car." Bridget waved him off. Clearly not concerned about her brother's problems. "Carson, guess what I've done for us?"

"For us?" Damn, that sounded dangerous. Bridget only did things that were to her advantage.

"I've hired Hans Ziegler to be our head trainer."

"Who?"

"Hans Ziegler. That's who."

"I haven't a clue who *he* is."

"Only the best horse trainer on the West Coast. He's trained Olympic champions."

"Yeah? Really?" Carson rubbed his chin. "But why is he here? Why isn't he training them right now?"

"He just came back to the area from Florida. Don't you see? This is the chance of a lifetime, a big coup for Cedrona. Not to mention with him at the helm, your horse would have a good shot of making the team."

"But I thought Sam was the head trainer?"

Bridget dismissed Sam with a wave of her hand. "Her? She's talented but self-destructive and disorganized. She'll never get anywhere."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because she won't. She's been bordering on the edge all her life. She gets close; then she goes into fear-of-success mode and finds a way to screw it up. Everyone knows that."

"Well, I don't." Annoyance crept through Carson. His sister's condescending attitude struck a cord deep inside.

“Well, now you do. There’s a lot more to her than you can even imagine. She’s bad news. No one with a decent facility would touch her. Hans, on the other hand, will be a big drawing card for Cedrona. He brings with him a stable full of wealthy clients and fancy horses. Of course, you’ll want him to train Gabbie. I’m sure that Sam could be his assistant if she begs him.” Her eyes glinted as she considered that. “But then, there’s some past history there.”

Carson held up a hand. “Wait a minute. This is my project. I’m not hiring anyone and making big changes until I’ve had time to familiarize myself with the building plans, our obstacles, and our financial situation.”

His sister pouted. “It’s my project, too. Daddy’s building this for me.”

“And Mom,” Carson pointed out. “Until it’s complete, your involvement is strictly advisory.”

Bridget glared at him. Carson braced himself for one of her infamous temper tantrums, but she surprised him. Instead, she smiled her sweetest smile. “Carson, you don’t know horses. I do.”

“You might know horses, but I know business, and I *know* you. Next week, you’ll be on some new tangent. This week it’s dressage. Not too long ago it was jumpers. Before that I remember that western garb.”

“I did love those outfits and all that silver on the saddles.” She was totally unaffected by his criticism. “I’ve ridden dressage off and on for several years.”

“It’s the *off* part that worries me.”

She waved off Carson’s concerns. “We’re hiring Hans”

“No, *I* am not. Not without more information and background. Sam stays in her present capacity for now.” Carson crossed his arms over his chest and glowered at her.

“Fine. Then lease him some barn space and let him train out of one portion of the barn. Sam’s horses and students certainly don’t fill it. We have almost 30 empty stalls. We could use the extra money.”

Carson considered this for a moment. They could use the income. What could it hurt? “Is that an acceptable business practice for a horse facility?”

“Of course it is. Call around to other barns if you don’t believe me.”

“It sounds like a recipe for disaster, like two competitive CEOs sharing the same office space.”

Bridget rolled her eyes. “It’s nothing like that.”

“Aren’t they competing for the same students, the same horses?”

“Hans’ students are at a much higher level than Sam’s students so they actually complement each other.”

“I don’t know.” Carson was in a dilemma. After all, every extra dollar was a dollar toward the project. Maybe not directly, but to investors it did demonstrate solvency and a strong, growing business. His sister had a point as much as he hated to admit it. “Who would care for his horses?”

“That’s Juan’s responsibility. He’d have to hire a few more workers, but that won’t be a problem.”

“Sam isn’t going to like this.”

“Of course she isn’t, but she’ll get over it. She worked closely with him in the past—if you gather my meaning.”

Carson’s gut clenched as he did, indeed, gather her meaning. This had to stop. Maybe this Hans guy was just the thing to stop his dead-end attraction to Sam.

“But even if she does, she doesn’t get a vote. We own the place. She’s only using 14 stalls.”

“I don’t know. I need to think about it.” Sam needed to be consulted. He owed her that for some unexplainable reason.

“Well, think fast, a professional like Hans will be snatched up in a minute by our competitors once the word gets out that he’s available.”

* * * *

After his sister left, Carson unpacked the remainder of his things. He hung his clothes in the small closet then folded his underwear and placed them in military precise piles in a dresser drawer.

Completing that task, he settled in a chair and tried to read a dry book on the horse business, but he couldn’t concentrate. He kept sneaking peeks out the picture window, which offered a view of the barn below.

Damn. He’d kissed her. If he knew his women—of course, what man ever did—that kiss changed their relationship even if it hadn’t rocked her world.

Did it rock his world?

Carson pondered that disturbing thought for a moment then cultivated some all-out denial.

He'd attribute his behavior to being lonely and depressed. Sam happened to be convenient and entertaining. He didn't see a probable future with her, and she deserved better than that. Besides, she'd find him as boring as his other girlfriends had; then he'd be dealing with a damn broken heart on top of his other problems. *He* deserved better than that.

If there was ever a mismatched pair, they were it.

Just look at the place she'd picked for dinner, the music she liked, the way she dressed, and her propensity for attracting dirt.

After staring at the same page for fifteen minutes, Carson put down the book and walked to the window. Sam's rattletrap truck sat in front of the barn. He pictured her long legs wrapped around a horse or bending over to clean a stall. An unwelcome response stirred in his groin and his heartbeat stepped up a notch. He adjusted himself but found no relief from his tight slacks. Thinking of Calamity Jane had given him a raging hard on. Entering the kitchen, he popped the top off a micro brew and slugged down half of it. Frowning at the bottle, he placed it on the counter. He could sit here alone and get drunk, or he could take a walk.

Succumbing to his fate, Carson walked out the door and headed down the hill toward the barn.

Chapter 13

A Five-Car Pileup in the Living Room

Sighing, Sam slung another shovel load of manure into the wheelbarrow. It was Juan's day off, and the barn cleaner hadn't shown up—again. She'd taught lessons all day and hadn't had time to clean the stalls earlier, nor had she taken the time to eat. Her stomach rumbled in protest. Leaning the fork against the wall, she rubbed a hand over her sweaty forehead. Two more stalls to go, and she'd be done in time to catch the last call for dinner at Character's.

Someday, she'd make enough money to hire responsible people to do the tough physical work rather than teenagers working for lessons and guys with Sherlock Holmes fetishes. Imagine that, her own people available at her beck and call. She'd bet scores of people catered to Carson night and day. He probably considered it his due. Good thing that man was a pain in the ass because he was so not right for her, and she so wanted him. She was behaving like a teenage tomboy with a crush on the high school football star. It annoyed the heck out of her.

Sam blew out a long breath and surveyed the stall. Clean enough. She rolled the wheelbarrow into the next stall since her people weren't crawling out of the woodwork to relieve her of her manure fork.

Mucking stalls left entirely too much time for her to think about her predicament. She really wasn't interested in Carson. It was just that her body refused to listen to reason. It lusted after the man and bad. Really bad. She tried every internal argument in the book, but her intuition continued to insist that the pretty boy was actually attracted to her. Well, her intuition worked well with horses, but it often malfunctioned when it came to men. She'd be wise not to listen to it.

Her cell rang, and she fished it out of her pocket.

"Sam?" It was the stepmother from hell.

“Hi, Eunice.”

“I seem to have misplaced your loan payment for this month.”

Sam gripped the phone, wishing it were the woman’s neck. Manipulative bitch. “You didn’t misplace it. I never sent it.”

“Oh, dear, I’m sure it was an oversight. When can we expect it?” Eunice knew damn good and well that it wasn’t an oversight.

“I don’t have the money right now. I’m trying to get it.”

“You need to quit dabbling with those animals and settle down and make some real money. This is irresponsible behavior, and you’re too old for that. You know how your family feels about your *hobby* after what happened to your mother and all. Horses broke up her marriage. They were her priority over her children. Look where it got her.”

Sam stiffened and bit back a nasty reply. She knew where horses had gotten her mother—six-feet under. She didn’t need to be reminded of it by this money-grubbing old hag.

“Sam, are you still there?”

Her finger itched to press the End button on the phone. “Yes.”

“When are you going to get a real job?”

“My *hobby*, as you call it, is a business. I’m building it from the ground, but I’ve made big strides in the past six months. It takes time. I’ve explained all this.”

“Time is something none of us have. You made a deal with your father. He might be a pushover, but I am not. I’ve generously offered to let you work in my shop.”

Not the crafts shop again. Sam tore a page off the calendar on the wall and crumpled it in the receiver. “Look, Eunice, I’m sorry...my... cutting out. I think...battery’s dead. I’ll...” Sam’s itchy finger hit the End button. Letting the phone drop to the ground, she leaned up against a stall and shut her eyes but couldn’t shut out the guilt and frustration.

Dumping the last wheelbarrow of manure, she trudged up the stairs to her small apartment for a quick shower. She pulled off her boots in the small entry area and tossed them in a corner. A rap came at the door.

“Who is it?”

“Carson.”

“Do you need something?” *Not tonight of all nights.* She combed her fingers through her messy hair and wiped at the dirt on her jeans and t-shirt.

Her heart raced ahead in expectation of those ice blue eyes and sexy mouth.

“To talk to you. Please let me in.”

Sam opened the door a crack. Carson seized the opportunity to push past her with a bottle in his hand.

He stopped in his tracks one step inside the door and surveyed the chaos. Embarrassed, Sam grabbed clothes and magazines from the couch, threw them into her bedroom, and slammed the door. Carson watched with amused horror.

“Was there a five-car pileup in your living room?”

“Yeah, minus the blood and body parts.”

He sniffed. “It smells like there could be something dead in here.”

Sam took a whiff but couldn’t smell anything. Hopefully, he was pulling her leg.

Carson took a few tentative steps into the room. “This is incredible. How do you find anything?”

“I know exactly which pile everything is in.” Sam crossed her arms and frowned.

He glanced around, his expression skeptical.

“Did you come up here to criticize my housekeeping, or did you have another purpose in mind?”

“Sorry.” Carson blinked. “I was distracted by the extent of the destruction. You might be able to get some federal disaster money.” His usually ice blue eyes sparkled and reminded her of a Blue Hawaiian she’d had once in a piano bar.

She looked away before his eyes made her as drunk as that drink had. “Have a seat.” She gestured to the lone barstool in front of the kitchen counter.

Carson sat after he moved the phonebook, wrapped his long legs around the stool, and continued to examine the room. “I’m thirsty. Could I have something to drink?”

“You have a bottle with you.”

He looked surprised that he was still holding the bottle. “It’s for Juan.”

“Another one? So he’s still holding a grudge?”

“Yeah. He’s only speaking to me in Spanish, and I don’t think his words are complimentary. If I drink his tequila, He’ll probably have me stuffed into a piñata.”

“Then hung from the rafters. Alive.”

Carson cringed.

Sam shrugged. “I have lite beer.”

“Do you have any wine?”

“I do.” Sam triumphantly pulled out a box of red wine.

“You don’t refrigerate red wine.”

“You do this kind.”

Carson rolled his eyes.

“Do you want any or not?” Sam moved to put it away.

“Wait. I guess it’ll have to do.”

Suppressing a smile, she poured some wine into her best plastic glass and cleared a spot on the counter.

“Thank you.” He took a sip after he examined the glass for foreign substances. From his expression, she half-expected him to spit it out. “Do you have any napkins?”

“Second pile on the left, halfway down.” Popping the top on a beer, she leaned on the opposite side of the counter. Keeping a safe distance was advisable and definitely the smart thing to do. Crush or not, she didn’t need a man for fulfillment. Horses gave her everything she needed and more.

She looked at him to find him looking at her and winced at the thought of what he must see. Pushing her unruly hair away from her face, she tucked it behind her ears.

“Sam, about last night...”

“I’ve already forgotten about it.” Yep, just like she’d forgotten his name.

“I was out of line.”

“So was I. I’d had too much to drink. I wasn’t thinking.” Sam precariously balanced a stack of junk mail on top of a pile of magazines and straightened a few more piles.

“It won’t happen again.”

“Damn right.”

“We’re business partners, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay, well, as long as we have that straight.”

“No problem.” For a fleeting second, something like sadness flashed in his eyes. She sought a way to change the subject. “That can’t be the only

reason that you invaded my privacy.”

“I wanted your opinion on someone.”

“Who?”

“Hans Ziegler.”

Sam swallowed and hugged her arms to her chest. “Hans? What do you want to know?”

“Is he any good?”

“With horses?”

“Well, of course, with horses? What did you think I was talking about? Golden Retrievers?”

Her face burned. Even though she and Hans had never shared as much as a kiss, horse show gossip had them as red hot lovers. Her one-time hero worship of the man had fueled those flames. She also suspected that Hans had poured a little gas on that story and embellished all the more. “I was his assistant trainer six years ago, before I went to Germany.”

She’d been his protégé until he’d abandoned her after she’d been fingered in that tragic barn fire. In the back of her mind, she’d always wondered if he’d had anything to do with that fire. He’d lost three horses in the blaze, all heavily insured. His most valuable horse had come up lame only a few days prior in what appeared to be a career-threatening injury, rendering him virtually worthless as a show horse. Yet, Hans had made a killing on the insurance settlement.

“Did you keep in touch with him?”

“We didn’t part on the best of terms.”

“And now?”

“I really don’t have much contact with him.”

“What do you think of him on a professional level?”

She considered lying but took the high road. “The man is brilliant with horses, a true master. He almost seems to read their minds. He has very few equals. He has the temperament of an artist, talented, explosive, difficult, and unpredictable. Why are you asking?”

“I’ve heard things about him. I wanted another opinion.”

Sam went cold. She hoped he didn’t hear the things that she feared he’d heard. “Who told you about him?”

“My sister.”

“She wants him here, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, but the decision is mine.”

“Carson, I can’t work with him. His ethics are in question.”

“In what ways?”

“I can’t tell you because in most cases I have no proof, only suspicions.”

Torching a barn full of horses for insurance money ranked right up at the top of her suspicions about that man.

“I’m not interested in gossip or hearsay. Give me an example of a case where you do have proof.”

“He’s known for stealing talented students from other instructors. In fact, he’s quite blatant about it. Nothing stands in his way when he wants something. He’s not beyond undermining another instructor.”

“That sounds like the voice of experience. He wouldn’t be able to steal away the clients if they were happy with their instructor.”

“His tactics are underhanded.” Sam leaned forward, bracing her hands on the counter. “Give me a chance, Carson. Give me the same chance that you wanted from your father. That’s all I ask. I really need this opportunity. It might be the last one I’ll get.”

“Why would that be?”

“I owe my family a lot of money.”

“And?”

“Over the years, my father and brothers have invested thousands of dollars in supporting my horse habit. They allowed me to drop out of college. Dad helped me finance my Germany trip and paid some legal expenses of mine by taking out a second mortgage on his house. My stepmother was furious. You’d think I put them in the poorhouse because of it. She’s making Dad’s life, and mine, a living hell. There’s a huge balloon payment coming up at the end of the year. I have to pay it. Right now, this job barely covers my expenses, let alone a large loan.”

“You don’t sound overly thrilled about your stepmother.”

“I don’t like her, but she’s Dad’s choice, and I didn’t get a vote.”

“So now you’re in a bind?”

“When I came back from Germany, she wanted me to quit ‘playing around with horses’ and get a real job. I promised my family I would take one more year to do the horse thing as a professional. If I’m not where I want to be at the end of a year, I’ll give up horses as a profession and go back to school and work in my stepmother’s crafts store.”

She glared at Carson as he covered his hand over his mouth. "It's not funny."

"You? In a crafts store? That's not funny?"

"I'm pouring my heart out to you, and you're making fun of me."

"Sorry." He managed to look properly contrite.

"My mother wanted me to go to school. She was a professional horsewoman, but she knew what a struggle and how expensive it was. She had bigger plans for me."

"You talk about her in the past-tense."

"She died several years ago after my dad and she divorced. She was in the tryouts for the Olympic team in Florida when a young horse she was training flipped over backward on her. She died instantly."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It was a long time ago. It's okay." It wasn't. Not really. Her stomach still ached when she thought of her mother.

Carson steered them to safer ground. "So where do you want to be in a year, exactly?"

"I need to be making enough money to comfortably make large payments on my Dad's loans. I need to prove I'm competitive and that I have enough students and training horses to sustain a viable business."

"How do you judge that?"

"Income level, for one. I'm sure you understand that measurement stick."

"Am I being insulted?"

Sam laughed. "Isn't that my job, pretty boy?"

"No, I think it's your hobby." The corner of his mouth quirked into an almost smile. "So income can't be everything? What else?"

"Did I hear you right? Money isn't everything? This from a man who tucks his bankroll into bed at night and reads financial statements to it as a bedtime story?"

"You're doing that insulting thing again."

"Oops. Sorry. It just comes so naturally."

Carson sighed. "So what else is a measure of success in the dressage world?"

"To be long-listed for the Olympic or Pan-Am team, win a regional championship, or finish in the top-ten in the nation at the level which I'm

showing.”

“And Gabbie is your ticket to achieving that goal?”

“Yes, I *have* to ride her, Carson. You have to give me a chance. Please. No matter what you hear about me, please give me an opportunity.”

Carson nodded. “I’ve seen you ride that mare. I may not know dressage, but I think the two of you have something special. I need this horse to bring a large sum of money within the year. I trust you to do whatever it takes to see that happens. She’s yours to ride.”

“Carson, I promise you won’t regret this. I promise!” Sam threw her arms around him and gave him a hug. He stood stiffly, hands at his sides and didn’t move. She drew back. “Sorry, I got carried away.”

Carson didn’t react. “Don’t thank me yet. We’re doing the business part of this my way. I’d like to meet with you first thing Monday morning to discuss strategy, short-term, and long-term goals.”

“You’re kidding?”

His face said something different.

“You’re not kidding.”

“I know it’s hard to imagine me asking someone with your obvious organizational talents to a planning meeting, but humor me.” His gaze swept around the room at the devastation and back to her.

“I’m much more organized than I appear.” Sam bristled with irritation.

Carson had the gall to laugh. “If your housekeeping abilities are any measure of that, I’m in deep shit.” He stood, leaving a full wine glass on the counter. “Give Juan my regards.”

Chapter 14

Carson's Ten-Rule Dressage Program

Bridget always got her way. If pouting, manipulating, or throwing a fit didn't work, she'd just do as she pleased anyway. Today was one of those do as you damned well pleased days.

She wanted Hans as the trainer at the new facility. The one way to show him they were serious was to offer him a spot at the old facility. The man was a prima donna, and she was prepared to cater to him. Well, at least she'd make sure her people catered to him.

Carson was a shrewd and ruthless businessman. Of all her brothers, she trusted him to follow his head and not his heart. He'd see this her way once she made everything clear to him, and he ran the numbers. Then, she'd send that little bitch, Sam, packing in no time. And it would not be a moment too soon because brother dear showed way too much interest. Hell if she could understand that one.

Bridget spread the architectural plans on the old, scarred desk in the barn office. Hans leaned over to study them. She stepped back and stayed quiet—a monumental task for her—as he perused them.

The man was a German, known for his attention to detail, so she let him take his time, even though the wait drove her crazy.

Finally, Hans looked up, his face unreadable. "This is quite an ambitious project."

"It's my goal for Cedrona to be the premier dressage facility in the Northwest. So of course, we want the premier trainer in the Northwest."

Hans puffed up a little. "Ya, I can understand that." Glancing out the window, his eyes narrowed slightly. "Despite your lofty intentions, I don't see much being done. The arena site is overgrown with weeds, which tells me that construction has been halted for a long time."

"It's going to be starting again this week. My brother, who has vast

experience with projects of this magnitude, is taking over the management of the construction. He'll see that it's done under budget and on schedule."

"A miracle worker?"

"Yes, he is."

"You can't expect me to teach and train out of the existing facility for long. I do have a reputation to uphold."

"I would never expect that of you."

"What about Ms. MacIntyre? Isn't she currently the head trainer?"

"Head case would be more like it," Bridget snorted. "We have no legal agreement with Samantha. She is here on a month-to-month basis."

"She may stay as long as she doesn't interfere with my business. I'll need exclusive use of the arena while I am teaching my students. I cannot teach at the same time as another instructor. It is much too distracting for the creative process. I am an artist. She is a bumbler."

"We'll readjust Sam's schedule to fit around yours. Her students are novices compared to your advanced-level students, so I don't see any competition between you for students."

"Which is good for her. She could never compete with me. However, I have no interest in teaching novice riders. That's what instructors like her are best at."

Bridget nodded her agreement. The man might be a pain the ass, but his credentials demanded respect.

"I have small items that must be done before I move my horses here."

"Just name it, and I'll see to it."

Bridget listened as Hans outlined a list of improvements that put her Nordstrom's shopping list to shame. The current facility must be brought up to his exacting standards. She might have a few issues with Carson, but she'd convince him—somehow. Hans would be worth it in the long run.

* * * *

Gabbie was having a day—a very bad bitch mare day. She didn't want to cooperate. Sam swore it was the mare's time of the month. There were moments when she could sympathize with men when it came to handling an emotional, cranky female. This was one of those moments.

Sam gave Gabbie a boot with her leg. The mare sucked back and

swished her tail in annoyance. Sam tapped her with her whip. Gabbie flattened her ears, kicked at her leg, and tried to wipe her off on the wall.

“Turn early!” boomed a familiar voice from across the arena. “Don’t let her put you on the wall. Push her hindquarters out on the circle. Shoulder in! Stay with her! She’s NOT stupid. She has no intention of hitting her ass on that wall. TURN EARLY! NOW! Stay at least one meter off of the wall. Show her you’re smarter than her; then she’ll give in. More outside rein! Inside leg!”

Without pausing to think, Sam followed his instructions. She’d spent so many years under the man’s tutelage that it came naturally. Of course, it worked. After a few more unsuccessful attempts to turn her rider into arena wall art, Gabbie gave in and settled into her forward, ground covering trot—waiting to fight another day.

Only then did Sam pause to wonder what the hell Hans was doing barking orders at her in her own arena. Fuming, she rode Gabbie to where he stood at the rail. Bridget with a shit-eating grin on her perfect face flanked his left side. Carson the Traitor was conspicuously absent. The answer was becoming all too clear. The coward had sold her out.

Bridget smiled a syrupy sweet, fake smile. “Sam, you know Dr. Ziegler.”

Sam almost choked. Doctor? Since when had Hans become a doctor? Maybe he had a Ph.B, Doctor of Bullshit. She stared down at Hans from her perch on the horse, enjoying the height advantage.

“Sam and I know each other well.” Herr Doctor nodded, all business.

“Not that well,” Sam shot back.

Bridget watched the two with interest. “The difference in that mare was like night and day, Hans, once you started offering suggestions. You are brilliant.”

If those were suggestions, Sam would hate to see what he did when he actually issued orders.

Hans didn’t reply. He was too preoccupied, studying her horse. Finally, he turned to Sam. “What horse is zeez?”

Sam allowed herself a smile. “Gabriella.”

Hans’ mouthed dropped open. He narrowed his eyes, leaned closer, and shook his head in amazement. It was the biggest compliment he’d ever given her, and he hadn’t spoken a word. Finally, he cleared his throat. “Hard

to believe. You are still on her back. She disposed of every rider to set a foot in her stirrup in five minutes or less last year on the California circuit.”

“I’ve done a lot of work with her.” Sam forced herself to sound humble.

“Hmmm.” Hans straightened the cuff on his starched shirt. Obviously feeling he’d given her too much credit, He adopted his usual godlike persona. “You were lucky. She is a talented but difficult animal. It is not possible to get the best out of her without an experienced eye on the ground. She is too full of tricks and surprises.”

“Well, then, it’s Sam’s lucky day.” Bridget turned to Sam, giddy with the knowledge of her imminent triumph. “Sam, Dr. Ziegler is going to be training and teaching out of this barn starting next week.”

“It shall be a challenge to turn it around, as the facility has Ms. McIntyre’s stamp of disorganization all over it.”

Sam bit her tongue and tasted blood. She only wished it was his. “How nice.”

Hans smiled but those slate gray eyes were colder than concrete in the winter. “I’ll decide what days I want to teach, and you can adjust your schedule accordingly.”

“I can what?” She flexed her fingers, if only they were around his neck, even better Bridget’s.

“Of course, you can, Sam. Your amateurs aren’t as difficult to schedule as Hans’ professional clients.”

Sam couldn’t think of a verbal attack that would do justice to what she was feeling at the moment. “Fine, Herr Ziegler. I bow to the master.”

He inclined his head, not the least bit affected by her sarcasm. That pissed her off even more, and he knew it. “I’m anxious to see what you’ve learned in Germany. I wish you’d have consulted me on your choice of barns; I may have been able to find you a better situation with a well-respected trainer. Of course, you weren’t in a situation to be too selective.”

Gritting her teeth, Sam turned Gabbie back into the center of the arena and continued her ride.

* * * *

“I want her fired.” Bridget’s suspicious gaze zeroed in on Carson’s face. Carson rubbed his eyes and leaned back in his creaky office chair. He’d

been up all night studying financials. He didn't need this crap from the woman who made Paris Hilton look like Mother Teresa.

"Why? What's wrong with her? She makes those horses dance."

"Competitive dressage requires more than just raw—and I do mean raw—talent. It's a sport judged subjectively, like figure skating, on aesthetics and precision. It requires absolute perfection and precise attention to detail."

"I don't follow you."

"Well, just look at her. Is that perfection?"

"She's an artist. They're always different."

"Hans is an artist. A master. But a disciplined one."

She had him there, and he'd be a fool to argue. "Your point?"

"You have no idea what a bad reputation she has."

"So enlighten me."

"Big Brother, I'm not sure you're ready for this."

"Try me."

"Sam's carelessness was responsible for the barn fire on this very farm. Several horses were killed, and the owner of the barn was trapped inside. She died also."

Carson frowned. So that explained her reaction to cigarette smoking in the barn. But Sam, careless when it came to her beloved horses' welfare? That didn't fit her character. "What did she do to cause the fire?"

"I hear the skepticism in your voice, dear brother. Trust me on this. They believe he plugged a heater into a faulty outlet in the tack room and left blankets sprayed with waterproofing too close to it."

"They *believe*?"

"Well, it could never be proven. Everyone knows what a slob Sam is. She'd just come back from a horse show and unloaded everything and was the last one in the barn that night."

"She wasn't the last one in the barn."

"Huh?"

"Well, if someone was trapped in the barn by the fire, it would appear she wasn't the last one."

"I guess that's true."

"What do you think that barn owner was doing in the barn that night?"

"Checking on her horses. Like any responsible barn owner would do."

You're trying to distract me. It won't work."

"It usually does. I should have waved a Coach handbag under your nose."

Bridget huffed. "Everyone thinks she did it."

"Was she ever charged?"

"No, it was ruled accidental."

"Well, then, I don't see what that has to do with her competence as a horse trainer."

"Some people think she did it for insurance money. Others think it was pure carelessness. It doesn't matter. One way or another she caused it."

"How do you know that?"

"Everyone knows it."

"Maybe everyone is wrong."

Bridget's eyes narrowed. "You're hot for her."

"I am not. Me of all people. Look who you're talking to."

"I find it hard to believe myself, but I'm seeing it with my own eyes."

"It's nothing like that. I see potential in her. She's a challenging project. I'm going to develop her into an efficient businesswoman."

Bridget threw back her head and laughed. "That would be worth the price of admission."

"You doubt me?" Carson knew he was digging himself in deep here, but he couldn't stop.

"When it comes to her, you'd better believe it. She's a walking disaster."

"You'll see. She's going to turn that mare into a winner."

"Poor brother, you're delusional. How many successful professional athletes reach the top without a good coach?"

She had him there, and he knew it. "What does that have to do with horses?"

"Everything. You're dealing with two athletes—the rider and the horse. They can't do it alone. You, of all people, know that. Sam has the raw talent to make that *horse* a winner. The Doctor has the knowledge and persistence to make *her* a winner." Bridget leaned forward, poised for the kill. "Car, whether Sam will admit it or not, she needs him."

Unwelcome blades of emotion sliced through him, indefinable and foreign. Not jealousy? He wasn't the jealous type and especially not when it

concerned one disheveled horse trainer.

“What kind of history do they have?” He hated himself for asking, but the words tumbled from his lips.

“Those two? Love-Hate, I’d say.” Bridget pulled a compact out of her purse and reapplied her lipstick.

“Were they intimate?”

She snapped the compact shut, blew out an annoyed breath, and rolled her eyes. “Shit, Carson. How would I know? That was the gossip, but I never personally saw them in bed together. Who cares? We’re talking about horses, not sex. You want to sell that horse and make big bucks in the least amount of time?”

Carson nodded, treading lightly.

“Then let Hans train here, and Sam can take advantage of his expertise.” She regarded him with shrewd, calculating eyes. “Unless you’re worried he might rekindle their old relationship.”

“What do I care? What she does in her private time is her business.” Then why was his stomach churning? This was not good.

“Believe me, she’ll thank you.”

“I doubt that.”

* * * *

“You promised you’d give me a chance.” Sam had seen this coming, but it still pissed her off. Carson hadn’t been straight with her. She turned her back to him and brushed Gabbie vigorously. The mare switched her tail in protest and stamped one large hoof.

“I *am* giving you a chance.” Carson sidestepped the mare’s nose as she zeroed in on his white shirt.

“I don’t call allowing that jerk to teach here giving me a chance.” She brushed harder, and Gabbie turned her head to glare at her.

“Well, I do.”

“And how is that?”

“You’re still teaching here. He doesn’t have priority over you.”

“Oh, really? So why do I have to work around his schedule?”

“I...”

“Carson, forget it. You’re in deep shit with me, buster.”

"Fine. I might as well get in deeper. Starting Monday, clear your calendar for every other morning from 10:00 to 10:45."

"Why?"

"Hans has agreed to coach you."

"What? That pompous ass? I'm not working with him." Sam crossed her arms over her chest and dug in her feet.

"Yesterday you said he was brilliant."

"I was sick with a fever."

"All the top athletes have a coach."

"Like you would know. You're as into sports as I'm into good wine."

Carson raised an eyebrow but refused to play along. "You'd be surprised what I know about sports."

"Really?" Sam recognized a good opportunity for a little revenge. "Who holds the home run record? By the way, I'm talking baseball here."

Carson grinned like a man who'd just found a million bucks in a Cracker Jack box. "Hank Aaron. 755. You gotta give me a tougher one than that."

Lucky guess. Hank Aaron was probably the only name he knew in baseball. "Whose record did he break?"

"Babe Ruth." His blue eyes sparkled brighter than last year's fireworks.

Another lucky guess. "Who holds the record for most strikeouts?"

"Nolan Ryan."

Sam frowned and decided not to bury her ego any deeper. The guy had a cursory knowledge of baseball, which dumbfounded her and ruined her faith in her ability to judge people. Why couldn't the man stay in this carefully crafted box she'd made for him? "I didn't know you were a baseball fan."

"I didn't know you were."

"Don't look so pleased with yourself. You just got lucky."

"Yep, that's right. I'm a great guesser."

"You're toying with me again." She preferred him when he was being a tight-ass. It was much easier to dislike him.

"So?"

"Stop it."

"Yes, ma'am. So *are* you?"

"Am I what?"

"A baseball fan?"

"As baseball as apple pie. I grew up in a family of men. I learned to love sports out of self-defense. What about you? Are you a baseball fan, or just a man who remembers useless trivia?"

"Guilty on both counts. I have box seats for the M's right behind home plate."

She couldn't help but be impressed. "You've been holding out on me."

"Are you jealous?"

"Damn right I am. My brothers would give their left nut for those seats."

"Thank God, I didn't have to go that far."

"You've distracted me from the point of this conversation."

"No, I did not. You distracted yourself. Now that we're back on track, though, Monday, 10:00 A.M., sharp. I understand The Doctor doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"The Doctor?"

"I guess that's what he likes to be referred to—Herr Doctor of Dressage."

Carson's horrid German accent made her laugh, but she quickly sobered. "I can't take lessons from him."

"You want to ride that horse?"

"Of course, I do."

"Then you need to play the business game by my rules."

"I'm not giving that phony one cent of my money."

"You don't have to. He's getting thousands of mine."

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"For your own good and my horse's. You need his help."

"Who told you that? Your sister?"

"Could be. Or maybe I'm more savvy than you realized."

"Carson, seriously, I don't want anything to do with the man."

"Get over it. He promised he could make you and that horse into champions in six months, or I get my money back."

"Since when does a dressage trainer give a money-back guarantee?"

"He didn't. It just sounded good."

"You lied?"

"Hey, I embellished."

"Carson, I can't work with that man."

"You're a professional, aren't you?"

“Yes, but...”

“As a professional you learn to work with people you don’t necessarily like if the professional relationship is advantageous to you.”

“What is this? Rule #1 from Carson’s Ten Rules to Becoming a Successful Dressage Trainer?”

“I prefer to think of them as ‘steps’.”

“With you, it’ll be rules.”

He considered that for a moment. “Don’t forget our Monday morning planning meeting. We’ll meet from 8:00 to 9:00. That should give you enough time to prepare for your lesson at 10:00.”

“There isn’t enough time in the world to help me prepare for that.”

“I have no sympathy.”

“You’re not going to expect written weekly status reports, are you?”

“A good businessperson produces the proper documentation.”

“How about a seat-of-the-pants, disorganized business person? Can I write a plan on a gum wrapper?”

“Rule #2. Don’t mess with the master. That includes Hans *and* me. Good night, Sam.” He slanted her a killer smile. Her lungs forgot to function and left her gasping for breath, as he turned and walked away.

Gabbie watched him go with her big lovesick doe eyes and nickered after him. Sam reached out to pat her neck. “I know how you feel, girlfriend. I really do.”

Having her emotions involved was bad enough, but learning the next eight rules would be damn near intolerable.

* * * *

Pricking her ears, Gabbie nickered as Carson strode out of the barn, his back stiff and his shoulders tight. The two humans had been battling for herd supremacy since they’d met. Sam needed some education. Any good lead mare would grab the offending horse by the scruff of his neck and give him a good shake, followed by a disciplinary nip to the butt. That kept the herd in line. Didn’t she understand that mares ruled the herd, not stallions?

The motives for such an argument were beyond her. They weren’t fighting over a prime piece of grazing area or a better spot under a shady tree or the first drink in a stream. Instead, it had something to do with those

ribbons that humans seemed to find so valuable. Their pursuit of these ribbons mystified her. After all, you couldn't eat the things. They didn't scare away predators. They were too small to offer shelter. So who cared whether you got one or not to hang on your stall door or what color it was? It made as much sense as being asked to trot in endless circles that never went anywhere.

Humans. Gabbie snorted. Poor dumb creatures.

Chapter 15

Avoiding the Other Eight Rules

It started as a rumble and rose to a roar. Sam heard the ruckus from inside her apartment and high-tailed it down the stairs. The noise came from the parking lot in front of the barn. She ran out the door and screeched to a halt beside Carson.

Juan and Hans stood several feet away, toe to toe, chest to chest. Juan cursed a blue steak in Spanish, and Hans held his own with an inventive mixture of English, bastardized German, and some unrecognizable dialect. Bridget fidgeted off to one side, trying desperately to placate her prima donna horse trainer. A small group of boarders and students hovered in the background.

Sam raised one eyebrow. Even Dr. Matt stood off to one side, watching in morbid fascination. The vet was around so much lately, he might as well put in a change of address with the post office.

Several horses stood with their heads over the paddock rails, ears pricked, eyes alert. Gabbie, ever the busy body, followed the argument with as much interest as any human.

"You're late for our meeting," Carson noted calmly as Armageddon raged around him. He never once took his eyes off the battlefield.

"I'm sorry. I had important paperwork to finish."

"You? Doing paperwork? I truly doubt that." He flinched as Juan delivered an impressive verbal barrage that sent Hans staggering back a step.

Sam smiled sweetly at him. "See, we don't need to meet. You've already become a good influence on me."

Carson snorted. "Bullshit."

Sam surveyed the battle waged in front of them. Hans had recovered and advanced once again on Juan. "What's going on?"

Carson shrugged. "I think that Juan doesn't like Herr Doctor's attitude. Something about müy loco and what I suspect translates in Spanish to jerk."

"Oh." More like 'asshole' or worse, but she saw no need to point that out.

"The hay isn't up to Herr Doctor's exacting standards, and Juan is insulted."

"I can imagine. He traveled to Eastern Washington and handpicked that hay. You can't get better hay anywhere in the area."

"You have to admit the man is easily offended. I'm into him for two expensive bottles of tequila."

"I'm guessing forgiveness will cost you one more bottle. You committed a three-tequila offense. Hans is getting in deeper than that." Sam leaned against a stall to enjoy the show. "Do you have any popcorn?"

"Nope, we're in the cheap seats."

As they watched, Bridget attempted to get in between, only to be driven back by the rising decibel level of the shouting.

"I suppose I'd better intervene before someone gets hurt."

"Oh, do you have to?"

Carson frowned at her. "You'd like to see Herr Doctor ground into horse manure, wouldn't you?"

"Hell, yeah. In fact, I'd bet even you could kick his butt."

"Ah, now I'm flattered that you think so highly of me."

"Don't let it go to your head."

"I doubt it can."

"I'm sure his artistic side will be too upset to teach this morning, so I fear I won't get my lesson."

"Saddle that horse and get her ready. I'll unruffle his delicate feathers. You're not getting out of this."

"But..." Sam gave him her best boo-boo lips, but Carson seemed immune. "Carson, I'm dying to hear the other eight rules. In fact, it's crucial for my professional development. I'm sure Herr Doctor will understand our need to cancel his lesson."

"You'd rather hear my lecture on how to run a business? You really don't want to take lessons from this guy."

"No, it's not that. I respect your professional acumen and hope to soak up your vast knowledge like a sponge." She slanted a sideways glance at

him and was sorry she did. With that face and body, he'd make a Greek god jealous. She dragged her eyes away, but her heart had already picked up the pace.

"Double Bullshit." One corner of Carson's mouth lifted in an amused smile; even those ice blue eyes warmed. "Sorry, Lady. I'm not buying it. You're going to be late if you don't get your little hind end moving."

"Carson..." Damn, the man was cute when he talked like that.

"No whining. Saddle that horse, or I'll do it for you, and you don't want that."

She considered arguing, but the stubborn set of his smooth-shaven jaw changed her mind. "You have a point." Resigned to her fate, Sam trudged into the barn.

* * * *

Carson leaned wearily against the arena railing, emotionally and mentally worn out. His head was pounding. Even his eyes hurt. Trying to reason with three eccentric and egocentric individuals took a lot out of a person. Appeasing Hans while preventing Juan from quitting had been child's play compared to controlling his uncontrollable sister.

At least, two out of three wasn't bad.

"What is *that* on your horse?" Hans pointed at Sam's bridle as she entered the ring.

"My bridle."

"Bridle? It looks like something you bought off a gypsy caravan."

"The cheekpiece was missing, so I had to improvise with some baling twine."

"Why are you always misplacing things? This is careless behavior. Inexcusable. Dressage is a sport of precision and details. If you cannot pay attention to small details such as your equipment, how can you ever expect to put together the complete package?" Hans was on a rant and thoroughly enjoying himself. The more he expounded on Sam's shortcomings, the stronger his German accent became.

Sam stiffened and said nothing. Carson had a feeling that she'd been here before.

"Your horse's front boots are mismatched. Or are you decorating early

for Christmas?”

“I know, I couldn’t...”

“...Find the other red one.” Hans finished for her, starting on a new rant. “Bah! This kind of negligence is exactly what holds you back from realizing your potential.”

Carson suppressed a grin. He couldn’t agree more. She *was* a walking disaster. Perhaps, with Hans’ help, they could turn her around. He had to hand it to the man, he might be a pain-in-the-ass prick, but he had Sam pegged. He wondered if it was appropriate to tip a horse trainer.

“I hardly think that color-coordinated boots and matching tack make me a better rider.”

Carson steeled himself for the inevitable storm. The woman just couldn’t keep her mouth shut, but then she was a female.

“Perhaps you should try a different sport. Mud wrestling might be your true calling.”

Carson hooted out loud. Sam whipped her head around. Her glare pierced him like a dagger. Damn, she was so sexy when she was mad. He felt something tighten in his groin and adjusted his stance, trying to find a more comfortable position. Some deep-seated aberration in his subconscious was attracted to grunge, at least Sam’s particular brand of grunge. With the exception of his long-lost fiancé, he couldn’t remember ever being so fixated on a woman.

These feelings were unwelcome and damned annoying. He needed to work harder on displaying his typical Carson restraint. She was his horse trainer and his summer project—nothing more and nothing less. He’d turn her around by the end of the summer. He’d organize her to the point that her clients and her own family wouldn’t recognize her. He hadn’t looked forward to something this much since he’d played in the state football championship. Inwardly, he smirked, imagining the look on Sam’s face when she found out that he had been at one time in his life a jock and a good one, not just another pretty face.

He pulled his attention back to the horse and rider. They were now trotting around the arena. Despite their tacky appearance, Carson thought they looked pretty damn good.

Think again. Herr Doctor didn’t share his sentiments.

“Wrap those long legs around that horse like you would a man!” Hans

boomed. “How would you give your boyfriend any satisfaction with limp legs like that?”

Carson adjusted himself again. That piece of crap dryer must be shrinking his clothes. Sam’s face turned bright red. Carson suspected he was red himself. Not that he was her boyfriend. Uh uh. No way. Not him. Never. He just liked the visual of what she could do with those long legs to please a man.

* * * *

“Now that wasn’t so brutal, was it?”

Sam turned to find Carson leaning against a stall door, one ankle crossed over the other. His broad shoulders filled out that tight polo shirt quite nicely. She’d never noticed him wearing such a tight shirt before. She’d rather he wore a bag, so she wasn’t subjected to those sexy muscles. “Brutal? It was beyond brutal. The man is a sadist.”

“He’s a perfectionist. You could do with a little of that.”

“Sadism?”

“No, perfectionism instead of your particular brand of chaos. That’s you, the Chaos Queen.”

“Well, thank you. I’m flattered.”

“You should be. I’m a great judge of character.”

Turning to pick up a brush, Sam stared at the place where she’d left her grooming kit, barely hearing Carson.

“You’re not listening to me.”

“Carson, my grooming kit was sitting right here.”

“It’s not now. You probably put it somewhere else.”

“I *did* not. I know where I left it.”

“Like you knew what happened to your bridle and those leg things your horse wears?”

“Yes, just like that. I didn’t lose them. Someone moved them.”

“You expect me to believe that? I’ve seen your apartment. It terrifies me to look in your tack room.”

“I know where everything is. There *is* a method to my madness.”

“Or a madness to your method.”

Rolling her eyes, Sam walked to the tack room with Carson on her

heels. She glanced over her shoulder as he stopped dead in the doorway and stared. He'd had the same look on his face when he walked in her apartment.

"I don't know much about horse stuff, but is that the missing bridle piece?" Carson pointed over her shoulder.

Sam turned. Hanging on a hook near the sink was the missing part. "I swear that wasn't hanging there this morning."

Skepticism etched wrinkles on Carson's face. He crossed the small room. "Weren't you missing a red boot?" He picked up the errant red boot and held it out to her.

"That wasn't there. It wasn't. Really."

"We're going to clean up this disaster and organize it. When do you have some free time today?"

"I don't."

"Make some. Meet me in my office in an hour."

Sam watched him leave. That man sure had a fine butt. If he wasn't such a priss, she might be able to turn him into a man's man with a little help from her brothers. Seeing her brothers and Carson in one room—now that that would be worth the price of admission.

She sighed and directed her attention back to the newly found items. What the heck was going on? She might be messy and disorganized, but she'd left her grooming kit in the aisle. She remembered scattering brushes around trying to find the right one. Then she'd fretted about what Carson might say if he saw the mess she'd left.

As far as the missing bridle piece, she rarely had the time to clean her tack. Gabbie's bridle should have been complete and thrown in a corner of the tack room—just where she'd left it the day before.

Someone was messing with her. But who?

* * * *

Frowning, Carson stared at the bill in front of him. What the hell? Who was authorizing improvements to that old barn? He couldn't believe it. Three thousand dollars for stall mats, new stall doors, and several smaller items. Surely Sam wouldn't be so presumptuous, but he knew someone else who would. As soon as he got his hands on his sister, he'd... The phone

interrupted his planning of his sister's demise.

"Carson?"

There was no mistaking that voice. "Uh, Dad. Hi."

"I just hung up from talking to your sister. She's disturbed by two of your employees."

"Juan and Sam." Carson's stomach sank to his toes.

"Exactly. Do I need to be concerned?"

"No, sir, you do not. This is my project, not yours and not hers. I have the utmost confidence in both of them. They are consummate professionals." Carson crossed his fingers that his father had never met either of them.

A long silence ensued. "You're not letting your emotions cloud your judgment, are you?"

"What makes you say that?" Carson bristled and tapped a pencil on the desk.

"Bridget alluded to something, that's all."

"Well, Bridget rarely knows what she's talking about."

"In this case, let's hope she doesn't."

"She doesn't." Carson snapped the pencil in two. Grimacing, he threw it in the trash.

"I'm going to take your word for it—for now. I have bigger concerns."

"Like what?" Carson didn't really want to hear the answer.

"You are way over budget. Get a handle on it. *Now.*"

"I'm trying. I just don't have the lay of the land yet. Besides I—" Carson's concentration broke when he heard a rap on his office door. He frowned as Juan slid through the door of the small barn office. What incredible timing that man had. He plastered his body up against the wall, away from the window and crouched down, watching Carson like a cat watches its prey.

Carson raised an eyebrow. He didn't comment on his barn manager's strange behavior. The man was no less normal than anyone else around this place. Horse people were a strange bunch, and his sister belonged at the top of the list.

"Dad, I need to go. I have an important appointment with the subs."

"Certainly. Don't be a stranger. I have a thirty-year-old bottle of Scotch waiting for you."

"Uh, okay." Carson hung up the phone and let out the breath he'd been holding. "Juan, can I help you with something?"

"*They* are watching."

"I see." Carson adopted a concerned expression.

"Sam is not safe."

"And why is that?" Carson scratched his chin and leaned back in his chair.

"She know the truth. She just not realize she know it."

"Why don't you tell me what the truth is, so I can refresh her memory?"

"I don't know what the truth is. Only she know. I surveil area to find out."

Carson's head hurt. Juan was one shot short of a bottle, just like the rest of this crazy group of people. "Well, I'll make sure that she takes adequate precautions."

"They are dangerous. They do small things right now, but it get bigger as they get more desperate."

"What have they done so far?"

"They hide things. Make saddle fall off."

Carson sighed. The only thing that made that saddle fall off was Sam's lack of care for her equipment.

Juan froze. He held a finger to his lips, cupped a hand to his ear, and listened. Either he had the hearing of a horse or he heard sounds in his head. Carson didn't hear a damn thing. Dropping to all fours, he crawled to the door and opened it a crack. He looked one way then the other.

"I must go now. I am surveiling suspicious person." He slid out the door and disappeared.

Carson pulled out the Advil and popped a couple in his mouth. This was going to be a long summer.

* * * *

Sam clamped her hand over her mouth in an attempt to muffle her laughter. Another large swath of horse snot decorated the front of Carson's white polo shirt for the third time this week.

"Get that animal away from me." He growled. "I've just spent the last half hour listening to Juan's disjointed accusations and conspiracy theories

and my father's criticisms. I don't need to deal with this crazy horse, too."

"So that's why you're so grumpy."

"I'm not grumpy, and you're late. AGAIN."

"I'm not late. In order to be late, you have to show up. I didn't show up." Sam smiled sweetly.

Carson's face hardened. "I mean it, Sam; we are going to work on your professional demeanor." His blue eyes zeroed in on Dr. Matt, lounging on a beat-up lawn chair outside the barn door. "What the hell is that guy still doing here?"

"I assume he's waiting for a client."

Carson rounded on her, irritation etched on his face. "Is he coming on to you?"

"What if he is? It's none of your business." Sam glanced at Dr. Matt happily chewing on a sandwich in the afternoon sun. He had been around most of the morning. Surely, he had other clients. Whatever his reason for being here, it wasn't her. The vet never showed her anything but a cursory interest.

"During business hours, everything is my business." Carson continued to glare at the unsuspecting horse doctor. If it weren't such a ludicrous thought, Sam would have considered his behavior that of a jealous man.

"Well, rest assured, if he has the hots for someone around here, it isn't me. Maybe it's Jaye."

"Is he gay?" Carson relaxed his tense position a little.

"Carson, I'm joking. Why don't you loosen that tight ass of yours?"

"My ass is none of your concern."

"My veterinarian is none of yours."

"*Your* veterinarian? Judging from that vet bill I got last week, I think I own a large portion of his clinic."

Sam rolled her eyes and steered the subject down a safer road. "Carson, don't you own a t-shirt or a pair of jeans?" The man wore cream slacks with a knife blade crease along with his now-soiled polo shirt. In contrast, Sam wore her usual grubby t-shirt and worn jeans.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?" Carson looked down at his clothes, as if to refresh his memory.

"You're in a horse barn, for Pete's sake." Sam snorted.

"So that means I should dress like a slob?"

“Well, horses are dirty; you might want to dress a little more realistically. But dirt wouldn’t dare stick to you, would it?”

“No, because when you’re around, it’s too busy clinging to you.”

“If you’d exercise those muscles instead of that smart mouth once in a while maybe some good honest dirt would stick to you, too.” The man could be so infuriating. How did he expect her to stay spotless after riding and grooming a dozen horses?

Instead of taking offense as she expected, Carson chuckled then leaned closer to her until he invaded her comfort zone. “There’s got to be a way to shut you up.”

“Only if you’re man enough to try it.” Her smart mouth had taken possession of her brain once again.

“Never, ever challenge a competitive man.” Carson’s blue eyes darkened, and she lowered her eyes unable to meet the gaze that saw too much. A muscle in his jaw twitched. He was either furious or turned on or both. His large hands encircled her arms, preventing her escape. His fingers stroked her in light, sensual caresses. She caught a faint whiff of some pricey men’s cologne. It was heavenly and hypnotizing. Her traitorous body responded. Her throat was dry, so she cleared it. Biting the bullet, she lifted her eyes to his. Oh, Lord. Not good. An amused smile lifted one corner of his mouth. The jerk truly was toying with her. This didn’t mean anything to him. It could mean everything to her—if she let it.

She backed up a step to break the spell, and he let her go. “Why? Why did you do that?”

He shrugged. “I love it when you’re mad. Do you have any idea how sexy you are when your eyes flash fire like an enraged lioness?”

Sexy? Her? Did he need glasses? Sam’s eyes narrowed, and she studied him with suspicion, looking for an ulterior motive. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Me? Now why would you insinuate something like that?” She glimpsed a twinkle in his eyes.

“You bait me into arguments for the hell of it, don’t you?”

He held out his hands palms up. “Hey, I don’t get too many thrills right now. No multi-million dollars deals on the line, no property to seize from some poor, hapless fool, nothing to keep me occupied.”

“Except me?”

“Except you. And that lovesick horse of yours.”

“Of yours.” She spoke the words more to remind herself who the mare belonged to than to clarify his words.

“Sometimes you can own something, but that doesn’t make it yours.”

“And sometimes you may not have a claim on something, yet it is yours.”

Carson raised his eyebrows. “I see.”

“Do you? Do you really? You’ve always had the money to buy anything you’ve desired.”

“This might come as a shock to you, Sam, but the most valuable things on this earth can’t be had for a price. They have to be earned.” Something changed in his expression. Deep down inside she turned soft and gooey in response.

She attempted to be flippant to destroy this weird mood he’d slipped into. “Well, don’t we sound philosophical. That statement is too much for this poor country girl to handle.”

“Is that all that’s too much for you to handle?” Carson’s voice dropped a notch. He stepped closer; even Gabbie’s nearness didn’t deter him. Sam’s heart raced and her legs liquefied. Every womanly instinct she possessed celebrated with the knowledge that he was about to kiss her. Every ounce of self-preservation went aground and refused to surface. She was on her own with a man who should be everything she wanted in a man—and everything she didn’t.

Gabbie chose that moment to play matchmaker. She gave Sam a shove in the back with her nose. She stumbled forward, right into Carson’s arms. He pulled her close. “Remind me to give that horse extra grain tonight,” he murmured in her ear.

“Carson do you have any idea what you’re doing?” Sam tried to get her hands between them, but he held her tighter.

“Of course. I’m holding you.”

“Why?”

“Because it feels good. Aren’t you always telling me that I need to do something spontaneous?”

“Uh huh, but this isn’t it.” She looked up at him and his mouth moved closer until he was a few inches away. His breath feathered across her lips. Damn it, she wanted more. Stupid as it was, she wanted him. Her breasts

rubbed against his chest. His hips pushed against hers, pressing into her core. She was falling for a dangerous man, one who could eat her up and spit her out, showing no mercy and taking no prisoners. A man like Carson wouldn't stick around long. They weren't compatible. He didn't fit her criteria—whatever those were—and she couldn't possibility fit his.

Sam gave a hard push, and Carson let her go. She glared at him. Even though her anger was at herself, she turned it on him. "What's wrong with you?"

He blinked a few times and glanced around the barn. His ice blue gaze returned to her. "I didn't think anything was wrong with me, but obviously you do."

"You're the one always preaching professionalism. Do you think this is professional behavior? We shouldn't be doing this. We have to work together."

He considered her words for a moment then shook his head. "No, I guess we shouldn't." With an oddly sad expression, he nodded. "I need to check on the subs doing the framing."

"What about our meeting?"

"Forget it." Without another word, Carson walked away. Sam watched him go, tall and proud with his perfect posture and perfect body, at least what she'd seen of it.

What was she going to do? Her pilot light was lit just waiting to ignite into a full-blown fire.

Chapter 16

Father Knows Best?

Carson walked to one of the pastures and leaned on the top rail, searching for a little peace from his conflicting emotions. This pastoral setting had become his favorite place to work through problems.

Up until today, he'd done an acceptable job of keeping Sam at arm's length while managing the building of the new equestrian center. Not an easy feat considering that he found a myriad of excuses to be with her, even taking her to dinner a few nights a week under the guise of discussing the building plans and her career plans. Whenever Sam rode Gabbie, he hung out nearby. He'd avoided dissecting his reasons, other than a smart businessman kept an eye on his assets. Unfortunately, he spent more time keeping an eye on her assets. A smart man would have kept her at a distance, and that wasn't happening either.

He was beginning to question his intelligence.

One thing he did know, he spent entirely too much time in Sam's company, which was dangerous. She was right. They had a professional relationship. It needed to stay that way. Unfortunately, it wasn't, not in his mind. He was attracted to her. He couldn't explain it, didn't understand it, and sure as hell couldn't have predicted it.

Try as he might, he couldn't stay away. She made him feel good—even arguing with her felt good and exhilarating. All of his personal and professional problems faded when he saw her smile. He felt alive in her company. Emotions he kept so tightly controlled rose to the surface whenever she was near.

Then today, his efforts to keep an emotional distance had been destroyed in that brief moment of weakness when he'd done the spontaneous thing and held her.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Spontaneous wasn't in his vocabulary, at least it hadn't been until he'd met Sam and that damn horse.

"Hey, Car."

Carson stiffened and turned his head to find his brother, Brad, leaning on the railing next to him. "Hi. I didn't see you pull in."

"Really?" Brad's crooked smile betrayed his amusement. "I'm not surprised. I've been here a while."

"How long?"

"Long enough."

Carson studied the horses in the pasture and considered his brother's words. Instead of speculating, he waited for Brad to get to the point.

"How's it going?" Brad brimmed with pent up energy or something else.

Carson blew out a breath. "Bridget is constantly interfering, pissing off the subs, demanding this and that, running up expenses, and I'm already in the red."

"Wasn't this place in the red before you set foot on site?"

"Well, yeah, but it's getting deeper and deeper. I'm starting to feel like there's no way out of this hole."

"Sure, there is. You just haven't thought of it yet."

"I doubt I ever will."

"Yep, you will. I have faith in you."

"Well, at least you do. Dad called earlier. I guess Bridget bitched to him about how I'm managing the construction and who knows what else."

"Dad can be tough, but you can handle him. And Bridget bitches about everything. Dad won't take her seriously. He's just humoring her." Brad studied him closely, as if he'd never seen him before.

"What? Quit looking at me like that."

"There's something else bothering you, and it isn't this place."

"And what made you come to that conclusion?"

"You watch Sam like a man eyeing the only canteen in the Sahara Desert."

"I'm not sure Sam would appreciate being compared to a canteen."

"Quit avoiding the subject. I saw the two of you earlier in the barn aisle."

"Nothing happened."

“Yeah, well, not because of a lack of effort on your part. You’re in deep, man.”

“I am not. I find her, uh, intriguing because she’s so different from any woman I’ve ever known.”

“Yeah. Right.”

Carson met his brother’s eyes. “She’s just a distraction and a project. Bridget thinks it’s more than that, but it’s not.”

“Well, Bridget likes drama and that’d be one hell of a drama in our family.”

Carson almost smiled as he imagined that scenario.

“It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you interested in a woman the way you’re interested in Sam.”

“It’s just a case of opposites attract. It’s nothing more than that. Once the novelty wears off, we’ll be wondering what attracted us in the first place.”

“Bullshit. Carson, you’re not fooling me. You and I used to carouse together back in our high school and college days. I know you.”

“I do not carouse.”

“Maybe not anymore, but you sure as hell used to know how.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I know when you’re playing and when you’re serious. I’ve only seen you serious like this one other time.”

“And don’t remind me how that turned out. I haven’t stepped foot inside a church since.”

“Sam is nothing like Marcia.”

“And she’s not like me. We have nothing in common.”

“Who are you kidding? You two are so much alike it’s a wonder you don’t kill each other.”

“What are talking about?”

“You’re both ambitious, driven workaholics who don’t acknowledge that there’s life after work.”

“That’s how you see it?” Carson had to admit he’d never thought of them like that.

“That’s not how I see it. That’s how it is.”

* * * *

Carson sensed a trap, but it was too late to do a thing about it. When he entered his office Bridget and his father were waiting for him.

Damn, this wasn't good.

"You're involved with her," Bridget accused before he'd even closed the door.

"So what if I am."

"Your judgment is clouded. She needs to be gone. Especially now."

"She's not going anywhere."

"We're not hiring her as the head trainer for the new equestrian center," Bridget insisted.

"I'm not thinking that far ahead."

"Carson, you don't need to think that far ahead. Cedrona is mine to manage once it's operational."

Carson looked to his father for confirmation. "You can't be serious, Dad."

"We're building it for your sister." His father sidestepped the real question with the expertise of a politician.

"Yes, I know that was the plan."

"Hans is the logical choice. For once I'm the one thinking with a clear head. Unemotionally." Bridget set her jaw and cast a withering glance in his direction.

"I am not emotional about Sam. She deserves a chance. She's building up her clientele. She's young and ambitious. Hans is yesterday's news. Sam will be tomorrow's." His father, ever the poker face, leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms across his chest. Not a good reaction. His sister snorted. Carson tripped over his tongue to do damage control. "Besides, I promised her we'd give her a fair chance."

Bridget looked at their father. "See what I mean."

Joe nodded. "Your mother agrees that Hans would be an excellent choice to head Cedrona's lesson and training program."

"What have I been telling you?" Bridget smirked and slanted him a superior sideways glance.

"Carson, on paper Hans *is* the best choice."

"I disagree." Carson dug himself in deeper and wondered what the hell he was doing. Even he knew Hans was the better choice from a logical

business standpoint. Yet his gut, which his father had criticized him for not listening to, was telling him that Sam would be the best long-term choice. But, could his gut be trusted where she was concerned?

“On what grounds?” His father’s intent gaze dissected Carson piece by piece.

Carson searched for words to explain the reservations he felt. “Hans’ ethics are questionable.”

“In what way? I’ve never heard this before.”

Bridget threw her hands up in the air, exasperated. “Dad, he doesn’t have anything. He’s grasping at straws.”

“He has no qualms about stealing students from other instructors.”

“If they were happy, they wouldn’t look elsewhere.” Bridget dug in her purse for a compact and reapplied her lipstick with vicious, angry strokes. She hated it when she didn’t get her way.

“The man is rude and a prima donna. His customer service skills are poorly lacking.”

“That doesn’t make him unethical,” Joe pointed out.

“It’s a horse barn. He doesn’t need customer service skills. People come to him because he’s one of the best. They tolerate his difficult temperament.”

“Bullshit. That’s a poor excuse to be an ass. Sam deserves a chance. She’s been hanging with us while the place is in shambles and under construction. She deserves some consideration for her loyalty.”

“Hans instructs her, Carson. Not the other way around. It’s obvious he’s the best choice. Get your head out of her pants.”

Carson opened his mouth to fire a retort, but his father held up a hand to silence them both. “That’s it. I’m tired of listening to the two of you bicker about this. Here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll decide.”

Bridget shot Carson an ‘I told you so’ look. “Good, because it’s no contest. Hans is the one.”

“Now wait a minute.” Carson glared at her.

“Stop it, both of you! I’m talking about a creative solution to this problem.”

Carson heard what he didn’t say. The dreaded “C” word reared its ugly head to haunt him once again. It was the thing that he wasn’t.

“Like what?” Bridget’s smug smile turned upside down.

"I propose a little contest with me as the judge. The winner takes over Cedrona. The loser can stay as assistant trainer or go with our blessing and a good recommendation."

"What kind of contest?"

"Hmmm. That's a good question. Obviously, it would make sense if it was based on dressage show scores."

"Hans doesn't show anymore, he just trains."

"You're one of his better students."

Carson jumped on that one. "Let's pit you against Sam."

"Now, how fair is that? I'm just a lowly amateur. She's a professional." Bridget's whining grated on his nerves like a bow on an out-of-tune violin.

"Yeah, but you have incredible, well-trained horses imported from the finest European stock." Carson sat back and smiled. This was sounding better all the time. Gabbie and Sam wouldn't let him down.

"I still have to ride them." Bridget pouted.

Their father interrupted. "My game, my money, my horse barn, my rules."

"We'll use the regional championships and count each trainer's top three riders' scores. Since Hans has the better students with better horses, Sam can include her own scores. The trainer with best overall average score will be offered the job."

"I don't know." Bridget seemed wary.

"What? You doubt Herr Doctor can pull it off?" Carson lounged back in his plastic chair and suppressed a smug grin.

"It's not that, it's just that Sam shouldn't count."

"Sam counts. That's final." Their father looked from one to the other, daring them to challenge his decision. "Bridget, you have two or three horses that could qualify for championships, correct?"

"Well, yes."

"Your scores for each horse can count."

"That's not right." Carson sat up straighter.

"My rules, remember? I'll even sweeten the pot." Joe's eyes glinted. No one loved a good competition more than dear old dad. "I'll throw in a \$50,000 bonus for the winner."

* * * *

Gabbie watched the dark figure make his way down the barn aisle. She snorted. Humans usually turned on lights at night, but not this one. He must see as well in the dark as a horse did.

She sniffed the air. He smelled familiar, yet odd—the kind of smell that emanates from a human when they’re nervous or frightened.

She sighed a big horse sigh, wishing it were the man with eyes the color of her water bucket. She loved the way he smelled. The human disappeared into the tack room, so she went back to munching her hay and flirting with the gelding across the aisle.

Chapter 17

Leave Your Heart on the Bench

Sam chewed on a fingernail as Dr. Matt examined the horse in the crossties. He'd already taken several x-rays.

"I'm sorry to call you out here so late at night, but I didn't think this could wait considering the pompous jerk that owns this horse."

"Don't mince words, Sam, how do you really feel about Schrader?"

Sam laughed, easing some of the tension from her body. In all the years she'd known Dr. Matt, he'd always been fair and straightforward with her. They'd been together through thick and thin. She considered him one of her true friends. Not to mention, he was a damn good vet, one of the best in the area.

"You don't want to know what I really think about that man."

"I understand. You don't have to apologize to me."

"I'm still sorry you had to come out tonight."

"If I'd wanted a 9-to-5 job, I would have been a state worker."

"Gotta pay for that new vet clinic, right?" Sam attempted a teasing tone. It didn't work considering the seriousness of the horse's injuries. "What happened to the other vet you hired to help you out?"

"She left after only three months. I'm looking for someone new."

"Sorry about that." Sam gestured toward the gelding. "What's the verdict?"

Matt shook his head, looking grim. "He's pulled another suspensory tendon."

"Not again. It can't be." Sam's stomach sunk to her toes. She was glad she hadn't eaten for hours. "What's the prognosis?"

"They could give him a year or so of stall rest, but it's not looking good since this is his third time, and it's a hind leg. Dressage horses depend on their hind ends being strong."

"I doubt that the Schraders will be interested in rehabilitating the horse. They're going to blame me, and you know it."

"You didn't have anything to do with this."

"I was the last one to ride the horse."

"It could have happened in the pasture. The horse was sound when you last rode it. Correct?"

Sam nodded. "I'm guessing they'll want to cut their losses and get rid of the animal."

"Well, find out. Jaye can find him a good home."

"How am I going to tell them that their six-figure horse is just a pasture ornament?"

"That's horses. You never know."

"Like they're going to listen to that."

"Sam, as their vet, I'll call them. You don't need to worry about it. I'll explain the situation, what their options are, and what rehab will cost if they choose that route."

"Matt, I owe you one."

"You do at that." He smiled at her, his dark eyes twinkling. Sam felt a twinge of guilt and tried to contain it. He didn't blame her, and of all people, he had the most right. She'd prove her innocence for him as well as herself. They both deserved to know the truth.

"Are you okay?" He stared at her in that strange way he had.

"I'm fine. I'm just worried about the horse." It was a partial lie, but he didn't need to know that. "He's such a sweet animal. Where am I going to find an upper-level horse suitable for a young rider just before the show season begins? Especially that young rider."

"Jaye might know of something. He always has a few irons in the fire."

"A few?"

Matt chuckled.

"It sure seems like there've been a rash of injuries lately. I just can't believe my luck."

"If it makes you feel any better, it isn't just your students' horses; Hans has had his fair share."

"That does make me feel a little better."

Dr. Matt loaded up his equipment and, after leaving instructions for the horse's care, disappeared down the dusty driveway.

She jumped when someone tapped her on the back and whirled around. Juan stood behind her holding a hardcover book.

“Juan, is something wrong?”

“Too many sick and lame horses. Is suspicious.”

“It’s not to anyone’s advantage to have horses with problems. No one would purposely cause them.”

Juan pointed to the book in his hand. “Not what book says.”

Sam read the book title, *Suspect and Detect*. “Where did you get that?”

“Is required reading for online private detective course.”

“I see. What does the book say?”

“Someone always stands to gain from another’s problems. Is life.”

“Not in this case.”

Juan’s eyes darted around the barn. “Must go.” He hunkered down, looked left then right then dashed into the darkness.

Sam watched him go. Sighing, she started to walk up the stairs to her lonely apartment when she noticed a light under Carson’s office door across the hall. Against her better judgment, she rapped on the door and entered, not waiting for an invitation.

Carson looked up. A day’s growth of dark stubble peppered his cheeks and chin. His shirt was rumpled. His dark hair stood on end where he’d most likely run his hands through it. He looked like a real guy, not a Calvin Klein model in a perfume ad—a real guy that she could get very attached to.

Carson the Tight Ass and her together was a stretch. Carson the scruffy guy and her together was a baby step to paradise.

“You sure spend a lot of time in here.” Her voice cracked, worse than an out-of-tune karaoke singer.

“Is there something wrong with your throat?” Carson snapped the lid on the laptop shut and leaned back in his chair.

“Uh, no. I...nothing. So why are you working so late on a Saturday night. No hot date?” Something painful flickered across his face; then the shutters dropped and shut her out.

“I haven’t had a hot date in years—at least it seems like years. As far as working, I don’t have a choice. I have to turn this place around.”

“What are you working on?”

“I’m trying to figure out what to cut to get this budget under control. Of course, Bridget says it’s all crucial.” Carson rubbed his eyes and groaned.

“Crucial for what? Bankruptcy?” Sam moved behind him to look over his shoulder at the plans spread on his desk.

“Anything this big,” she noted, pointing at the plans, “is never going to turn a profit. This area can’t handle an equestrian center of this size. It’s overdone. Too ambitious.”

Carson heaved a deep sigh. “Bridget and my mother designed it. What would you expect?”

“Common sense.”

“From them?”

“Point taken.”

“The original design was done when ReynCorp had money to burn and could absorb a large loss like this as a write-off. That’s not the case now, but we have horse show contracts for next year that we need to fulfill.”

Sam nodded as she stared at the plans. The place looked like a frigging Disneyland for horses.

“So what would you do to change it?” Carson leaned forward in his chair. He glanced up. His brilliant blue eyes drilled into hers with an interest that didn’t seem entirely businesslike. A small seed of hope took root in her heart, while something more carnal took seed between her legs. Sam swallowed and roped in her lust, because that’s all it could possibly be, a classic case of opposites attract.

With a not too steady hand, she pointed at the plans. “I’d cut the size of the large indoor arena by a third. You can still fit a full-size dressage arena in there. I’d get rid of three of the five outdoor arenas. If there’s enough demand for the extra arenas, you can add them later. I wouldn’t bother making them all-weather. That’s a huge expense around here. No one wants to ride in the rain in the winter anyway even if the footing allows it. Yet, they have to drain well enough to withstand the summer rain. And—” She jabbed a finger at a spot on the plans. “The horses don’t need a swimming pool.”

“There’s a swimming pool for horses in these plans? That’s what that is? I couldn’t read the architect’s writing.” Carson’s brow furrowed in concentration as he took a closer look. “Shit. I don’t believe it. What do horses need a pool for?”

“For therapy. To exercise horses that can’t be ridden or put weight on a leg. It’s a luxury you can do without.”

“Undoubtedly.” Carson rubbed his chin. “What else?”

Sam reached around him and changed to the drawings of the interior. “You don’t need custom stalls with fancy wood, mahogany or teak or whatever it is. The horses don’t care, and the people won’t either if the care is good, the place is clean and safe, and they’re happy with the trainers.”

His breath feathered her cheek, and those feathers of pleasure wafted downward and tickled her every nerve ending, leaving her super-charged and ready for action. Her fingers itched to touch that uncharacteristic stubble on his chin. Her lips longed to capture his firm, uncompromising lips and make them soften and meld with hers.

“Those are good ideas.” Carson stared at her. The man seemed to be in a state of shock. She didn’t know whether to be flattered or insulted.

“It’s hard to believe that the Chaos Queen could sort through all the rubble in her brain and actually present some intelligent business ideas.” Sam let a little sarcasm seep into her voice hoping it’d cool down the heat in the room. It didn’t.

“That’s what has me speechless.” His tone might be bantering but his expression was deadly serious.

“I love it when you show such confidence in my abilities.”

“Not as much as I love it when you shock the hell out of me. I’d like to talk to you more in depth about this, but it’s late and I need to...” His voice drifted off, as if he forgot what he was saying. Carson glanced down at her hand resting on the plans in front of him. He sucked in a breath. It was happening again, this thing they had going. A delicate silk thread stretched between them, forging a fragile connection. She shivered, but she wasn’t cold. In fact, it was just the opposite; she was hot, very hot.

Carson watched her. Those slate blue eyes saw all and grew as warm as a Caribbean pool. He covered her hand with his, touched her knuckles, and stroked the inside of her thumb with his index finger. A little thrill ran through Sam, the same feeling she used to get in her young and stupid days when jumping five-foot jumps at breakneck speed.

The pretty boy’s hand tightened around hers. Problem was, he wasn’t looking all that pretty right now. Instead, he was looking damn sexy and way too appealing. Swallowing, she rallied her will power and sprinkled it with a bit of attitude, a surefire prescription to piss him off and break this spell between them.

"Is Rule Number Three to hustle the hired help? Is that how you rich boys do it?" She yanked her hand away from his and tucked it to her side.

He didn't give her the satisfaction of taking the bait. Instead, he ran one hand through his hair then rubbed his eyes. "Sorry. Did you come in here to talk or did you need something?"

"What?" She blinked a few times. That was it? No argument that she'd physically removed her hand? And as a result, there would be no promise of a hot night under the sheets. He should be arguing, not giving up so easily. Unless—it just didn't matter to him. She felt like a lovesick, naïve fool.

"Do you need something?"

Now that was a loaded question. She shook off the stupor she'd fallen into and tried to remember why she'd entered his office in the first place. "I don't know. I'm not sure. Something doesn't seem right."

"Oh, God, have you been hanging around Juan?" He relaxed a little and leaned back in his chair.

"Carson, I'm serious. Dead serious."

Carson gestured toward a folding chair in the corner, all business. "Have a seat."

"I have another student's horse that's injured. In fact, he's most likely unusable. At the least, he'll be off for a year or more."

"Whose horse?"

"Schrader's."

"Oh. Not good."

"Yeah, that's not all. There seems to be a rash of these lately."

"Your students?"

"I know what you're thinking. Three of my students' horses have had various injuries in the last couple weeks, but Hans has also had several according to Dr. Matt."

"Is that unusual? I recall my sister's horses getting injured all the time. They're no different than any athlete that puts stress on their joints."

Sam shrugged. "You're probably right. I suppose Juan's warnings have me on edge. He's taking an online course to be a private detective."

"I wonder if we should do a background check on him."

"I did before I hired him. Nothing."

"He could have changed his name."

"Now he has us doing it." Sam stood up straight and put her hands at her

sides. "Maybe I should get going."

Carson stood. His eyes searched her face. "Do you have to?"

"I think it would be smart." Not that smart was really on her mind right now. In fact, what she was thinking was a far cry from smart—more like stupid. Real stupid. Regardless, she wasn't going to get stupid tonight.

Sam headed to the door. "Go to bed, Carson," she called out behind her.

* * * *

Go to bed?

That was exactly what Carson wanted to do, just not alone and not to sleep.

Besides, he needed to tell her about the contest between her and Hans. He suspected she wouldn't appreciate his deal with his father.

"Sam?"

She stopped with her hand on the doorknob and turned back to face him. Damn, she looked good, even without makeup and in those ragtag jeans and oversized t-shirt. He couldn't bring himself to tell her, not when they were actually getting along. He'd save it for a moment when he wanted to get under her skin. Right now she was the one getting under his skin.

Damn. His life wasn't supposed to work like this.

Thoughts of her were invading his every waking moment and his sleep, too. Something had to change. He needed to walk off the field or play to win. But if his body joined the game, how could he keep his gullible heart on the bench?

Chapter 18

The Horse Show Debacle

Carson strode past millions of dollars in horseflesh, fancy trucks, and fancier horse trailers. It was mind-boggling. His steps increased the closer he got to Sam. It wasn't that he was anxious to see her, not at all. He was excited about seeing his horse at her first show. It had nothing to do with Sam.

He passed Bridget's truck and trailer. Her rig was new, shiny, and big enough to have its own zip code. His sister was nowhere to be seen, but a groom quietly and efficiently prepared her horse for the next class. Saddles, bridles, and grooming tools were neatly arranged in the trailer's tack room, everything spotless and polished. She had a place for everything and everything in its place. It was an organizational masterpiece that did her brother proud.

Carson stopped dead when he spotted Sam's rig. He'd thought her apartment had been a mess. It didn't compare to this. The truck and trailer belonged on the movie set of *Grapes of Wrath*. Even worse the surrounding area looked like a weapon of mass destruction had hit it. Carson maneuvered around ground zero in search of life, namely Sam and his horse.

The grass was littered with horse brushes, saddle pads—some dirty, some clean, leather bridle parts, pieces of clothing, boots, and other equine paraphernalia. Pieces of paper and old horse show ribbons fluttered in the breeze from various nooks and crannies.

Incredible. Maybe Dr. Phil could do a show on this woman.

In the midst of it all was Sam, running in circles in a panic but not really accomplishing anything. Damn, he had his work cut out for him. Organizing this woman might be tougher than keeping Bridget on a budget.

He walked closer, stepping carefully over the debris. His horse was tied to the trailer. The big mare nickered and gave him those doe eyes. Carson

kept his distance and ignored his equine admirer. She wasn't any safer than the human type.

Sam paused from her mindless circles to emit a muffled snort. "I'm glad you showed up. It would've broken her heart if you'd missed her debut. The poor animal is infatuated with you."

"Great. Wonderful. I make it a rule never to date a female over five hundred pounds."

"She'll be crushed."

"Not as crushed as I'd be." Carson gave the mare the once over. The elephant blinked at him and yawned, showing two rows of very big teeth. "Horses *are* vegetarians, right?"

Sam rolled her eyes. "Make yourself useful and carry this to the arena. It's too hot to wear it while I'm warming up." Sam tossed a black riding jacket to him. It was smudged with dirt and dusted with horsehair.

Carson raised one eyebrow but bit back a smart remark.

Sam straightened her hat and checked her stock tie. "How do I look?"

"Like you just fell out of the eye of a tornado."

"Thanks, that gives me confidence. They're scoring my horse and my riding, not my appearance." Sam huffed. That woman did have her huffing down to an art.

"I might be ignorant about horse shows, but I'm not stupid. It's a subjective sport, so appearances play a part. You know as well as I do that it makes a difference with the judges, even if it's unconscious."

Sam pursed her lips and turned her back on him. Swinging into the saddle, she steered Gabbie in the direction of the warm-up arena, her spine stiff and proud. Carson tagged along.

He'd insulted her and hurt her feelings, but damned if he knew any other way to get through to her.

Leaning his arms on the top rail, he took in the scene before him. The warm-up ring resembled a demolition derby with as much dust or more. No one paid attention to anyone else. A dozen or more horses were going every which way, yet somehow they managed not to collide. It was amazing, almost as if it was carefully orchestrated for some movie. And he thought horse shows were boring.

Carson held his breath as an animal larger than Gabbie lumbered down the arena wall. The fat, middle-aged rider bounced in the saddle like a

bobblehead; her arms flailed in the air, and her legs flapped against the horse's sides. Her air time out of the saddle would have impressed an Olympic high jumper. The horse, on the other hand, seemed oblivious to her existence. He chose his own course, weaving in and out of the crowd like a hockey player driving to the net. The animal zigged when he should have zagged and sent a wild-eyed Arabian leaping almost vertically in the air. The kid on the Arab's back hung on like an expert, as if it happened every day. The Bobblehead remained focused on her horse's ears, never noticing the havoc she'd caused.

"WHAT IS ZEEZ?" boomed a familiar baritone with a German accent. Hans stalked to Carson's side, gesturing dramatically at Sam who was holding Gabbie back, walking small circles.

Carson kept quiet. He figured Hans didn't need an answer. After all, this was Sam the Chaos Queen.

"Shoulder-in! Ride forward!" he belted out in a voice that sent three horses shying across the arena. Sam nudged the mare into a trot, and Gabbie, in full drama-queen mode, overreacted and shot forward, almost unseating her.

"YOU ARE RIDING AS BADLY AS YOU LOOK!!!" Hans seemed poised to leap into the ring and ride the horse himself. "DETAILS! It's all in the details!"

Carson couldn't argue that point. Sam's details left a lot to be desired. All the other horses had neat, tidy rows of braids in their manes. Gabbie's mane stood on end in places and some of the braids were crooked. Her own appearance didn't fare much better in comparison to the other riders. Her clothes were ill fitting and too big for her. Her boots were dusty and unpolished. That white thing she wore around her neck, oh yeah, the stock tie, was off to one side. Two splotches of dirt graced her white breeches. Her hair peeked out from her helmet. Lord, she was a walking disaster.

Hans, on the other hand, was pristine in his tan breeches, boots polished to a mirror finish, and white polo shirt, which caused Carson to gloat. A person could wear white around horses and not get dirty.

And his sister, now there was a fashion example if there ever was one. Her impeccable black jacket looked like it'd never been close to a horse. Her boots were so polished they could double as a mirror for putting on her makeup.

Carson supposed he could make excuses for Sam. She didn't have a groom. She'd been running from arena to arena all day trying to coach students and ride her own horses. Still, dressage appeared to be a very precise sport. Precise dress couldn't help but impress the judges.

He'd have a talk with her before the next show. If need be, he'd hire a groom to take care of the details. He couldn't have someone representing him with such a disheveled appearance. Hans wasn't overly impressed with her appearance either.

Adam Schrader, who came to stand next to Hans, interrupted Carson's musing. "Herr Ziegler, you have your work cut out for you." Schrader gestured toward Sam, now careening around the arena on a half-out-of-control Gabbie.

Hans, disgusted, turned away from the arena and focused his attention on Schrader. Carson watched, attempting to appear detached and disinterested.

"How good to see you again. Have you given any more thought to my FEI prospect?"

"That question took care of itself. My daughter's horse has suddenly come up irreparably lame. She needs something ready to go right now. The cost is immaterial."

Saliva dripped from the corner of Hans's mouth, or it should have. "The horse has the talent, but he'll need a tactful rider." Hans paused to watch Sam. Gabbie was bolting left and right, sending horses and riders scurrying for cover.

"Of course." Schrader's eye followed Gabbie around the ring. She wrestled the horse under control, but only for a moment. Carson's eyes narrowed as he watched his sister veer in front of Sam. She had to jerk the mare in a tight circle to avoid a collision. Like a skidding car, the mare slipped and almost went down. That damn sister of his was going to get a piece of his mind. Messing with Sam might be a misdemeanor, but endangering his investment constituted a felony.

"Sam is talented, but undisciplined." Hans spoke with the superiority of a man who knew his place in the world.

"She's her own worst enemy." Schrader agreed.

"I am certain she's an adequate instructor."

Carson bristled. The German knew exactly what he was doing, courting

Schrader's favor. Sam was right not to trust him.

"My daughters are too gifted to settle for adequate."

Gifted at being pains in the ass, Carson decided.

"Would you like me to schedule a time for your daughter to try the horse?"

Schrader gave a dismissive wave. "Absolutely not. I'm well aware of your reputation. If you say the horse is good, it's good."

"Ya, it is."

"I'll write you a check on Monday. I'd like my daughters scheduled for lessons starting next week."

"My schedule is quite booked." Hans made a show of consulting a PDA. "But given their natural abilities and dedication, I will squeeze them in somehow."

Carson almost choked. Hans was pouring it on way too thick. It was all about money. He could have those spoiled girls. Sam would be better off without the Schrader brats.

* * * *

As Hans' critical voice boomed across the arena, Sam seethed from the humiliation of it all. *Jerk. Pompous jerk.* He was making an ass out of her in front of her students and most of all, Carson.

His bellowing was bad enough, but his silence was deadly and suddenly he'd fallen silent. She slanted a glance toward the man in between Gabbie's airs above the ground. Schrader had joined them. That wasn't good, not good at all. Even Carson didn't look so smug anymore. He looked annoyed.

Unfortunately, Herr Doctor could ride, train, and teach even better than his immense ego believed he could. If there had been any justice in the world, he'd be all talk and no substance. That wasn't the case. Hans was one of the best. He'd almost made her one of the best, until she'd lost her horse and—not the thing to be thinking about before entering a class. Pay attention, Sam, she chastised herself.

Perhaps just a small bit of her predicament could be attributed to her being just a teeny bit late to the show grounds (only about two hours) and just a little disorganized. She usually knew which pile everything was in, but it was her first show of the year. She'd get better.

Sam's excuse making was interrupted as Bridget's horse shot toward Gabbie in an extended trot across the arena. Sam had to wrench the mare in a tight circle to avoid a collision with Bridget's massive gelding. Bridget was everywhere, getting in her way at every turn. She was purposely trying to undo her concentration, and she did it so well that no one else would notice how deliberate it was.

By the time her short warm-up was over, she'd worked herself into a state of nerves. Gabbie was in a lather and dancing on tiptoes. Her sensitive mare couldn't handle being wrenched about. Bridget was a mean-spirited, self-absorbed bitch. Somehow, she'd find a way to get even with her.

Jaye met her as she left the warm-up for the competition arena. "Take a deep breath, Sam. Don't let those two get to you." He swiped at her boots with a towel and shook his head in defeat.

"Gabbie's fried."

"Just get in there and do what you do best. The mare is a drama queen, and we both know it. If you calm down, she'll calm down. She has her panties in a bunch because she doesn't want to be here, and she doesn't want to work."

Unfortunately, Sam couldn't find it within herself to put her frustrations behind her. Gabbie went around the arena, fighting every step of the way. She shied, bucked, and bolted at random. The judge watched with lips puckered as if she'd just eaten something sour and distasteful. It wasn't a good sign.

At least, she stayed on the horse.

She turned Gabbie down the final centerline. The mare quit fighting, let out a large sigh, relaxed, and happily did a perfect square halt, as if nothing was wrong.

Sam had been had. A rider had to be smarter than the horse, and this mare had just outwitted her.

* * * *

"Your sister needs a lesson in sportsmanship," Hans noted as he stood next to Carson by the competition arena. They watched as Sam rode Gabbie in her 2nd class of the day. The mare had worn herself out in the first class, and now just dragged her big body around the arena as if all the energy had

been sapped from her.

“She’s always needed that lesson. It’s pointless. She’s in to win.”

Hans nodded sagely. “So I’ve noticed. She’s a good rider, but chooses to flit around from horse to horse and never sticks with one long enough to develop a working relationship with it. She is not focused or dedicated.”

“You can develop a working relationship with a horse?”

“Ya, certainly.”

“What about her?” Carson indicated Sam.

“She is still on that horse’s back, is she not?”

“Has that been a problem in the past?”

“This horse has thrown America’s best.”

“Can Sam make a winner of that horse?”

“She has the gift. Attention to detail is her key. Sam is an incredibly talented rider. She rides by feel and intuition. She needs to keep that, yet become more precise to pick up points. That would separate her from the crowd.”

Carson appraised the man for a moment. Appearance wise, he couldn’t fault him. He epitomized the image Carson imagined for Cedrona. Yet, there were things that bothered him. For example, his German accent seemed to come and go. As far as ethics, he stole students from other instructors. Carson witnessed two more incidents in which Herr Doctor intimated that a rider could do better with his expertise.

“So how is this scored anyway? I mean how does someone win?”

“Ah, it’s pretty complicated, but I will attempt to simplify it for you.”

“Give it a shot. I’m not as dense as you think.”

“The rider memorizes a pattern called a test. Each part of the pattern is performed according to the letters located around the arena. For example, trot the horse in a circle starting at letter A and ending at A.”

Carson held his hand over his mouth to stifle a yawn.

“Are you listening?”

He nodded.

“The tests are divided into movements and each movement is awarded a score from 1-10, similar to figure skating, but tens are beyond rare. A seven or eight is an excellent score; a six is average. There are four levels, First through Fourth. Then there are the FEI Levels, Prix St. George, Intermediare I, and Intermediare II, and Grand Prix. Grand Prix is the level ridden in the

Olympics.”

“FEI? Sounds like a store that sells sporting goods.”

“It is French and is an abbreviation for Fédération Equestre Internationale and is the international level of competition.”

“What level is Sam competing?”

“Third and Fourth level, which is excellent for a young horse. Each level takes approximately a year to master. Assuming you start the horse at four, most eight-year-olds are at fourth level or lower. Gabriella is only six, but she’s talented and easily bored, so she was moved up faster.”

“If she’s so talented, why can’t she start at the FEI stuff?”

“Because it takes years to build up the muscles and skills necessary for the horse to perform without pain and with confidence. Would you put a ten-year-old in the same exercise program as a professional soccer player?”

“Well, no, of course not.”

“The judge’s scores are recorded on a score sheet, totaled, and averaged into a percentage. The highest percentage wins the class. Good scores are in the mid-sixties. Anything above seventy percent is wunderbar.”

“Seems a little odd.”

“You will figure it out.”

Carson wasn’t sure he cared, as long as the horse did whatever it needed to do to maximize its potential worth.

Sam exited the arena and rode past him without a word. Gabbie reached out and wiped her big nose on his shoulder as she strode by. Carson glared at the animal, certain it was laughing at him. The big elephant stepped out smartly, suddenly full of energy.

He followed Sam back to the trailer but kept his comments to himself. She was nearing the melting point, and he didn’t have any interest in being part of the fallout. Her appearance was even more disheveled than it had been earlier. She reminded him of a flower wilting in the dessert sun.

Sam gasped and stopped Gabbie a few steps ahead of him. Carson looked in the direction of her gaze.

Shit.

Every tire on her truck and horse trailer was flat.

Chapter 19

Flat Tires Make for Bumpy Rides

Bridget was standing by her horse trailer when Sam and Carson pulled into the barn parking lot. She looked like she'd just walked out of Glamour Magazine, while Sam looked like, well, like Sam. And Carson, lord, Carson had a feeling that he looked like a male version of Sam—dirty, sweaty, disheveled, and tired. That's what happens when you help AAA change eight tires.

Sam got out of the truck before it even braked to halt and stalked past Bridget. Without a word, she went to the back of the trailer and started unloading horses.

Carson exited the driver's side and advanced on his sister. Bridget looked him up and down but didn't budge. Not much intimidated her. "I thought you were going to reform *her*. It looks like she's reformed you from tight ass to slob in a short month. Unbelievable."

Carson ignored her and stepped closer. His expression was menacing. Bridget actually took a step back. "I can't believe that even you would stoop that low." He spat the words out one syllable at a time.

"She could and would." Sam interrupted as she stomped by leading Gabbie.

Bridget rolled her eyes. "What are you talking about, dear brother?"

"As if you didn't know."

Bridget shrugged, bored by the conversation and studied her fingernails. "She kept getting in my way in the warm-up arena. What was I to do?"

"So you let the air out of her tires?"

Bridget's head jerked up. "What? I never did anything like that. That would be cheap and underhanded. I prefer my fights to be face-to-face."

"Fights? So you admit that you're after Sam?"

"I'm not *after* her. I'm trying to prove a point. She's not appropriate for

the future of this barn or for you, big brother. You're not seeing this situation with your eyes open. That's not like you."

"Maybe you didn't physically do it, but you set someone up to do it."

"Get real, Car. That's not my style, and you know it."

He had to concede that one. It wasn't like his sister to pull something like that. It was one of the few things she wouldn't do. "You're sure?"

"Don't insult me. I don't need to sabotage Sam. She does a good enough job on her own."

Bridget had a point there. "Maybe you didn't, but you purposely got in her way in the warm-up, over and over again."

"So? She claims to be a professional. She needs to handle it. I'm just a lowly amateur. Her performance in the show ring was abominable. She fell to pieces and so did the horse. Let's see, what was her score? Fifty-one percent? That's a disgrace for someone of her alleged caliber."

Carson didn't know what to say. He had this sinking feeling that Bridget might be right. Was his judgment clouded by his insane physical attraction to Sam?

"Hans was talking to you. What does he say about her?"

"You already know. He makes his opinion no secret."

"Well, he's right. Listen to him." Bridget paused as Juan scurried by, darting between the truck and trailer. "What the hell is that nutcase doing now?"

Carson glanced around. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Bull. You do, too. We need to fire that guy. He's dangerous."

"Hardly. Sam says he's a good farm manager."

Bridget stomped her foot. "Sam needs to be fired, too."

Carson squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. "I am not giving up on her. Even Hans admits she has raw talent and potential."

Bridget's eyes narrowed shrewdly. "Carson, your judgment is skewed by your personal involvement."

"There is no personal involvement. I believe I can turn her around."

"Ah, my brother, the miracle worker. Somehow the image doesn't fit. What's happened to you? You used to be the hatchet man. If someone didn't do the job the exact way you wanted, they'd be out the door in a flash."

Carson glared at her. What did she know? He was a very committed guy. "Maybe I've changed."

“That’s what Dad’s hoping for.”

“Keep Dad out of this.”

“Oh, did I hit another sore spot?” She tossed back her long dark hair and checked her makeup in the truck side-view mirror, bored with their conversation.

“That’s enough.”

Bridget straightened and faced him. “It is for now, since you aren’t admitting to any guilt. Maybe you took the air out of those tires so that you could play the part of the hero?”

“Me? And get soiled on purpose?” Carson held out his dirty hands and made a show of staring down at his grungy white shirt and torn slacks.

“She’s getting to you. Before you know it, your house will look like hers, you’ll be playing country music, and drinking wine from a box. Give up, Carson. Let’s concede that Hans is the best. Sam doesn’t stand a chance, and you know it.”

“I don’t know any such thing. Besides, you don’t get a vote in this and neither do I. Dad set the rules. We’re playing by them.”

“Does she know what the rules are?”

“Not yet, but she will. I didn’t want to put undue pressure on her before the show.”

“Like it would’ve mattered. I’m telling Hans tomorrow, so he can formulate a plan, not that he’ll need one. He is an exacting and thorough person, unlike her.” Bridget glanced in Sam’s direction and rolled her eyes. Stuff was already falling out of the trailer and littering the ground.

“We’ll see.” Carson stalked off to help unload the trailer.

This was war. He intended for Sam to have every advantage. If you want to be a winner, you had to look like a winner. This past weekend proved that. He’d be damned if she’d go to one more horse show looking like a homeless person. He’d enlist Jaye’s assistance to buy her a new set of show clothes and new bridle. That man did love to shop.

Next he needed to figure out how to afford a new truck and trailer. He swiveled his gaze to his classic Jaguar, parked nearby in the parking lot.

He’d miss that car.

* * * *

The old truck coughed and spat black smoke then gave its last dying gasp, going out with bang and a whimper. Sam cranked the key again. The thing made a feeble attempt to turn over; then it fell silent. She pressed her head against the steering wheel and burst into tears. What more could happen? She had four horses to haul to the show in a few days and no truck.

Damn. Damn. Damn. Sam pounded her fist on the steering wheel. With a resigned sigh, she lifted her face, wiped the tears from her eyes and took a deep breath.

"Hey, what the hell was that noise? And what's all this smoke?" Carson poked his head in the driver's side door, took one look at her, and frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Please, just go away."

"No, I won't. What's going on?"

"You can't help me?"

"What makes you so sure of that?"

"Are you a mechanic?"

Carson shrugged. "What's the problem?"

"It won't start."

"Oh, so it was this piece of shit that just about blew out the side of the barn on its dying breath."

"Yes, it was my piece of shit."

"I'll call the garage and have it towed. It sounded like it blew a rod."

"I can't afford that. Anyway, how would you know?"

Carson studied her for a long, long time. "Pop the hood," he ordered.

Sam started to laugh then shut up. She had to see this. As rotten as this day might be, watching Carson try to fix her engine in his pristine clothes would provide some comic relief. She pulled the latch to release the hood and jumped out of the cab. Carson lifted the hood and peered underneath.

"This thing is a mess. There's oil everywhere. It looks like your apartment."

"It ran; that's all I cared about."

"Obviously."

"I suppose you could eat off of your engines."

"I suppose you could."

Carson messed around inside, inspecting parts and reaching down as if he actually knew what he was doing. The man was incredible at faking it.

His arms were black with grease and his shirt was ruined. He leaned into the driver's side and turned the key. The engine whined, screeched, and made a popping sound followed by silence.

Then he really shocked her by crawling underneath. Finally, he stood up and shook his head. Sam stared at him and considered falling in love. Right then. Right there. Just like that.

The man's hair was mussed, and he was an oily mess. His sweaty shirt stuck to his chest. He was *just her type*. Except this was a momentary aberration for a pretty boy.

"It's dead, Sam."

"I could've told you that, Einstein."

"I mean it needs a new engine."

Sam bit back a sob. Not today, not now. "What do you know about cars?" He had to be wrong. He had to be.

Carson raised one black eyebrow. "More than you'd ever guess."

"I wouldn't guess much."

"I'm sure you wouldn't. You seem to have a low opinion of my blue collar abilities."

"You've never worn a blue collar in your life."

He raised one eyebrow but didn't comment. "We'll have it towed."

"Now what am I going to do for this weekend?" She bit her lip, using the pain to distract herself so she didn't cry.

"My sister has a truck."

"She's hauling her own horses."

"Oh." Carson thought on that for a while. "Okay, I'll get something."

"You don't need to do that."

"But I do, it's in my best interests. I was going to anyway. Just hadn't gotten to it yet."

"Why would you do that?"

"My horse needs to travel in style." He glanced at the piece of junk littering his driveway. "And safely. I'll be back in a couple hours with something that'll work."

Several hours later, that "something" pulled into the driveway. Sam fainted, almost. A one-ton black Chevy diesel pickup pulling a huge gooseneck horse trailer stopped several feet in front of her. It had to be at least a four-horse if not bigger, complete with deluxe living quarters.

Carson stepped out, grinning from ear to ear. "Well?"

"Carson, who did you borrow that from?"

"I didn't borrow it. I bought it."

"You bought it?"

Carson grinned, like a little boy at Christmas. He seemed to be having way too much fun.

"Why did you buy...such...such a huge rig?"

"Because I wanted to."

"I don't know what to say."

"Thank you works."

"Thank you." Sam choked up and cleared her throat.

"The farm needs a truck and trailer anyway. I'm using it for business, so what the heck, I'll write it off."

"Can I see it?"

Carson gave her a tour. He must have memorized the salesman's speech because he did an excellent job. The trailer had four stalls. She'd guessed right. The front part housed the most luxurious, though overdone, living quarters she'd ever seen in a horse trailer. A large bed was in the gooseneck; below that was a small living/kitchen area with a bathroom and shower.

"I'm blown away."

"Then you like it?"

"Who wouldn't like it? The living quarters are a little over the top. It looks like a bordello on wheels."

Carson laughed. "I guess the guy that ordered this trailer and never paid for it was a gay, overly eccentric Arabian horse trainer."

"That explains the mirrors on the ceiling above the queen bed and the red velvet curtains. At least it looks normal on the outside."

"I've never shopped for horse trailers before. I thought that kind of tackiness was normal."

"In some circles, I'm sure it is. I can always park it on Aurora Avenue at night and pick up a few extra bucks."

Carson threw back his head and laughed.

Chapter 20

Heaven on Horseback

Sam checked her watch for the tenth time in the last five minutes. It wasn't unusual for the spoiled Schrader girls to show up late for a lesson but not a half-hour late.

Sighing, Sam gave up. She needed the money the Schraders brought in, but she was somewhat relieved they hadn't shown. Diana Schrader's performance at the show had been substandard, and she knew she'd be blamed.

Jaye roared down the driveway. His hot little red sports car slid to a halt next to the barn. Gravel sprayed ten feet in all directions followed by a cloud of dust. The man always had to make an entrance. He exited gracefully from the small car, immaculate in his European breeches and matching shirt.

"Hey, why aren't you torturing yourself teaching the brat sisters?"

"They didn't show."

"Hmmm. Now that *is* interesting."

"Do you know something?"

"Maybe more than I realized. I approached Adam yesterday about a young rider prospect he might be interested in that's ready to go to replace Julie's horse."

"And?"

"He told me he'd already purchased a horse from Herr Ziegler."

Sam whipped around and stared at him. "You're joking?"

"Nope."

"Well, isn't that convenient for him. I'm sure he offered his expertise so they get the most out of the horse."

"Of course. Don't worry." Jaye grinned at her and flicked a speck of dust from his breeches. "That animal isn't sound. It won't last long."

"What do you know about that animal?"

"I imported it and sold it a year ago. It's been lame off and on ever since. Not a good investment." Jaye leaned forward and lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone. "Interesting, isn't it, that Hans' students' horses seem to go lame quite often? It always happens when he has a sale horse or two waiting in the wings with a big price tag and a big commission for him."

"Julie was my student at the time."

"He scored twice. He sold a horse and gained two students whose daddy has a bottomless wallet."

"What are you getting at, Jaye?"

"Nothing, really. Just an observation."

"Well, I've known that man for years. He would never harm a horse for money or to further his career."

"Imagine that. You're defending the jerk."

"I'm not defending him, but what you're insinuating needs to stop right here."

"He sold you out, Sam. He could have defended you, but he didn't. You don't owe him any loyalty whatsoever. It's all about what's in it for him."

Sam could say the same thing of Jaye in most cases. "Herr Doctor will have his hands full with Adam Schrader if that horse doesn't make it through the show season."

Jaye smiled a secret smile. "Won't he? A shame, isn't it?"

Both their heads turned as a car pulled into the driveway. Hans' conservative dark green Beemer stopped in front of the barn.

"Excuse me, I have an appointment with a dishonest bastard."

Jaye grinned with glee. "Can I stick around and watch?"

"I'd rather you didn't. You never could stomach blood and gore."

* * * *

Sam might be furious at the man for stealing her most lucrative clients, but she didn't miss teaching those girls. She'd give anything to see how Hans whipped them into shape. No more excuses and no more blaming the horse. Hans didn't tolerate unfair treatment of horses. People were a different story.

When she'd confronted him about the Schraders' defection, he'd blown her off. *The Schraders were discerning clients with exacting demands she*

couldn't meet in her current unsystematic state. The man was an arrogant, pompous ass, who read from the same book as Carson.

Regardless, she didn't have to like him to learn from him. Fighting him hadn't gotten her anywhere, so if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Besides, Carson was footing the bill. She might as well take advantage of some very expensive instruction. Hans' fees were prohibitive on her budget unless she wanted to become an indentured servant like she had years ago. Trainers of his caliber didn't come cheap, but they did come with all sorts of eccentricities and demands. Today she'd cooperate during her lesson if it killed her, so she saddled the redheaded witch mare and headed for the arena.

Sam sat quietly and followed Hans' instructions. For once, she was in sync with Carson's temperamental mare. Even Hans wasn't doing much yelling. In fact, she heard him say "Güt, güt" a few times.

When she touched the mare's sides with her calves, Gabbie sprang forward. Too bad she hadn't behaved like this at the show. She rode the mare in endless circles and performed more difficult movements under Hans' direction. Gabbie flicked her ears back and forth, as she concentrated on processing her rider's requests.

It happened slowly, subtly, but it happened—the thing every rider craves but few achieve. Hans' voice faded in the background as Sam's mind and body merged with the horse in a symphony of two different creatures united as one.

Controlled energy and raw power surged under her. The mare danced on air, eager to please. She seemed to be saying, *Now? How about this? This? Right, you want this?* No, Sam told her by closing her ring finger on the reins. *Come back to me. Slow down.* Like a car gearing down, the mare's speed transformed into more power, putting more bounce in her stride, causing her to float and spring off the ground. To an observer, the horse grew a couple inches taller. Following the direction set by her eyes, Gabbie responded to subtle clues from the give and take of Sam's hands, seat in the saddle, and legs on her sides.

Nothing on earth equaled this feeling of controlled impulsion. Sam lived for it. As fleeting as these moments were, they kept her coming back for more. Like most true dressage riders, she'd sacrifice everything for one fluid ride on one very special horse.

“Is güt! Enough for today.” Hans’ booming voice broke her trance. He graced her with a rare smile and a nod, his way of saying he knew what she’d felt, and words wouldn’t do those feelings justice. Turning, he directed his attention to his next student entering the arena.

Sam slowed the mare to a walk. Carson stood near the arena gate. She’d been so engrossed in her riding that she hadn’t even noticed him. She halted and dismounted. Candy, a teenage student of hers, took the reins from her and walked the mare around to cool her out. Thank heavens for horse crazy kids. Candy hung around most of the day now that school was out and did anything she could in exchange for free lessons.

Thanking Candy, Sam walked toward Carson. He opened the gate for her. “Did you have a good ride?”

Giddy from the world’s greatest natural high, Sam threw her arms around a surprised Carson. “Oh, Carson. You have no idea how wonderful that was.”

“Was it?”

“Yes, even you saw it. Admit it.”

“It did look pretty good. When will she be ready for the Olympics?” One corner of his mouth lifted in a suppressed smile. Sam beamed at him and gave him another hug. Holding him was the most natural thing in the world. She gazed up at him, and their eyes locked. A hot fudge feeling, warm and gooey and sweet, spread through her body. Reluctantly, she extracted herself from his arms. He grinned at her. She smiled back. “So? The Olympics?”

A small ray of hope set anchor in her soul. Could he possibly be considering keeping the horse? Sam gathered her wits about her and answered him. “She’s inexperienced and inconsistent. It takes years to train a horse to the top levels of this sport. The Olympics are levels above that.” What she’d give to have that chance.

“Have you ever done that? Trained for the Olympics?”

Sam’s eyes clouded over. Carson’s innocent question sucked the joy out of her heart. “I came close,” she whispered. “But that horse is dead.”

“Oh.” Carson shifted his feet and stared at the ground for a minute. “I’m sorry.”

“Not as sorry as I am.”

“Could I buy you lunch?” His expectant look warmed her all over again.

"You're always feeding me."

"I know. You could use a few pounds. When's the next show?"

"I have her entered in a big show at the end of the month."

"Good. I want to see how my investment measures against the competition when you ride like that."

"Don't expect too much. She's still unpredictable. It'll take her a while to adjust to the hustle and bustle of horse shows."

"I hope it doesn't take too long."

Sam smiled at him, but her heart did a dive. What a predicament. The better Gabbie performed, the better chance she'd bring a good price and the better for Sam's business. Yet, she'd lose the horse. Right now she didn't want to think about that.

This was the horse of a lifetime.

She'd rescued Gabbie from mistreatment and bad training. With slow, painstaking patience, the mare was beginning to trust her. What if her new rider didn't understand her?

Two things were happening that she swore would never happen. One, she was getting attached to an animal that didn't belong to her. Two, she was getting way too attached to a controlling, inappropriate man who didn't fit in her life. Would she ever learn? Or was she doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over?

* * * *

After wiping down the sticky table at Character's, Carson pulled out a notebook and placed it in front of Sam. He watched intently, gauging her reaction.

"What is that?" She frowned at the notebook, making no move to pick it up.

"Your show organizer." He braced himself for the eruption.

"My what?" Her eyes opened wide. "I don't need one." She pushed the book toward him.

Grinning, Carson leafed through the pages and delivered an explanation of each form. "Here is a list of items that you'll need to take to every horse show."

"Like you would have a clue."

"I got it off the Internet on Debbie MacDonald's website." That shut Sam up for a moment. There was no disputing Debbie MacDonald. She was an Olympian of the highest caliber.

Sam tipped her beer to her lips. Carson took a moment to appreciate how she ran her tongue around them afterward. His groin tightened. She was doing it to him again—intentional or not.

"This is way too rich for my blood." Sam pointed at the clothes section. "I don't have enough white breaches and shirts to change every day of the show."

"You're not wearing the same dirty, sweaty clothes every day." Right now he wished she wasn't wearing clothes.

"I always have in the past."

Carson raised an eyebrow but chose not to comment. "This is your show-day schedule. It's adjustable based on your class times. See how it outlines all the preparations you need to make before each class?"

"Where did you come up with this stuff?"

"I already told you." He resisted the urge to be smug.

"Well, Debbie has full-time grooms. Do you really think she does any of this herself?"

Carson turned the page. "This is a form to fill out for your show budget, your ride times, your students and their show schedules, your fees, your expenses."

"Okay, okay, I get the picture. Do you really think I'm going to spend the time it takes to do all this stuff?"

"It's called preparation. And, yes, you will because we'll be doing it together." That wasn't the only thing he wished they were doing together.

He fought to gain a measure of professionalism. His body refused to behave. Instead, it imagined how much fun it would be to tell professionalism to go to hell.

* * * *

The barn was dark and quiet, except for the sounds of horses munching hay or moving around in their stalls.

Gabbie heard the barn door open and put her head over the stall door, hoping for a late night snack from some kind human.

The person walking down the aisle was familiar to her. She leaned on the door and stuck her neck out into the aisle. Her *friend* stole quietly down the aisle in the darkness.

Gabbie nickered, but the human ignored her. She flattened her ears to express her displeasure at being ignored. The silent figure walked past her and entered the stall of another horse.

The air around her grew still, too silent. Gabbie snorted, sensing something was not right.

She heard rustling and a sharp crack followed by scrambling about and banging in the stall. She smelled panic and fear. Several of her stablemates ran to their doors to check out the disturbance. Alarmed, Gabbie whirled around a few times; then shoved her head over the door. She stamped her foot and looked in the direction of the noise. Everything had turned eerily quiet.

The shadow sauntered past her and out of the barn, sliding the door shut. Gabbie stayed by her stall door for several minutes. Through distended nostrils, she drank in the smells of the barn and pricked her ears to catch the slightest sound. She sensed fear and confusion then acceptance and pain from the stall next to hers.

With a deep sigh of resignation, she returned to her hay.

Chapter 21

Something went Bump in the Night

“Now what?” With a feeling of dread, Sam approached Dr. Brandland, who was examining a horse in the barn aisle.

The horse’s owner, a sweet amateur rider named Teddi, glanced at her, worry in her eyes. “It appears she cast herself in her stall and was injured trying to get up.”

“How bad is it?” Sam addressed Dr. Matt.

“I’ll need to do some x-rays or an ultrasound, but I’d say the horse is out for the next six months or more.”

“Oh, no, Teddi. I’m so sorry.”

Teddi wiped a tear and sighed. “That’s horses.” She’d owned horses all her life. She knew what fragile creatures these big animals were, but that didn’t make it any easier. This particular student had worked really hard this year to improve enough to have a chance at an amateur championship. It looked like that dream would need to wait another year—at least.

Sam’s heart went out to her. Teddy was a single woman who taught high school during the day. In the evenings and on weekends, she devoted her life to a local handicapped riding organization and her own horse. She deserved better than this.

Riding and showing a dressage horse was a little spendy for Teddi’s budget, but she hung in there just the same because, like Sam, she had a passion for the sport and those big noble animals.

Teddi was a true saint and dedicated to her cause. If ever Sam wanted to emulate someone, it would be Teddi. Unfortunately, she never quite made it to the true saint category.

Instead she spent too much time fixing the things that she broke, rather than building on the future.

* * * *

Tonight was like every other night. Sam checked the horses before she went to bed. She walked down the aisle and peered in each stall, looking for signs of colic or distress and doling out carrots. The horses knew the routine. Their heads hung over the stall doors with every eye on her except one.

The Schraders' new horse exhibited the same attitude as his owners. He turned his back on her when she approached and stood with his head in the corner. Then he cocked one hind leg as if getting ready to kick. He treated her with the same disdain as the girls. It was funny how things work out like that. She doubted he'd be as tolerant as their old horse. It'd do them good to learn a little tact and discipline. As much as she hated to admit it, Hans was the better person for that job.

Hans might be hard on horses and people, but he believed in putting the blame where the blame lay. Except with her. He had it in for her, always on her case about something. His constant criticism grated on her. She might be a little bit forgetful and disorganized, but she wasn't that bad.

There also was Carson with his imminent lists upon lists, his business plans, and his arrogant assumption that everyone should be as anal as him. After all, his way *was* the only way. Well, it wasn't happening. Not to this girl. He'd be smart to give up his crusade.

Being better organized had nothing to do with winning blue ribbons. She needed more time with the mare, and it would come together—eventually. Oh, yeah, she'd concede that it might make her less stressed to be better prepared, but she didn't need his brand of over-organization. For the next show, she'd get ready a little earlier and keep everything in its place so she could locate it at a second's notice.

All this she could do without Carson's interference. She knew what needed to be done; she just needed to apply herself.

Sam stopped her mental berating of Carson to listen.

Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. It came from outside the barn door.

She frowned. What the heck was that? Did the barn cat get locked in a horse trailer again?

Sam walked toward the partially open door. Something felt off. Oddly, the horses stared at the door, a few of them snorted. She hesitated then chastised herself for being such an idiot. This wasn't a scene from *Friday*

the 13th with Freddy lurking in the woods, ready to hack her to pieces.

Regardless, she peeked around the corner and looked out into the inky blackness. The light in the barn parking lot was out so it was hard to see. She'd forgotten to have Juan fix it.

If she'd kept a list—okay, she'd stop that line of thinking right now. Carson was contaminating her. On reflex, she looked up the hill to the ranch house. A single light shown through the trees. He was probably home. In her limited experience, Carson rarely went out unless it was business related.

A twig snapped in the darkness only a few feet away.

"Carson, is that you?"

The bushes near the skeleton of the old barn rustled, but no one came out of hiding. A chill passed through her and goose bumps rose on her bare arms. The threatening phone call from a month ago played back in her head. She'd almost convinced herself it was a prank and banished it from her mind.

"Stop it." Her voice wavered.

Again nothing.

"Juan? Come out from hiding. Now. This isn't funny. Vamos!"

Nothing. Just the eerie sound of the wind blowing through the trees. Sam stood in the doorway to the barn and held her breath. This was stupid. She was behaving like a helpless woman, and she abhorred helpless women.

Scanning the area around the barn, she turned slowly in a circle. The dim light in the barn aisle illuminated only a small patch of ground. A car passed by on the distant road. Its headlights didn't penetrate the black, starless night. The darkness around the barn gave up nothing, revealed no secrets. Sam groped for the flashlight that Juan kept inside the barn door for emergencies. It wasn't there.

Footsteps crunched on gravel. Her heart lodged in her throat.

"Juan, is that you?"

Silence.

"Juan, this isn't funny."

Nothing.

"Juan, if you don't come out of hiding, I'm firing you. *Again*. And for good this time."

Dead quiet.

"Right. *Now*." Oh, man, she was starting to shriek a little.

One more crunch. A single footstep.

“Juan?”

Sam backed up a step. If she went further into the barn, she could hide. On the other hand, this person would have her confined in a space with only a few ways out. If she could reach the lights, she could switch them off. She knew the barn layout in the dark, presumably her intruder didn’t. Or did he? She?

Snap.

What was that? A wild animal? A deer in the brush? Or a bloodthirsty killer on the prowl, stalking his next victim with a twelve-inch switchblade, chainsaw, hockey mask, and...

This was all Juan’s fault. His constant paranoia had rubbed off on her. She was probably stressing out over Louie hunting mice in the nearby woods.

“Here, kitty. Kitty? Lou?”

But Louie the Executioner, the orange barn cat with a penchant for beheading his victims and leaving them as gifts at her door, didn’t emerge from the darkness. Nor did he emit an annoyed meow, demanding silence for the hunt. Nope, her hunter wasn’t a fat barn cat, but more likely the human kind.

Something crashed behind her. She leapt in the air and whipped around toward the noise. Somewhere between her apartment and the barn door was the origin of that noise. Someone or something was now in the barn. They’d snuck around the back and entered behind her.

Then she saw him—the faint outline of a person. She imagined his eyes glowing yellow like a feline’s as he watched her. Once she made a move, he’d pounce on his prey, drag her into the woods, and do unspeakable things before hacking her into a million pieces.

One thing Sam hated more than a helpless woman was the stupid girl in horror movies who walked into danger despite all the warnings. She never considered herself a stupid girl, messy and disorganized, but never stupid. She didn’t have any intention of being a face on the nightly news or a future subject on one of Juan’s crime TV shows.

Another noise.

Footsteps? They stopped, not too far away.

Sam looked for a pitchfork or something to use as a weapon.

Bam!

Sam jumped. What the hell was that? Sheer terror raced though her faster than a thoroughbred in the Kentucky Derby.

She'd seen all the Friday the 13th movies. If Freddie was lurking in her barn, damned if she'd stick around long enough to find out.

Sam tore out the door, skidded around the corner, through the open gate, and gunned it up the hill with the speed of a world-class sprinter. Her legs pumped harder than pistons on a steam train. Her heart pounded louder than a horse's hooves on concrete.

Straight ahead was safety bathed in the warmth of the light from the ranch house.

She was so near and yet so far. Sam rounded the far turn and entered the home stretch. She imagined footsteps thumping on the dirt road behind her. She dug deeper for a little more speed and ignored her protesting lungs.

* * * *

The woodpecker was back.

That damn thing jack hammered somewhere outside Carson's bedroom window every morning before dawn. The little monster was probably on the endangered species list and knew it. If he wasn't, he should be endangered and for a good reason.

Carson rolled onto his stomach and threw the pillow over his head. The pounding got louder. And louder. *And louder.* It intensified until it occurred to Carson that it would take a 200-pound woodpecker with a sledgehammer to make that kind of racket.

Bleary eyed, Carson sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes.

What the hell?

Fully awake now, Carson heaved himself out of bed and staggered down the hall to the living room. He stubbed his toe on a chair in the darkness. Cursing, he flicked on a light and headed in the direction of the noise—his front door. The person on the other side better have a good reason for waking him out of the first sound sleep he'd had in months.

Yanking open the front door, Carson stared.

Sam stood on his porch like a prey animal, poised for fight or flight. Her wild hair flew every which way. Her eyes were bigger than the zeros in her

bank account. She didn't wait for an invitation to enter. Instead, she burst past him into the hallway, whipped around, and ripped the doorknob out of his hand. She slammed the door shut and drove home the deadbolt. She stood there, chest heaving, body shaking, and stared at the door. Carson said nothing.

Seconds later, she turned around to face him. Carson's guts did something strange and unwelcome at the sight of her distress. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and drive away her fears. He wanted to kiss her senseless, slay her dragons, and take her to bed. At that moment, he'd fight the devil himself to keep her safe.

"What took you so long to open the door?"

"I was asleep." Her accusatory tone drove away his momentary lapse into dragon slayer.

"In what country?"

Carson frowned and fought his inclination to fire back a smart-assed retort. Sam was obviously agitated and goading her wouldn't do either of them any good despite the momentary pleasure he'd derive from it. "Is something wrong?" Carson forced calmness into his voice.

"No. Nothing. What gives you that idea?" Sam peeked out the side entry window down the driveway.

"You."

"I'm fine."

Carson lounged against the kitchen doorjamb and crossed his arms over his chest. "Then to what do I owe the pleasure of this impromptu visit in the middle of the night?"

"Uh..." Sam stared down at her toes. "I...uh...need a cup of sugar."

"A cup of sugar?" Carson repeated incredulously. "You're baking at midnight?"

"I always bake when I can't sleep."

"And why can't you sleep?"

"I..." Sam sniffled. At least he thought he heard a sniffle. But Sam? Sniffle? He found that hard to believe.

"Sam, are you okay?"

She sucked in a breath.

"What is it?" Something warm and tender curled inside him. It was such a foreign feeling, yet it felt so right. He moved a step closer and reached for

her. She hesitated, and then threw herself into his arms. Now she really was sobbing.

Shit.

Carson held her to him. His hands moved up and down her back. He buried his face in her hair, savoring the clean, outdoorsy smell of her. He was in deep, deep *shit*.

"Sam, what's wrong?" He whispered.

She held tighter to him. His bare chest was wet from her tears. "Nothing."

"Liar." He hooked a finger under her chin and gently tilted her face up to his. "I've never seen you like this. Not my strong, independent woman."

"Someone is in the barn."

"What do you mean?"

"Someone's down there. I heard them; then I saw them."

Carson stared over her shoulder down the hill. "Could you tell who it was?"

"No, I just saw a faint shadow."

"Man or woman?"

"I'm not sure."

Carson wiped her tears away with his thumb and resisted the urge to get lost in her golden eyes. "I'll go down and check it out."

"No! Not without me. I'm not staying here alone." She clung to him, and she wasn't a clinging type of woman.

"Maybe it was a cat or an animal of some kind."

"Not a chance. Not unless the barn cat has grown to six-foot-two and walks around on his hind legs."

Chapter 22

Carson, the Dragon Slayer

Sam stared up at Carson. She'd never seen him look so tender. Concern softened his usual hard, unyielding expression.

She fell a little more in love with him at that moment.

"I'll drive down there and take a look around. You can wait in the truck with the doors locked."

"What if he's dangerous?"

"Are you worried about me?" His eyes glinted with amusement.

"Well, you're not exactly the type of guy my brothers would have backing them up in fight."

"You wound me deeply, and you underestimate me. Maybe I have a black belt in Karate."

"You do?"

He laughed. "No, but I can hold my own. I'm not the wuss you think I am."

Carson took her arm and led her to the garage. He opened the passenger door. She settled into the soft leather seat of his new truck. He shrugged into the light jacket he grabbed on his way out, slid behind the wheel, and tossed his cell phone in her lap. "Just in case."

Sam clutched the cell phone as if her life depended on it. She glanced around the garage, empty except for the truck. "Where's the Jaguar?"

"I traded it and my SUV for the truck and horse trailer."

"Carson, you shouldn't have done that. You loved that car."

He shrugged his shoulder. "No big deal. Buying the bordello on wheels was more important." He started the truck and backed out of the garage. He kept his eyes straight ahead.

He'd traded in his beloved car for a truck and horse trailer. She couldn't believe it. A warm feeling spread through her, but she slapped it down. He

didn't make this sacrifice for her. He did it for appearances and for that horse. Biting her lip, Sam stared out the window. The fir trees lining the driveway loomed tall and ominous. They rounded a corner and the barn came into view. Carson pulled into the parking lot and switched off the truck. "What happened to the outside light?"

"It needs to be replaced."

"And you forgot to have that done? Sam, you need to make lists."

"How can you be talking about lists at a time like this?" The man was obsessed. "What if this person is dangerous?"

"It's probably just Juan."

"I'm not sure. His truck isn't around anywhere. He went home several hours ago. Why would he come back?"

"To prove a point to you that there's danger lurking about."

"I guess that's possible." Improbable, but probably not impossible.

Carson raised one dark eyebrow. "Anything is possible with that kook." He opened the truck door. "Wait here."

"Carson." Sam touched his shoulder, and he met her gaze. "Be careful."

Carson swallowed. Something flickered in his eyes that stopped her heart for a beat. "I will."

He slid out of the car, and she locked the doors, feeling a bit like the very type of woman she often ridiculed. She wasn't helpless; she was just smart.

Smart? She'd have been better off facing her unknown stalker than showing up on Carson's doorstep after midnight. The stalker might steal her things, but the pretty boy had stolen her heart.

She held her breath as Carson walked down the dimly lit barn aisle and disappeared out of sight. Tapping her fingers on the dash, she scanned the barn aisle for him, while dread slid through her body. "Car, oh Car, please be okay. I'll never call you pretty boy again." She rolled the window down a crack and listened. Frogs croaked in a nearby pond. The earlier breeze had died down. Sam gnawed on a fingernail. She strained for a glimpse of Carson. Where the heck had he disappeared? How long should she wait? If he didn't show up, should she look for him or call 911? Five minutes passed. Sam put her hand on the door handle and braced herself for the worst.

The worst never came.

Carson strode from the arena and down the aisle. She let out a relieved breath and unlocked the truck door for him. She'd never been so happy to see anyone in her life.

He stuck his head in the door. "I don't see signs of anyone or anything missing. Do you want me to check out your apartment?"

"Yes. I'll go with you." Sam leapt out of the truck and plastered herself to his side. He looked down at her, an amused glint in his eyes.

Her apartment didn't look disturbed; well, at least not any more than normal.

"Sam, though it's difficult to make an accurate assessment, I don't see anything other than your ordinary chaos."

"I don't either. I guess I was just being stupid."

He smiled, a sweet, heart-warming smile. "You weren't being stupid. You were being smart."

Sam shrugged. "It's late. We both have to work in the morning. I'm sorry for bothering you." She didn't want him to go, but she didn't dare ask him to stay.

Carson moved closer in the cramped quarters of her small entryway. "Are you going to be able to sleep?"

"Probably not," she admitted honestly.

He grinned. "Me neither."

"Nothing's wrong. You said it yourself."

"I know I did, yet something just doesn't feel right to me."

There were a lot of things that didn't feel right to her, and one thing that felt too right. "I'll be fine," she lied.

"I have a spare bedroom. Why don't you stay in it tonight? I think we'd both sleep a little more easily."

Speak for yourself, buster. "Carson, I can't put you out more than I already have. Besides, it's not a good idea." She made a move to open the door and give him a not-so-subtle hint to hit the road—rather than the mattress.

"Sam?" Carson moved closer. Sam looked up at him.

She knew.

He knew.

They weren't that tired.

There was nothing either of them could do or would do to stop what was

going to happen.

Hands on her shoulders, he pulled her closer. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and let the devil carry her away to a place where sense and reason didn't count. Carson bent his head. He brushed his lips across hers. She shivered and pressed closer to him.

"Carson..."

"Shhhh. Don't talk. The time for talking is over."

Boy, didn't she know that.

His jacket dropped to the floor. She placed her hands on the bottom of his shirt and pulled it over his head with his utmost cooperation. He stood quietly. His hands dropped to his sides. He didn't move one gorgeous muscle. She took a moment to appreciate the strong planes and lines of his bare chest.

Sam ran her fingers over his chest, down across his flat stomach, and rested them on the buttons of his Levi's. She looked up. He met her eyes and nodded.

"Don't stop on my account."

"Are you sure this is what you want? I don't want to force you."

Carson grinned. "Oh, baby, force me. Force me, please."

"This is a very bad idea."

"I know, but I'd rather regret what we did in the morning than regret not doing anything tonight." He nuzzled her hair. "I don't understand it, but for some strange reason I'm attracted to you."

"It's the age-old opposites attract thing. You'll come to your senses."

"Not tonight," Carson vowed.

Sam could have guessed that one. Tomorrow he'd be tight-assed Carson. He'd apologize and forget about it like a typical man. She'd live with the memories of that one night with him for the rest of her life. Or would it be one night? Would it be a series of one nights, doomed to eventual extinction by their differences? They'd sneak around so that his family wouldn't find out about his illicit affair with the hired help.

Would all that grief be worth a night of wild passion with this man?

Damn right, it would.

Buried deep under all that stiffness was a man with a wild side. She was certain of it, and she wanted to break that barrier despite the harm to herself.

"Sam." His voice was husky with need, as he leaned into her, placed his

hands on her butt, and pulled her closer.

She tilted her head upward and parted her lips in a blatant invitation. His mouth came closer, closer, closer.

Then...

Bang!

They jumped apart and whirled around as one unit to face their potential attacker. Juan stood sheepishly near the open front door.

“What the hell?”

“I heard noise. Was checking to make sure Sam was okay.”

“By leaning against the door and listening?” Carson growled.

Juan shrugged. “You okay? I was coming back to check on horses and saw a car leave the barn area with its lights out.”

“What kind of car?” Sam demanded to know.

Juan shrugged. “Too dark to see.”

“You couldn’t tell a thing?”

“No.”

“Damn. Some private detective you are.”

“So there was someone here?” Carson pulled his t-shirt on over his head. “Why were you coming back in the middle of the night?” He eyed Juan with suspicion.

“I have good ‘tuition. Is person trying to scare you. I tell you, you are in danger. Sí?”

Carson frowned, his expression a combination of skepticism and concern. “Sam, you can’t stay alone. Maybe we should call the police.”

“And tell them what? That I think I heard something? That nothing is missing? That Juan here believes I’m in danger? They’ll blow it off as nothing.” And that she’d gotten a threatening phone call over a month ago. No, she couldn’t tell them all that.

“You’re not staying here alone tonight.”

“I’m not staying with *you*.” The spell had been broken, and her smart-girl brain had asserted itself.

“You would have five minutes ago. What’s changed?”

“I regained my senses, that’s what.”

Juan watched them with interest, his pseudo detective’s mind collecting and cataloging every bit of evidence.

“We stand guard. I not mind. I sleep in empty stall. You do same?” He

addressed that last question to Carson.

Juan really wouldn't mind. In fact, it would make his day to be able to do *real* crime prevention. She couldn't see Carson sleeping anywhere but her bed. Actually, considering the current state of her bedroom, she couldn't actually see him in her bed either.

Carson's eyes grew large. "Me? In a stall?"

Sam almost grinned. "Good night, Carson. I'll lock my door. Juan will be sleeping in the barn. I'll be fine."

"We come up with secret signals if danger comes."

"Great." Carson rolled his eyes.

Sam attempted to shut the door. Carson tried to block her. "Are you sure?"

Sam nodded.

Carson glanced over his shoulder at Juan who waited patiently. Juan didn't move.

Carson glared.

Sam chewed on a fingernail.

Juan still didn't move.

Carson sighed. "Well, then. I guess I'll make myself comfortable—in a stall." He started down the apartment steps.

"Oh, Carson." Sam called after him.

Carson whipped around, obviously hoping for a change of heart. She tossed his jacket at him. He snagged it and continued down the stairs. Juan followed on his heels, eager to plan their next move.

Sam shut the door and broke into laughter, a welcome release from the night's stress.

* * * *

It'd been years since Carson had slept on anything but the best of beds. An empty horse stall with rubber mats and bedded with horse blankets was not his idea of comfort, not even minimalist comfort. Sitting up, he spat straw out of his mouth and stretched his stiff muscles.

Juan sat in one corner of the stall on his haunches and watched him with interest. Carson ignored him and rose to his feet. He folded the clean blanket he'd absconded from the tack room last night in a neat square.

Juan chewed on a pencil then wrote something down in his ever-present notebook. He must have seen Sherlock Holmes carry a similar one.

If it hadn't been for Juan interrupting last night, who knows what would have happened between Sam and him. He had Juan to blame or thank for that. He had Sam to blame for him sleeping in this stall, while she slept in her warm, comfortable bed.

Carson sighed, a deep, long-suffering sigh.

The things a guy would do for love.

A cold colder than the depths of an iceberg scissored through his heart.
No, not that. Not now, not ever again.

Love? Where did that random thought come from? He really didn't get enough sleep last night if he was thinking about the "L" word, the worst 4-letter word in the English language, and his old nemesis.

Love had never caused him anything but pain. He didn't need it, didn't want it.

He wasn't capable of it. Marcia had seen to that.

Chapter 23

Bouncing Checks and a Loose Stallion

“Dad, what a surprise.” Carson rose from the small desk in his barn office as his father walked in the door.

“Your horse trainer said I could find you in here.” The way his father said *horse trainer* didn’t sound favorable. “I do have to agree with your sister. The woman is a mess. She looks like the aftermath of a hurricane.”

“She’s extremely talented.” Carson praised the powers that be that his father had never seen the inside of her apartment or witnessed her organizational abilities at a horse show.

“Do you believe she’s up to the high standards we’ve set?”

“What standards?” Carson felt an argument coming on.

“The same standards we’ve held all of our employees to over the years, including you.”

“Are you insinuating that my performance is substandard?”

“I’m insinuating that you’re sleeping with the hired help.” Joe put his hands on the desk and leaned closer.

“Who the hell told you that?” Carson steeled himself and resisted the urge to move back.

“Your sister. Who else?” Joe pinned him with his intent gaze.

“She doesn’t know shit.” Carson forced his best poker face.

“I see no reason to use profanity. You seem to be a bit emotional about this. That’s not like you.” Joe stood up straight and crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m not emotional.” Carson reined in his agitation with great effort. “Sam is a friend, that’s all.”

“Samantha and you? Friends?”

Carson nodded.

“You’re as different as chocolate and lettuce.”

He didn't need to ask which one of them was lettuce. *Good ol' boring, dependable Carson.* "Didn't you tell me to expand my horizons? To learn how to work with people that don't think like I do?"

"Well, yes, I did, but..."

"Believe me. You can't get any further apart in personality and priorities than Sam and I."

Joe rubbed his chin in thought. "So you're telling me that this is purely business, nothing personal between the two of you? You're merely learning to appreciate the differences in people?"

"Yes, sir. That's exactly right."

His father frowned. He didn't believe a word of it. "If you're not having a relationship with her then why are you defensive about her?"

"Because she's good at what she does. Bridget won't give her a chance because she doesn't have a big name, and she's a little rough around the edges."

"And you think you're the man to soften those edges?"

"I think I can. The raw talent is there. She's disorganized and needs some advice on handling her business in a professional manner."

"Is that really your job?"

"As a responsible project manager, I think it is."

His father didn't comment. Carson didn't have a clue if that was good or bad. "Dad, you gave me this project, now trust me to make the right decisions."

"I'm trying, Carson, I'm trying."

* * * *

Sam found Jaye saddling one of his many horses. This was the part of her business that she truly hated. "Jaye, your board check bounced."

"What? You're joking?" Jaye busied himself with the girth.

"I'm afraid not." Sam handed him the overdraft notice, which forced him to look at her.

He studied it briefly. "Obviously, the bank made a mistake."

"Could you write me another one?" She desperately needed that money. Jaye boarded four sale horses and two of his own. That was a big chunk of change. Those animals still had to eat, and she was paying for their food.

“Certainly. As soon as I’m done riding.”

It didn’t happen. Sam tried to collect again, and Jaye couldn’t find his checkbook. He promised to get another check to Sam the very next day. Only the next day, and the next, and the next—no money, yet Jaye showed up in a new pair of hand-sewn riding breeches imported from Europe. Plus, he was having a spat with his boyfriend and couldn’t discuss such a minor thing as economics after the trauma of the argument.

Now things were getting awkward, and Sam didn’t know what to do next. Jaye didn’t seem the least bit embarrassed, nor did he sense the urgency with which Sam needed the money.

Finally, as a last resort, she approached Carson for advice. Their agreement stated that she collected the board and wrote one large check to Carson. He hadn’t asked for the money yet, but she hated having him think that she was being a flake. She’d never been late before.

Carson looked up when she entered. She’d made herself scarce and so had he the last couple days. He looked so good sitting there in his business casual clothes with his risky-business blue eyes focused on her.

“Any more problems with your intruder?” He shifted his eyes to the computer monitor in front of him.

“No, none at all. Juan’s been taking his surveillance seriously.”

“That’s good.” Carson tapped out a message on his computer.

“Yes, it is.” Sam tensed and waited for his full attention.

“Did you need something? I’m a little busy here.”

“Yes, actually, I do.”

“Well?” He looked up from the screen and met her eyes. A little twinge of excitement raced through her. *Whoa, girl. It’s nothing serious.*

“It’s business-related.”

“Okay.” Carson blew out a breath in obvious relief. What did he expect? For her to pledge her undying love?

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Then just start from the beginning.” He heaved an impatient sigh.

“It’s Jaye.”

“And?”

“He bounced his board check last week.”

“For all six horses?” Carson didn’t seem too surprised.

“Yes.”

“That’s a hefty amount.”

“You’re telling me.”

“Well, just ask him to cut you another check.” In Carson’s black and white world things might seem that simple. It didn’t work for her.

“I’ve asked him several times. He has a different excuse each time. Right now his love life has him too distraught to consider such petty matters. It doesn’t make sense. Jaye claims he has loads of money.”

“What do you think?”

She’d never tell him what she really thought. That he had the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. That she wanted to spend one wild night of abandon in his arms. That she wished they had a future together. That she was as lovesick as that horse of his. Instead she voiced the obvious. “I think he lives above his means.”

“He’s wealthy in horseflesh but cash poor.”

“Seems so. He certainly has a shopping addiction. He always has the finest stuff, never scrimps. Everything has to be perfect.”

“His extravagant lifestyle and out-of-control spending could explain his shortage of funds.” Carson’s eyes locked on hers. Her heart jumped into his lap.

Sam swallowed and cleared her throat. “*If* he has a shortage. Maybe he just doesn’t consider his board a priority.”

“He’s your friend. Has this happened before?”

“He’s perpetually late, but he’s never bounced a check. I’ve heard rumors here and there that there have been issues with other people.”

“Maybe he’s as irresponsible as my sister?” He smiled a wry smile.

“I wouldn’t go that far. Jaye holds down a job.”

“You call that a job? He travels to Europe and buys horses. Do you think he actually makes a living from that?”

“Yes, I do.” Sam grouched, feeling defensive and irritated. Who did Mr. Tight Ass think he was anyway?

“Exactly how much do you know about that man?”

“A lot. I’ve known him for years. He’s been into horses for as long as I can remember. He imported Gabbie. Did you know that? My mother knew him quite well. They were good friends. After my mom died, he took me under his wing. He’s been there ever since, even when no one else was.”

Carson held up his hands. “You’ve made your point. So did you come in

here for a reason other than to argue with me?"

"I was hoping that with all your entrepreneurial skills you'd have a suggestion on how to deal with this."

"Give him a letter stating he has five days to pay, or he can make arrangements to move the horses elsewhere."

"I can't do that. That's so cold." And she didn't have the guts to throw Jaye out when he'd been her staunchest supporter over the years.

"It's business." He closed off from her. Looking nothing like the Carson she'd come to know, and every bit like the ruthless CEO.

Sam huffed. "Never mind. I'll deal with this myself. I'm sorry I asked."

So much for getting advice from Carson. She should have known better. Carson was more of the type that would go the legal route when someone owed him money. She couldn't do that to Jaye. Never in a million years. Jaye might be a flake, but he was like family.

She'd find her own way to deal with this problem.

* * * *

Sam heard the commotion and came running out of the barn, fearing the worst.

"My stallion is loose with those mares!" Margaret Windemere, one of Hans' newest clients, screeched like a cat with her tail caught in the door. She contorted her face in horror as her big, black pig of a Fresian stallion, aptly named Fabio, raced around the pasture. The large, middle-aged woman had been a royal pain in the ass ever since she'd moved her 'baby' into the barn last week. Fabio didn't like the harshness of the lights in the barn. Fabio's stall needed to be bedded deeper. Fabio needed to be fed at precise times. Fabio was sensitive to the construction noise next door. The list of complaints went on and on.

Carson stood next to Margaret totally unmoved by her ranting. He'd become immune to her bitching in the past week. Juan, on the other hand, inspected the gate for fingerprints.

"Is that a problem?" Carson watched the stallion chasing the mares around the field. The mares were squealing and bucking and kicking.

"A problem? Of course, it's a problem!"

"Doesn't look like he thinks it is." Carson grinned. Sam looked away so

she wouldn't laugh. Her heart warmed even more toward the man, as if it wasn't already warm enough to melt. He refused to let Margaret suck him into her drama.

Sam considered turning her back on the obnoxious woman and her equally obnoxious horse. After all, she wasn't her client. On the other hand, she was responsible for the boarding operation in the old barn.

Sighing she stepped forward, pausing briefly to roll her eyes at Carson. "Mrs. Windmere, I am so sorry. Our barn worker put him in the wrong paddock this morning, and it looks like he broke through the fence to get to the mares. I'll take care of it right now."

"If there's one scratch on his coat, I'll expect compensation for your negligence. Hans would never condone such carelessness." She looked Sam up and down. "I know your reputation, and he's going to hear about this."

"Sam doesn't work for Hans. She works for me. If you have a complaint, address it to me." Carson stepped between them, playing the part of the cold, powerful businessman. Margaret took a step back.

While Sam appreciated his defense of her, she'd fight her own battles. "Actually, I don't work for either of them. I'm a trainer here, and I assist in the management of the barn. You can address your complaints directly to me. I'm responsible."

The woman looked from one to the other in contempt. "Regardless, I know how exacting Hans is. He'll hear about this obvious breach in protocol."

Rather than kill her, Sam swallowed her pride and anger. "We'll take care of this right now." She turned to Carson and barked out an order. "Carson, I need your help."

"What about Juan?"

"I am inspecting fence for suspicious evidence."

"What evidence?"

"I not put horse in this pasture. Someone else do that earlier this morning. None of my people do it. Fence has been tampered with. It was fine yesterday." Juan pointed toward the broken board. "See board. Someone hit with hammer to make it look like it broke from horse. Not from horse, from human."

"How do you know?"

"See hammer marks?"

“Maybe those are horseshoe prints? Maybe we should have the horses’ shoes inspected to see which one is the perpetrator?” Carson suggested with a straight face.

“Good idea.”

Carson shrugged. He followed Sam to the pasture. She put a halter on the stallion and flipped the lead rope to Carson. Fabio tried to pull away, but Carson held his ground. The spoiled stallion shook his head angrily and whinnied.

“What’s the matter, buddy. Aren’t you getting any either?”

Sam shot him a scathing look. “Put him back in his stall for now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Sam stalked off to find some materials to repair the broken fence and returned with everything she needed. Struggling with the twelve-foot board, she attempted to hold it while she pounded the nails. It slipped out of place.

She glanced around for Juan, but he’d predictably disappeared.

Carson leaned against his fancy truck and watched with detached interest. He crossed one ankle over the other and stretched his arms along the hood of the spotless pickup. She’d be damned if she’d ask him for help. Using her body to pin the board in place, she held the hammer in one hand. Her foot slipped in the mud, and she fell to her knees.

The mud made a sucking sound as she hauled herself back to her feet. A husky chuckle caused her to jerk her head around. The insufferable man looked away, but she caught his smile. *Damn him. The smug, arrogant, rich, spoiled, obnoxious testosterone-driven hunk of flesh. Fine. Let him make a fool out of himself. He’d probably never pounded one nail in his entire life.*

“Okay, pretty boy, are those muscles just for decoration, or do you know how to use them?” She relished the thought of insulting his manhood when he proved how inept he was at simple carpentry.

Carson raised one black eyebrow but didn’t change his relaxed position. “Please.”

“What?”

“Say please. Show some manners instead of your usual rude behavior, and I might consider it.”

She considered shoving the hammer down his throat or up his tight ass. “You’re stalling. You don’t have a clue how to use your hands.” Wrong choice of words.

A raw smile changed his harsh expression. "Oh, baby, believe me, I do. I really do, but I thought you wanted help with that fence."

No man had ever moved her to physical violence before, and she wanted him to be the first. Carson's long legs carried him to her in a few short strides. He snatched the hammer from her hand and picked up the heavy board as if it were a chopstick. "Hold that end," he ordered.

Biting back a scathing reply regarding who was ordering who around, she held the board and waited for justice to prevail. Maybe he'd smack his thumb a good one. Unfortunately, the scales of justice tipped precariously to the wrong side as he held the nail and gave it three solid whacks. He took another nail from the can at her feet and repeated the process. In a tenth of the time it would have taken her, he'd nailed the board in place.

"What were you saying about decorative muscles?"

"Where did you? I mean..."

"I have the same grandfather Jake does. Remember? Where do you think Jake learned his construction skills?"

"Can you repair a sagging stall door or a leaky faucet?"

"Don't push it."

* * * *

Sam did push it. The next thing Carson knew, he was tackling a list of 'honey do's' instead of tackling the paperwork stacked on his desk.

It was good for him to get out once in a while and actually do the kind of work that he usually paid people to do. As his grandfather used to say: Never ask someone to do something that you wouldn't do yourself. So now he could show Sam and the workers toiling away on the new equestrian center that physical labor wasn't beyond him. Besides, sweating off some of his frustrations felt damn good.

Carson wiped his brow. His thin t-shirt clung to his back and chest. When was the last time he'd ever perspired so profusely, excluding his regular workouts in an exclusive athletic club or having sex? Then again, when was the last time he'd worked up a sweat having sex? Shit, when was the last time he'd had sex?

He'd work up a sweat with Sam, no doubt about that one. He'd been thinking about that form of exercise a lot lately, and every time his partner

was Sam.

Maybe he should just quit fighting it, and ask Sam out on a date like a normal guy would do. Even though she did work for him in a way, her livelihood didn't depend on him. Anyway, she'd never be the type to sue him.

His physical attraction to her just wouldn't go away. This whole situation was giving him a major headache. This particular headache was ongoing, and he'd be damned if he could come up with a solution.

* * * *

"Sam?"

Sam looked up from her organizer. She was making notes in it because Mr. Tight Ass insisted on checking her plan for the day like an 1880's school marm.

"Dr. Matt says the test results don't look good. My horse is out for the year, possibly forever." Teddi choked back a sob. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually this emotional. It's just been a hell of a week for me." Teddi sunk next to Sam on the saggy couch in the lounge.

"Teddi, I'm so sorry."

"It's all so unfair."

"I know. I'll try to find a schoolmaster for you to ride."

"Oh, Sam, you're too kind, but you don't know the half of it."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I don't know where to start. I put a dent in my car. I lost my purse. I broke an antique vase that belonged to my great-grandmother. Then today, I get the news."

"What news?"

"About the riding program. A developer has bought the property the farm is on. The program's lease won't be renewed for next year. They have to find a place to move all those ponies and horses that's reasonably priced, close to Seattle, safe, and willing to accommodate the special riders in that program."

"Oh, Teddi, I know what that program means to you."

"Would you talk to Carson?" She wiped another tear and gazed at Sam expectantly.

“About what?”

“Moving here.”

“I don’t think I can do that. I mean, Carson has enough problems handling Bridget and the budget and the building; this isn’t something he’d be willing to take on.” Of that much she was certain. Carson was single-minded in his efforts to finance Cedrona. A handicapped riding program would add one more expense he didn’t need.

“As big as the new place will be, there’ll be plenty of room. Besides, Reynolds Corporation runs that San Juan Islands camp for emotionally abused children, so they have some experience with handicapped riding programs.”

“I’ll talk to him.” Sam sighed and wondered what she’d gotten herself into. Carson was going to kill her.

Chapter 24

Life Turned Upside Down

Sam slinked into the weekly barn meeting. As if Carson wouldn't notice her, but a girl has to have her dreams.

Juan, Bridget, Carson, and Hans turned their heads to stare at her. Mr. Tight Ass glanced at his watch. His lips thinned into a disapproving scowl. He was in fine form this morning. "You're late. As usual."

Sam shrugged and dropped into a chair. She hated these meetings. She hated being treated like a child, regardless of whether or not she deserved it. Most of all she hated the look on Carson's face when she didn't meet his expectations.

"We're discussing finances and business plans." He used his nonsense businessman voice. She was in real deep manure, but it just made her all the more defensive.

"Sounds like a fun time." Sam grouched. This was not how she wanted to spend her morning. She was already cranky about Teddi's injured horse. "I have better things to do, though."

"Good," Bridget smirked. "That means you're leaving?"

"Not if *you* want me to leave." Sam's smile dripped poisonous honey. "Even though this is a big waste of time."

Carson remained silent. His blue eyes were the same color and as warm as a frozen winter pond. His jaw was set in stubborn granite. He wasn't amused.

Hans raised one eyebrow, leaned back in his chair, and propped his feet on Carson's desk. Carson cast a death look at Hans, who yanked his feet off the desk and sat up straight.

"Why don't you enlighten us as to why you're late—again."

Sam winced. "You're acquainted with my student, Teddi?"

"The elementary school teacher who's *very organized*?"

She deserved that dig. “That’s the one. She volunteers with a therapeutic riding program.”

“She rides that ugly, uncoordinated Quarter Horse.” Bridget whipped out a compact and checked her makeup.

“She’s a wonderful little horse. In fact, I’d take one of her for five of your spoiled, ill-mannered warmbloods.” She knew better than to let Bridget draw her into a pissing match, but since when did that stop her?

“That horse gives dressage a bad name. It should be on a pack string in the Pasayten Wilderness.”

“Maybe you could join him. I understand they’re looking for a few mules.”

Bridget snapped her compact shut and looked ready to kill, but Sam refused to react. She smiled sweetly and waited. *Go ahead, hit me with your best shot, you rich, spoiled witch.*

Carson, most likely envisioning the potential for carnage, held up a hand to silence his sister before this degenerated into a mud-slinging fest. “I already gave a donation to that riding program.”

“Teddi’s not asking for a donation.” Actually, it was worse.

Bridget snorted, sounding a lot like one of her warmbloods. Sam shot her a poisonous glare. Carson sighed, ready to intervene if needed. “Get to the point, Sam.”

“The disabled riders program needs to move to another barn. The place it’s at has been sold for a development.”

“What are you getting at?” Carson regarded her like a hiker regarded a coiled rattlesnake in his path.

“We don’t have room for a program like that,” Hans interrupted. “It’s not compatible with dressage. Those people are barely able to walk their horses and steer. They’ll be underfoot all the time.”

“I’m not asking your upper-level students to share an arena with *those* people. The company that bought the property is not totally heartless. The group has until next summer to find another place.”

“Kind of them,” Carson murmured.

“Next year the old arena won’t be used much. Couldn’t we spare a few days a week for this program to use it? They could keep the horses and ponies in the old barn or in the pastures. This place has plenty of room for that.”

“Most of the pasture fences are non-existent.” Hans glanced out the window to prove his point. “It’ll take time and attention away from our primary project.”

“We’re not running a charitable organization here.” The pretty boy shook his head and made a move to dismiss her idea.

“It could be an incredible write-off.”

“This place is going to be a write-off without a handicapped riding program.” Carson massaged his temple with one hand.

Bridget slashed a tub of lipstick across her lips. They still came out looking perfect. “Those programs rarely break even. I don’t care what kind of backing they have. They operate on a shoestring with private donations. We’d be subsidizing them ninety percent of the time.”

Carson continued to shake his head. “Sam, I have serious reservations about the viability of your proposal. How could we leverage something like that without it costing us money?”

“Why the hell not try?” Sam sat up straighter.

“Because,” Bridget spoke as if dealing with a little child, “this is going to be high-class operation with only the best *trainers*—” She paused pointedly to look at Sam. “—and the best of everything. A handicapped riding program has no place here. It just doesn’t fit.”

“Well, coming from you that kind of elitist attitude doesn’t surprise me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you think this place is too good to have imperfect people among wealthy, perfect people. Why the hell else are you trying so hard to get rid of me?” Sam watched with perverse pleasure as Bridget got her back up.

“Why, you little...”

“Bridget,” Carson interrupted, “sheath your claws. Let’s handle this as adults.” He turned to Sam. The satisfied look on his face reminded her of how the barn cat looked after he’d beheaded some poor mouse. “Sam, I’m willing to consider any option, assuming it’s viable.”

“Okay.” She sensed a trap.

Carson swallowed a grin. “I’ll give you a week to prepare a written business proposal on how this alliance with handicapped riding stands to benefit our equestrian center, including financial projections.”

“But I have a horse show this weekend. I don’t have time to waste on

paper work.” Not to mention she hated it, and he knew it.

“Planning done properly is never a waste. In fact, it’ll save time in the long run.” He looked way too pleased with himself.

“I don’t care about the long-run. I’m a here and now person.”

“You have a week.” His unyielding gaze penetrated her defenses.

“But I really don’t know how to do a business proposal.” The man was starting to get under her skin with his superior attitude.

“Well, you’ll learn, won’t you? It’ll be good for all aspects of your business. I’d be more than happy to spend a few hours with you going over the finer aspect of Business 101.”

“Great. Wonderful.” Sam glared at him. The nerve of the ass. He had her exactly where he wanted her.

Carson grinned. “I guess that’ll take care of the meeting for this week. Sam will present a written report and a professional presentation on the advantages of a handicapped riding program next week.”

Sam shot to her feet, eager to beat cleats out of there before she said more things she’d regret. Carson stopped her in her tracks.

“So, Sam, who bought the current facility? They should be approached for assistance since they’re misplacing these people. It’d be good for their public relations.”

So there was a God, Sam decided and suppressed a grin. “ReynCorp.” She allowed herself a triumphant smile before she turned and walked out the door.

* * * *

“You haven’t told her yet, have you?” Joe studied his son with that intent expression that always made Carson squirm.

“About the contest? No.”

“You need to tell her soon. My experience with women says that the longer you wait the angrier she’ll be.”

“I know. I wonder if Hans knows?”

“Can Bridget keep anything quiet for long?”

“No.” Carson paced across the room and stopped to stare out the large window at the view. He could see the old brewery in the distance.

“Then you’d better tell her before she hears it from someone else.”

Besides, it puts Hans at a distinct advantage assuming he knows and Sam doesn't."

"I'll tell her at the horse show this weekend." Carson cleared his throat. "Dad, that's not why I'm here."

"I didn't think it was." Joe settled into one of the plush leather chairs in his office and gestured for Carson to take a seat next to him. "Tell me what's on your mind."

"I want to talk to you about the Ryerback Farm. Did you know that a handicapped riding program has operated out of there for years?"

"No, Carson, I wasn't aware of that."

"You knew we'd purchased the property, though?"

"We?" His father smiled at Carson's slip.

Carson bristled. "Did you know that *your* company purchased the property?"

"Yes, I was aware *our* company purchased it. It was in foreclosure, and we got it for a fraction of what it was worth. There aren't any plans to develop it for a year or more. I'm not handling the details, Brad is."

"*Brad is?*" Brad couldn't handle Monopoly, let alone something that required an investment of millions. No wonder his father had concocted this elaborate scheme to bring him back into the fold.

Joe nodded. "Is there an issue?"

"They need a place to go. They've asked to move into Cedrona and occupy the older buildings next year."

"You're proposing to operate a non-profit from the same location as our equestrian center?"

"That's an option. I'm waiting for a sound proposal before I consider it. The new indoor and outdoor arenas and barn complex will handle the dressage operation. The older barn and arena will be virtually unused except for horse shows."

"So you're thinking this would be a good option?"

"I'm not sure. We could stand to gain something monetarily from the usage fees for the facility."

"And if we don't?"

"We write it off as charitable contributions."

"Did you speak with my attorney about this?"

"No, but I might with your blessing."

“Then you’ve got it. I have to admit that it’s always bothered me that we’re sinking so much money into a facility that caters to the elite. It seems so self-serving and narrow-minded. I like the idea that we might be able to turn this around into something that actually does some good for those less fortunate.” Joe almost smiled. His father seemed pleased.

Carson just stared. He hadn’t really thought of it that way. He’d been thinking along the lines of what was in it for Cedrona. It wasn’t his responsibility to think about a project in sentimental terms. He had to earn a profit and come within budget.

His father was testing him, trying to see where he stood. The question was: Where did his father expect him to stand? More importantly, where did he want to stand?

Hell, if he knew, but he’d better figure it out fast. Everything used to be so clear, so cut and dried. Between Sam and his father, his life had been turned upside down. His old ideas and methods and morals had been challenged.

Nothing was the same anymore.

Chapter 25

Ransacked by Animals?

Sam couldn't help it.

She was late. *Again.*

Her fault. *Again.*

Her track record of always being late was untarnished.

She'd tried, really, she had. She'd used his stupid lists, but lists can't wash four horses, clean tack, and load the trailer with enough stuff to open a tack and feed store.

In the best of traffic it took four hours to drive to the show grounds south of Portland, Oregon. This wasn't the best of traffic.

Carson drove while she poured over her dressage tests. One more thing she'd let go until the last minute. She tried to drown out his muttered curses as he maneuvered the large truck and trailer through Portland's evening rush hour. Most of his grumbling was directed at her stupidity, carelessness, disorganization, and irresponsibility.

If the shoe fit, she guessed she'd better wear it.

It was dark by the time they unloaded everything and settled the horses in their stalls. Sam braided four horses while Carson held a flashlight and watched in stony silence. By the expression on his face, she didn't think he was impressed with her not-so-neat, not-so-tidy braids. Well, what the heck did he expect for a rush job at ten at night?

She'd had a tough few weeks. The intruder, the lame horses, bouncing checks for board, Hans, Bridget, and business plans had conspired to make her a disorganized wreck.

Tired and cranky, she dragged herself back to her trailer. Carson followed and unhitched the truck. He had a cozy hotel room waiting for him in a nearby town. She had the bordello on wheels, which beat sleeping in a tent or the back of the trailer. With the exception of the garish décor, she'd

never had such top-notch accommodations at a horse show.

“Well, I guess I should be going.” Carson jingled the keys in his pocket, but made no move to leave. He was stalling, but for what reason? An invitation for a nightcap? Hot sex in the bordello? The gaudy thing did inspire that kind of thinking, but so did looking at Carson. Even when he was pissed or being a tight ass, he radiated masculine energy and sex appeal. She weighed the ramifications of inviting him to stay for a drink.

“Do you hear something?” Carson cocked his head to one side. Sam heard it, too, just as a large horse came galloping past and thundered into the dark night.

“Someone’s got a loose horse,” Sam noted with a sigh. So much for a wild night or even a quiet night in the bordello. Now she’d have to catch a horse and figure out what stall it belonged in.

“Should we do something about it?”

“Yes,” she said wearily. “I’ll get a lead rope and some grain.” She rummaged through the trailer, which despite Carson’s valiant attempts to organize it and her, was already in a state of chaos. *Oh, home, sweet home.*

The horse stopped nearby and lowered its head to graze. She could make out a blaze on the horse’s forehead in the dim light from the nearby barn. Her heart stopped for a moment.

“Oh, no. Carson, that’s Gabbie,” she whispered, as if the mare could understand what she was saying.

“It is? Didn’t you lock the stall door?”

“Of course I did.” Boy, she hoped she really had. But what was the horse doing loose? “Be careful. If she runs off, she might end up on the highway. Stay back, and let me handle it.”

Sam walked toward the temperamental mare, talking sweetly to her. Carson followed at a safe distance. Gabbie watched them with a wary eye. As soon as Sam was within ten feet, the mare threw up her head, snorted, and trotted off.

Carson groaned. Sam wanted to cuss a blue streak.

“Come here, you red-headed witch.” Sam’s voice dripped with syrup. Again, the horse took off, moving several feet away before lowering her head to yank out hunks of grass. For ten minutes, they futilely followed her around the grassy parking area, always several hoof beats behind.

“Let me try.” Carson stepped forward.

“You? Are you kidding?”

“I have a way with females.”

“Be my guest.” Sam handed him the lead rope and the bucket of grain.

Gabbie lifted her head and watched as Carson approached. She took a few steps toward him and waited. Carson walked up to her and put a rope around her neck. Sam’s mouth dropped open. Gabbie lowered her head and nuzzled his chest. Carson scratched the base of an ear.

“How?”

Carson shrugged. “What can I say? All the ladies love me.”

“She knows you don’t ride her. Besides, I’m onto you, buster. You’ve been sneaking her treats. I know it.”

“Not me, I’d never do that. I don’t like horses. Chalk it up to my natural animal magnetism. Get it, *animal* magnetism.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Enough already. Leave the humor to Brad.”

With Carson leading Gabbie, they walked up the hill to the barn area.

Sam stopped dead in her tracks. Next to her, Carson froze. Even the mare halted and sniffed the air.

The area around Sam’s stabling had been ransacked. Buckets were overturned. Sacks of grain were split open. Hay bales were broken and flakes of hay were strewn about the barn aisle. Blankets were ripped. The tack room door, which had been locked, stood open and expensive tack was spread all over the area.

* * * *

The next night Sam and Carson sat in a hole-in-the-wall bar across from the show grounds. Their elbows stuck to the table, the food was greasy, and the bartender was surly. It was Sam’s kind of place.

Even more amazing, Carson was smiling as he watched a particularly entertaining Karaoke singer. Sam almost laughed. What the hell was going on that Mr. Tight Ass was actually enjoying this run-down bar? Was slumming it with the little people giving him a thrill? Or had these past couple months with her altered his thinking?

Perhaps he merely enjoyed her company. She frowned and did an about face directly away from that line of thinking. It didn’t lead anywhere but to a broken heart.

"I couldn't believe that your sister volunteered to help us clean up that mess at the show grounds. She hates me."

"There was nothing nice about it. She's stalking that trainer across the aisle from our horses."

"He's gay."

Carson grinned. "Don't tell her that. She loves a guy that's hard to get."

"He'll be that and more."

They were quiet for a while, watching the dancers on the dance floor. "So do you have the proposal ready for me yet?" The corner of his mouth twitched, tipping her off. He was purposely tweaking her.

"I have three more days. You'll get it, and it'll knock your pants off."

"I'd settle for it to be legible and neat. My pants can stay on." He thought about that for a second. "Well, at least during the proposal."

"Carson? What is happening to you? You're sounding like a normal guy."

"Sorry, I slipped. My mistake." He actually looked slightly sheepish. "I'm a little concerned about what's going on right now. That's all."

"Carson, do you really think that mess was caused by a pack of coyotes? Am I being paranoid?"

"Yes, you probably are being paranoid."

"Your sister blames me. She says I didn't secure things and animals got into them."

My sister blames everyone but herself for everything. The people stabled next to us said they'd had problems with coyotes last year at this show."

"Yeah, the two-legged kind."

Carson took a swig of his beer and swallowed it down. "Sam, you need to quit listening to Juan."

"I find it hard to believe that coyotes can break open bales of hay and strew them everywhere."

"A pack of them probably could."

"But there's other stuff missing."

"Mostly little things. A brush, pair of spurs, a bucket."

"And Gabbie's bridle."

"So we have coyotes who collect horse equipment to take home to their dens? Maybe they'll trade it to the squirrels for some nuts. I don't buy it."

Maybe they have a leather fetish.” He shrugged. “Maybe you misplaced it somewhere in that mess in your tack room.”

“I did not. I missed my first class because I couldn’t find that bridle.”

“You’re always late because you can never find anything. You need to use my list, organize things, label them, put them back in the same place each time.”

“Enough already. What if someone is deliberately trying to make things hard for me, and it’s not a pack of coyotes?”

“Why would someone be purposely doing this?”

“To get me to give up and go away.”

“They’d have to stand to gain from it. Who wants you gone? Do you have any enemies?” Carson didn’t appear to believe her, but he seemed willing to humor her.

“Me?” Unfortunately, she might well have lots. For starters all those people who believed that she was responsible for the death of their horses in that barn fire years ago.

“Yes, you.”

“I might have a few for something that they think I did years ago.”

“Does this have anything to do with why you went to Germany?”

“Pretty much.”

“Would you care to enlighten me?”

“Hasn’t your sister already given you all the dirt?”

“She’s told me something about it, but I’d like to hear your side.”

“You’ve known about the fire all this time and never asked me about it? Why? I’m surprised you didn’t send me packing.”

“Should I have?”

Sam shrugged.

“You can’t believe I’m actually a fair person, can you?”

“Actually, I truly do believe you are. I just thought you didn’t know.”

“Sam, do you think my sister would carry around some juicy piece of gossip like that and not tell me? Especially when it concerns you?”

“That would be hard to believe. So why didn’t you confront me?”

“Because I wanted you to tell me in your own time, and because I have a hard time believing that you would do anything that would endanger the horses. No matter how careless you are about other things, your horses come first.”

Sam found herself blinking back tears. "Carson, I...I live with this never-ending nightmare of that night. Sometimes I wonder why I came back. That empty spot where that barn used to be is a constant reminder. Did you realize that Dr. Matt's wife died in that fire?"

"Matt Brandland?"

"They owned the barn at the time."

"Could he be extracting revenge?"

"I doubt it. He's always supported me. Never blamed me. He's such a kind, gentle man. He's very devout and active in his church."

"Tell me about it. What happened that night?"

Sam told him every sordid detail. Once she started, she couldn't stop. It was cathartic. He listened quietly and never passed judgment. The compassion in his eyes was almost her undoing. "For a long time even I wondered if I'd done it accidentally, but I know I didn't. It was made to look like I did, but I didn't."

Carson rubbed his chin. "Sam, what if Juan is right? Maybe someone thinks you know something."

"Carson, I can't imagine what I would know."

"Who really did it and possibly committed murder."

Sam turned pale at the word 'murder.' "Did your sister tell you that I was a suspect? They actually charged me but eventually dropped the charges. My father mortgaged his house to hire a good attorney and keep me out of jail. I owe him a lot."

"Sam." He held her gaze, and she took strength from his quiet support. He didn't have to believe her, yet he did.

"Thank you, Car."

He nodded "Who is in your life now that was in your life then?"

"Hans for one. Some of Hans' students. My vet. Jaye. Your sister."

"Who lost horses?"

"Lots of people. Hans, Bridget, Jaye. I'd have to sit down and think about the rest."

"Make a list. Do you know if any of them received insurance settlements?"

"I'm sure they all did. Those were expensive show horses."

"What about those that didn't have insurance and lost an expensive horse because of it? We need to figure out who on that list might have been

in a position to do some of these things.”

“I’m guessing most of the people would be.”

“Let’s not guess, Sam. Let’s do this in a logical manner.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “Carson.”

“What about all the lame horses recently?”

“Show horses go lame all the time. Dressage can be hard on their bodies. One of the other barns I was in had more lame horses than it had sound ones during one show season.”

“I mean what would someone have to gain by lame horses? Dead ones, now that’s obvious.”

“If they’re permanently lame, they could collect insurance if they’re insured for loss of use.”

“Do you know if any of them were?”

“Not that I know of. It’s expensive. Most people only insure for mortality.”

“There has to be something we’re missing.”

“Your sister thinks I’m sabotaging myself, except for the injured horses.”

“My sister believes a lot of things, Sam. The majority of her facts are inaccurate.” Carson reached across the table and squeezed her hand. He continued to hold onto it, and Sam didn’t pull her hand away. His big hand felt good in hers.

Carson looked over Sam’s head then back at her. He had an odd look on his face. Her heart raced. “Nice song,” he murmured, as the band played their rendition of ‘Lost in This Moment with You.’ “I had no idea that country music went beyond that tawdry honky-tonk stuff.”

Sam smiled. “It *is* a nice song.” She couldn’t really think of anything else to say.

“Would you like to dance?”

“You dance?”

“Of course, I do. It’s been years, but I think I can remember how.”

Sam couldn’t refuse him. The way he was looking at her made him seem so vulnerable, besides a couple beers had given her some liquid courage. “I’d love to.”

Carson stood, still holding her hand and led her to the dance floor. Sam had never done much dating; horses had been her life. Sure, she’d had

boyfriends here and there, but none of them ever made her feel like this man did. Something told her that no one ever would.

She moved into his arms, surprised at how easy and natural it seemed for two such opposite people.

They shuffled around the floor. Both of them were too intent on holding each other and swaying to the music to care about doing any fancy dance steps. His warm breath tickled her neck. If she never had another moment like this, this one moment would be enough to last her the rest of her life.

She was in love with the man. She had been almost since the first time they'd traded barbs those few months ago. Nothing had changed except for her falling even deeper for him. He liked her, which she wasn't sure had been true when she'd first insulted him. But love her? That was such a ridiculous thought that she couldn't allow herself to even entertain it. Carson didn't allow himself to show that kind of emotion. Oh, it was there. He didn't fool her. It was just that he kept it buried.

She was on the verge of doing something crazy and eventually regrettable. But tonight, she wouldn't regret it. She wanted to share Carson's bed. She wanted to feel his skin against hers, his lips on her body, his hands stroking her back.

Sam moved closer to him, giving him a hint of her intentions. He felt so, uh, interested. Oh, yeah, he was interested. She leaned her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes. He guided her around the floor, but she might as well have been stepping through clouds because her feet didn't appear to touch solid ground. She needed this man tonight.

There was no future at Cedrona for her, so she might as well enjoy what she could have while she had it.

By next year, Gabbie would be sold. Carson would move on to another project. Hans would be head trainer. Bridget would be attempting to manage the place while some other poor soul did the real work—cleaning up Bridget's messes. Sam had no intention of being Bridget's whipping girl.

But for now, what difference did it make? She could have Carson on a temporary basis. When it was over and Gabbie was sold, that would be her cue to leave.

Chapter 26

A Hot Night in the Bordello on Wheels

Carson had never been one to act rashly or spur of the moment. Every decision he made was carefully thought out. He examined every option for flaws and strengths. He didn't leave much to chance. At least, not much of what was in his control, and he tried to make everything in his control.

This situation was *not* in his control.

When the slow dance ended and a faster one began, Carson welcomed the temporary reprieve from the spell this woman had over him. Unfortunately, that wasn't to be the case.

With a wicked twinkle in her eyes, Sam challenged him to stay out on the floor. "Can you two-step?"

"Afraid not." Carson tugged on her hand, but she stood rooted to the spot.

"So do you have two left feet?"

"Actually, you'd be surprised at how coordinated I am."

"Prove it. Watch me."

The dance floor wasn't crowded, and Carson watched Sam's feet as she counted out the steps. It was a cinch. He almost laughed. Maybe he should pretend that it was more difficult than it was, but why give her the satisfaction?

Carson imitated her steps easily. She stared at him in amazement. "So do you want to dance or not?"

Much as he hated to admit it, he loved dancing with Sam. She was supple and graceful. They moved around the floor with ease as if they'd been dancing together for a long time. Even better—or worse—she felt good in his arms, like she'd always belonged there and always would.

They finished that dance and several more then walked back to the table. Carson dropped into his chair and took a swallow of his beer. It was

warm, and he didn't give a shit. He'd just spent one of the most enjoyable nights of his life holding a woman who was so wrong for him in every way, especially that falling-in-love-get-your-heart-crushed-again way.

"This almost makes me forget all the stuff going on." Sam looked away, suddenly seeming shy. Which Carson found hard to believe, but he was seeing it with his own eyes.

Being with her almost made him forget everything too, including his moratorium against emotional relationships. His heart had a mind of its own, along with other parts of his anatomy.

Unfortunately, once he leveled with her about his father's *contest* for Cedrona, she'd probably never speak to him again anyway. She needed to know the deal. Hans most likely knew. He'd probably been plotting with sister-dearest how to win that cash and more importantly, the job. Meanwhile, Sam blissfully blundered along, oblivious to her future being on the line.

After all that had happened at this show so far—good and bad—he couldn't make it any tougher on her. He'd wait until Monday when they were back. It was the chickenshit way out, but it worked for him.

Carson sighed and wondered who'd really ransacked Sam's stabling area. Someone executed a targeted attack. Coyotes weren't that discerning. Not one other competitor's stuff had been touched.

There were people who would benefit from Sam leaving Cedrona, Hans, for one, and Bridget, for another. Was either of them dishonest enough to sabotage Sam? The incidents had started long before his father's proposal. Of course, the earlier incidents might be nothing more than Sam's talent for self-sabotage and disorganization. The recent ones could just be unfortunate coincidences.

"Carson, it's late. I need to get some sleep. I have to feed at 7 am."

Carson nodded. He paid the bill and together they walked the short distance back to the show grounds. It was quiet as they approached the bordello. Frogs croaked in a nearby pond, while an owl hooted somewhere in the woods bordering the show grounds. Sam unlocked the trailer door and turned to him. She hesitated. He waited. He wasn't sure what for, but he was pretty sure it was going to be a bad idea. His resistance was down, and he suspected hers was, too.

"Are you going to be okay by yourself tonight? The trailer parking is

somewhat isolated from the rest of the show grounds.”

“I’ll be okay.”

“Okay.” Disappointment raced through him. He was pretty sure it showed on his face. He turned to leave.

“Carson?”

Carson stopped in his tracks and pivoted around. “Yes?”

Taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders. “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to go.”

That one sentence sealed their fate.

* * * *

The minute the words were out of her mouth, Sam regretted them. Sorta.

She flipped a light switch in the trailer. It lit up the dim mood lighting that ran the perimeter of the ceiling and around the ceiling mirror in the gooseneck section, where the bed was. Even worse, the lights were red. “Oh, shit. Where are the real lights?”

Sam groped for them on the wall, but Carson grabbed her hand. “Leave it. Those are fine. They lend a tacky trailer ambiance that somehow fits.”

“Would you like some wine?” She didn’t wait for an answer, but jerked on the refrigerator door. It slammed against the cabinet behind it. She grabbed the box of wine; it slipped from her hand, landing on the floor with a thud. Carson picked it up and handed it to her.

“Do you want me to pour?” An amused smile crossed his handsome face.

“No, I’ll do it. Have a seat.” She managed to pour two glasses without incident. She needed some more liquid courage—now. Carson lounged on one of the dinette bench seats. She sat across from him as they sipped their wine in silence.

“Are you okay?” He reached across the table and held her hand. His index finger drew lazy circles on her palm.

“I’m fine.” She choked and almost spat out a mouthful of wine.

“Do you want me to go?”

She looked up at him. The man didn’t look like he wanted to leave. Instead, he looked like a cougar ready to make a meal out of this poor little

heifer. She trembled inside at the intensity in his eyes. Something warm and wild spread through her veins. No, she didn't want him to go. She wanted him to stay with her in this ostentatiously overdone trailer with its red velvet curtains and mirrored ceilings.

When she didn't answer, he stood. "I should go."

She stood, too, and bumped into him in the small space. She should have moved away, but there was nowhere to go. They both froze. When she lifted her face to his, she read the hunger in his eyes. His hand snaked around her neck. He pulled her to him with a gentle pressure. Dumb girl that she was, she didn't offer any resistance. She had none left.

Pinning her against the kitchen counter, he claimed her with a wild, hot fever that was unCarsonlike. For some reason, it didn't surprise her. She'd seen those looks he'd given her, seen him loosen up and smile or laugh. Underneath that tight ass exterior lurked a hot, sensual man.

And oh, lord, how she wanted *that* man.

Warmth spread through her bones and they melted, no longer able to hold her up, but Carson took care of that. He lifted her onto the tiny one-butt counter, pushed her legs apart, and positioned his hips between them. Sam buried her fingers in his dark hair, loving the silky texture of it and wrapped her long legs around his waist. She licked her lips, and he took it for the invitation it was. The mouth that came down on hers was anything but controlled. She didn't want control. She wanted him hot and bothered and not thinking any more logically than she was. They could regret it in the morning. The night was theirs.

She opened her mouth, inviting him to taste a sample. Her tongue mated with his, following his lead in their erotic dance. Carson turned his head and moved his mouth down her jawline to the curve of her neck and lower as he feathered little kisses on her overheated skin.

She shuddered, growing wet where his erection pressed against her, demanding and insistent. "Oh, Carson," she breathed into his ear and was rewarded with a shudder from his body. He pulled her t-shirt over her head. Losing patience herself with the clothes separating their bodies, Sam did the same to him. She ran her hands over his broad shoulders and down his arms, smiling in the dim light at the feel of his strong, muscular chest. Not one tattoo marred that perfect body, which didn't surprise her. She'd have been more shocked if he'd had any.

He pushed the straps of her sports bra off her shoulders and down her arms. She held her breath. Her hands stilled and gripped his biceps lightly. His pupils dilated as he savored the moment, lowering her bra until it revealed her small breasts and hard nipples. She ducked her head in embarrassment.

"I know they're small."

"They're perfect." He silenced her doubts by bending down and taking one in his mouth with the hunger of a stallion in a field full of mares in heat. He swirled his tongue around the tight nipple, making it wet and her even wetter. He drew back and blew on it. She moaned and gasped for air. The combination of hot then cold sent her senses jumping over fences of Olympic proportions.

"I'm glad you like them." His mouth came back down again. He sucked, carefully, gently, until goose bumps stood out on her bare skin. She trembled and gripped his arms tighter. She heard a throaty chuckle as he switched to the other nipple and gave it the same attention as the first.

Sam must have died. Right there on the spot because nothing on earth could possibly feel this incredible and this decadent.

"Carson, stop. It's too much." Senses flooded her body and overwhelmed her with a contradictory mixture of ecstasy and fear. They approached dangerous territory and the crossroads of no return. She didn't give a shit. He was hers for tonight, and she was going to have him.

He lifted his face to hers. "What's the matter? Can't take a little heat?"

"A little?" She croaked. "I'd be cooler inside an oven set on broil."

"Not a bad cooking analogy for someone who doesn't cook." He chuckled. "Don't worry, you won't get burned."

That *was* the problem. She *would* get burned, emotionally, though not intentionally. She knew it. He knew it. A union between them would never amount to anything permanent.

Carson lowered his mouth back to hers, and she forgot her misgivings. Grabbing her butt, he pulled her to him and carried her a few steps to the huge bed in the gooseneck portion of the trailer.

"Take them off." He indicated the remainder of her clothes. His voice didn't sound any steadier than hers did. He kicked off his boots and stripped off his clothes in Olympic record time.

Sam pulled off her jeans, bra, and underwear and threw them on the

floor with his. Only then did she take a moment to enjoy his naked body in the dim bordello lights. He was her wild-west gunslinger and she, a saloon girl. She could picture her tight-ass cowboy hunk a little messed up and hot for a night on the town or in the bed. The man not only had incredible pecs, but a great ass, and strong muscled thighs. And, oh, my, she forgot to breathe for a moment. He was hung like a horse, erect and ready for action.

Swallowing, she found the will to speak. "This place looks like a bedroom in a b-rated western."

"Well, Darlin," he drawled in a very poor John Wayne imitation that made her laugh. "I do so like them workin' girls. Why don't we turn it into an x-rated western? I've always wanted to do it with Calamity Jane, and that name does fit you."

"Whatever you say, Jesse James." After all, he was an outlaw who'd stolen her heart.

Carson crawled onto the bed next to her, taking his time perusing her body. His eyes met hers, intense and hot. She stared at his cock, hard and ready for action. "Do you have a concealed weapons permit for that thing?"

"It's not concealed anymore."

"Good point." She'd concede that one. "Is that why they call them six guns?"

He feigned hurt. "Six? Do you think that's all it is?"

No, she didn't. "Heck no. It's more like a rifle, and I'm ready for a shootout with you."

"I'm a good shot."

"I'll bet you are." He took the condom he'd pulled from his pocket earlier, ripped the package open, and slid it over his cock. Sam watched, forcing her lungs to take in air.

Carson stretched his body the length of hers and slipped his hands down her thighs to her crotch. She arched toward him when his hands found that secret spot. He cupped her then slipped his index finger easily into her wetness. She cried out and arched her hips toward his. He slid in up to his knuckle, pulled out then slid back in, repeating the action until she was nearly driven mad. Then he pulled his finger out.

"Don't stop now," she panted.

"I like you begging for mercy."

"I'll beg all you want. Just don't stop." She slipped her hands down his

sides and reached for him. "I could turn the tables."

"Oh, no, you don't. This time we play by my rules." He captured both of her wrists in one big hand and held them over her head. She squirmed to get free, but he was way too strong.

"Carson, that's not fair."

"What's your point?" He added a second finger to the first and slid them inside her, using his thumb in clever ways that made her head spin and her body defy gravity. He stroked her clit and moved his fingers in and out, faster and faster. She poised on the brink, started to go over, then...Damn him! His fingers were gone. He pulled back and watched her, a satisfied smirk on his face.

"You...you..."

"You're not going there without me." Releasing her hands, he straddled her body.

Sam shifted her gaze to his large cock. "Don't you think you should put that gun away before somebody gets hurt?"

"Oh, baby, this is for pleasure, not for pain. Let me show you."

"It's about time. Draw your six-shooter, and let's dance."

She parted her legs and wrapped them around his waist. He didn't need any further invitation. She was ready, wet, and horny. He started slow, just a little at a time, so she could adjust to his size. In. Out. In further. Out. In even further. Out again. Sam dug her fingers into his shoulders. He pushed in with a grunt and was buried up to the hilt, filling her completely. Withdrawing, he poised for another controlled thrust. Sam didn't want controlled. She wanted Carson stripped bare down to his no-longer suppressed emotions. She dug her heels into the small of his back and pushed her hips into his, driving him deeper. He made a sound that sounded more animal than man and increased his rhythm. She met it and matched it, driving them both higher and higher to a place where control didn't exist and emotions were the only reality.

Riding higher and higher, like surfers cresting each wave, they came together with a fierceness of which she didn't know she was capable. She screamed his name, and he screamed hers. The bed whirled around them like a carnival ride. Everything came hard and fast and crazy until it ended in a burst of star-spangled ecstasy. They sank happily into a warm, tropical ocean, satisfied and spent.

Surprised to find she still had a voice, Sam managed a croak. “You can dance with me anytime, cowboy.” She snuggled close to his warm body, resting her head on his chest. He nuzzled her neck and wrapped his arms around her with a contented sigh.

“My pleasure, Ma’am.” She felt his smile against her neck.

Chapter 27

Family Ties that Bind

“We never do anything like normal people, do we?” Sam lay on her side and propped her head up with a hand.

“I beg your pardon. Until I met you, I was so normal, I was boring as hell.” Carson sunk down into the covers and grinned at her. His blue eyes sparkled with satisfaction and pleasure.

Sam couldn’t deny the truth in that. “And now, you’re?”

“Probably still somewhat normal and boring.”

Sam laughed and cuddled closer to his bare chest. “Carson, believe me, you are anything but boring.”

“You really think so?” His disbelief surprised her.

“Of course, I think so. You’re good. Really good.”

For a moment he stared at the nearby wall and said nothing. “No one’s ever told me that.”

“You’re lying. Trying to get more compliments.”

Carson rolled over and propped his head on his hand. “I’m not. Sad as it sounds.” Something flickered in his eyes, and she realized he was telling her the truth. What kind of woman would make a man like this think that he was substandard? Sam couldn’t begin to imagine such a self-absorbed or stupid female.

“Carson, you’d better get your butt out of bed and get dressed before Bridget finds you here with me.”

Carson glanced at his watch. “It’s only 7:00 am. There’s no way she’ll be up for another few hours.”

“She has horses to feed.”

Carson snorted. “I’m sure she’s relegated that job to one of her people.”

“Regardless, I have horses to feed myself.”

“I get the hint.” Carson sighed and pulled on his jeans, pausing long

enough to lay a wet kiss on her lips.

Together they emerged from the trailer to the sound of horses chewing hay and others not so fortunate nickering for their breakfasts and kicking their stalls.

The good-looking trainer from across the aisle was feeding Bridget's horses. Carson and Sam exchanged shocked glances.

"Maybe he's not gay," Sam whispered to Carson.

"I'd say that's a safe bet."

"That might also explain why she wasn't waiting up for us last night."

"All I care is that she's not interfering in our lives."

"Amen to that."

Together they fed the horses. Sam measured the grain and poured it in buckets while Carson tossed flakes of hay in the stalls and filled water buckets. When they were finished, they both plopped in lawn chairs in front of Gabbie's stall.

"You know, it's odd, but that sound is relaxing." Carson looked over his shoulder at Gabbie eating her breakfast.

"The sound of horses munching on hay?"

"Yeah." His admission appeared to surprise him.

"You've just discovered something that horse lovers have known for centuries." Lord, she adored this man.

Carson smiled then grew serious. "Sam, about last night. I..."

"You don't need to say it. I already know. It shouldn't have happened. You're sorry that it did. I'm sorry that it did. I want to stay friends. I know. I've heard all lines."

"I wasn't going to say that. I'm not a one-night stand kind of guy."

"But..."

"There is no but." Carson stiffened in offense.

"Then what are you trying to say?"

"Maybe if you'd shut up and listen for once."

"Are you implying that I talk too much?"

"It's an inborn female trait."

"Since when?"

"Since Adam and Eve."

"If men weren't so, so irritating."

Carson sighed. "Just listen, okay."

Sam zipped her mouth shut, not wanting to hear what she expected him to say.

“Last night, it meant something to me. I hope it meant something to you. I’d like to keep seeing you.”

“What about your family? They won’t like this.”

Carson shrugged. “I’ve spent the greater portion of my life trying to please them. I never could. Maybe it’s time to stop.”

“Carson, we’re so different.”

“I know, but I think I can reform you.” He slanted her his lopsided grin.

“I don’t think there’s a man alive capable of that.”

“Now there’s a challenge I’d like to meet.”

“Carson, I don’t know.” Her heart was saying: YES! YES! YES! Her head was saying: No. No. No. Her heart was definitely drowning out her head.

“I can’t promise anything permanent or long-term. I just know that I like your company. You challenge me and my rigid ideas, take me out of my comfort zone.”

Comfort zone? She hadn’t been in her comfort zone since she’d met him. Of course, the old ‘I can’t promise you anything long-term speech’ was expected. He wouldn’t be a man if he didn’t stress that point. She wouldn’t be a woman if she didn’t dream of something more. It was a wonder that men and women ever got together at all.

The screwy thing was she’d take him anyway she could get him. Bridget would have a cow once she came out of her self-absorbed stupor. Harlee would be thrilled. Jake would probably warn her about his big brother. Carson’s parents? Would they get a vote? Disapproval probably took the top spot on their ballot. She didn’t have a pedigree or one millionaire in her family, just a bunch of working stiff who made America what it was and made people like the Reynolds’ filthy rich.

Now there was a thought. Her family was having a get together in a few weeks. She’d planned on attending alone. If Carson was really interested in expanding his comfort zone, accompanying her would do it. Her group of rowdy brothers and cousins would certainly give him a run for his money. Did she dare do that to poor, unsuspecting Carson? If a guy didn’t have jock written all over him, they figured he was some kind of pussy.

Besides, while she had him isolated, she might be able to convince him

to consider that the handicapped riding program would be a great addition to Cedrona. Maybe between the two of them they could come up with a way to make it profitable.

* * * *

The horse show had been long, stressful, and taxing, but Sam had made it through. Her three ragtag students with their backyard horses scored well. They even managed to beat Hans' students in a class or two.

As far as how Gabbie performed, well, she was Gabbie. She started what promised to be a brilliant performance, but three-quarters of the way into their test, threw a temper tantrum. Even so, Sam managed to keep her cool and ride forward. Even Hans had given her some rare praise. She'd actually managed one decent qualifying score for the regional championships, so she couldn't complain.

A few days later, she sat with Carson at Character's Corner, sipped on beer, and listened while he rattled off criticisms of her business plan for the handicapped riding program. The guy should have written it himself. What'd she know about this kind of stuff?

* * * *

Carson shook his head and fisted his hands in his hair. He drained his beer in several gulps just as George deposited another on the table.

This so-called proposal of hers was crap. It was incomplete, full of holes and inconsistencies. It needed more work before he dared suggest she present it to his father. Yet, he had to admit, the therapeutic riding program had potential. His mother loved the idea. She was already making plans to solicit some charitable contributions. He'd let her handle fund-raising. Unfortunately, there was nothing concrete, so he couldn't count donations that didn't exist. He wanted to meet with the program's director, but he was beginning to think this person didn't exist or was a ghost.

Then there was Sam on a personal level. She was either the best or the worst thing that had ever happened to him. She frustrated the hell out of him, made him feel things he'd long ago buried, and he walked around as horny as a teenage boy at the Playboy Mansion. His boring, predictable life

had done a 180.

Carson took in the room around him. This honky-tonk had become one of his favorite hangouts, even though his elbows still stuck to the table. Oh, how things had changed.

Carson's eyes honed in on a tall athletic man as he walked into the bar. There was something vaguely familiar about him. The man strode toward them with unmistakable purpose. He halted behind Sam's chair and tapped her on the back.

"I knew I'd find you here."

Sam whirled around and stared at the interloper, her expression a combination of surprise and guilt. Carson stiffened and glared at the guy.

"You've been ignoring my phone calls." Without waiting for an invitation, he pulled out a chair and sat down. Sam still hadn't said a word.

"Who is this guy?" The stranger jabbed a thumb at Carson.

Sam found her tongue and finally spoke. "He's a client of mine."

The man's eyebrows shot up. His eyes narrowed. He glared at Carson as he responded. "Haven't you learned your lesson by now? You're a sucker for these rich guys, and they only want one thing."

Carson opened his mouth to retaliate, but Sam shot him a pleading look that made him swallow his response.

"Mike, I ride his horse. That's all there is to it."

That's all there was to it? Those words hurt. Carson forced his face into a mask of indifference.

"Horses. Of course. What else is there but those bottomless manure pits you pour money into." Mike rolled his eyes. He turned his chair in such a manner that his back was to Carson. Carson knew a slight when one was thrown in his face, but he wasn't leaving Sam alone with this guy. He leaned back in his chair, assumed a casual pose, and sipped on his beer.

"When are you going to give up this insane waste of time and come home?"

"I asked for a year. You know that."

Come home? Sam was married? He grabbed a pretzel from the small bowl on the table, but it lodged in his throat. *Shit. If that didn't just figure.* He'd always had an uncanny talent for picking unavailable women.

"You'll never make a decent living with horses. Our mother couldn't. Look what happened to her?"

Carson blew out a breath of relief, and they both paused to stare at him. He offered an apologetic smile. Sam's brother. Now, this was an area he understood—sibling disagreements. He'd perfected winning them to an art and was quite often the perpetrator since his sibs usually fell short of his exacting standards.

"Keep Mom out of this."

"Mom didn't want her daughter to follow in her footsteps. She wanted you to graduate from college and get a stable job."

"I have a stable job," Sam quipped.

Carson choked back a snort. Knowing families like he did, it'd be better to stay neutral and out of it. Getting involved in family disputes, which he knew nothing about, was a sure recipe for disaster.

"You're never going to make the Olympics. You don't have the money." He turned to glare again at Carson. "Unless you get a rich sponsor."

"I've come to terms with that. I love riding and teaching. I can't imagine sitting in an office for eight hours a day. Can you picture me as a bookkeeper or a crafts store clerk? I'd hate it."

"Dad's paying off the debts he accumulated when he bailed you out of that mess."

"I'm going to pay him back."

"When? You're on borrowed time. It's been six years. Show a little responsibility and get a paying job. You could still ride, just not for a living."

Carson knew that argument. He'd had the same one with his sister on numerous occasions. The big difference being that his sister didn't even attempt to make money at horses, just spend it.

"You're not listening to me."

"What I'm listening to is that you're selfish. Dad and Eunice need you. The rest of us pull our weight. Why can't you? Dad's invested thousands in your horse career, and what's come of it? You can't even make ends meet."

"He knows I'll pay him back as soon as I can."

"Maybe he has faith in you, but I don't. That's why I'm here to remind you of the sacrifices he's made—that we've all made."

"I'm sorry. Really, I am. We agreed I'd give this up if I couldn't develop a thriving business within a year. I still have six months."

"You have four months. You spent two months trying to find a job once you came back from Germany. Unemployment counts. In fact, that's the point."

"Please, I feel bad enough." Sam swiped at her cheek. Was she crying?

Her brother paused and studied her closely. His voice softened. "I know you do. Just think about it, Sam. It's time. Besides, Eunice is making Dad's life a living hell with her nagging about you."

"That's the crux of it, isn't it? Our evil stepmother is putting the screws to Dad, and you suffer by association."

"Yeah, that summarizes it pretty well. We have a deal. Don't forget. Either you get a guarantee of a job at that fancy equestrian center with benefits or you quit this insanity for good. You're running out of time."

"I know. I'm working on it."

"Then work a little harder or admit defeat."

With that final comment, Mike stood and left the bar.

"And I thought I had family issues." Carson commented after he left.

Sam sighed. "I'm sorry you had to hear that."

"It's okay. It helps me understand you better."

"Is that important? Understanding me better?"

"I think it is." Carson's eyes narrowed. "What fancy equestrian center?"

"Uh," Sam hedged.

"Sam, what did you do?"

"I, uh, fibbed a little."

"How?"

"I told my father and stepmother that I was a shoe-in for the head trainer job at Cedrona. They gave me a year."

"Why did you do that?" Carson's heart sunk. Coward that he was, he knew he had to come clean.

"At the time, Harlee and Jake were managing the place. Bridget was in Europe. Hans was in Florida. I assumed that I would get the job if the place was ever built."

"If you don't, then what?"

"I've agreed to give up horses and work for my father and stepmother's businesses as a bookkeeper."

"A bookkeeper? You who wouldn't know a detail if it bit you in the butt?"

“Yeah, now you see why I’m so depressed. I’d rather be working on a chain gang in hell.”

“It’s that bad?”

“You should meet my stepmother. She makes Cinderella’s stepmother look like June Cleaver.” Sam grabbed his hand. “Carson, I have to have this job. I have to. Can’t you help me out? Hans can get plenty of other jobs, but me, with my background, my choices are limited.”

Carson ran his fingers through his hair and blew out a breath. “Sam, I...”

“Let’s just drop it for now. I don’t want to think about it anymore. It’s way too depressing.”

Carson rubbed his chin, trying to formulate a plan—a four-letter word he was certain Sam had come to detest. “Answer me one question. Why do you do this?”

“You mean why *don’t* I get a real job?”

Carson nodded.

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand. Horses are in my blood. They’re my passion. I can’t imagine life without them. Have you ever been pressured to give up something you love because it didn’t mesh with your family’s expectations of your future?”

Carson sighed. She had no idea. The loss of what could have been still tore at his gut, while regret left a sour taste in his mouth. It wasn’t too late for Sam to follow her dreams.

For him, it was.

Chapter 28

Lola's Bad News

Dr. Brandland shook his head. "It doesn't look good. He's pulled that same suspensory ligament again."

Not another one. Sam inwardly groaned. This had to be the worst luck she'd had in... Well, since... She flicked a quick glance toward the location of the destroyed barn, but she wasn't going to think about that.

"What's the prognosis?" Lola stared at her beloved horse, bravely fighting back tears. Poor Lola didn't deserve this. She and her horse had come so far so quickly. Unlike Teddi, Lola had the money to afford expensive horses, but she was a responsible rider, full-time computer programmer, and worked hard to get where she'd gotten. She'd been winning everything in her amateur classes. This was a huge setback.

"He needs surgery, but there's only a ten percent chance that he'll recover his full potential. He's probably not going to be much more than a trail horse."

"Can you do the surgery or do I need to take him to the vet college?"

"I can do it at my new clinic, but it's expensive."

"I'm not concerned about that. I'll pay what it takes."

Sam sighed. Her students' horses were dropping like flies. Harvey was a wonderful animal, and he deserved the best he could get. Thank goodness, Lola had the money to help him.

Sam tried not to think about how this affected her own pocketbook and her reputation. Two of her best students were out of competition early in the season and for the entire season. No lessons, no training rides, no shows, no ribbons meant no money for Sam.

Even worse, Teddi and Lola were genuinely good women. This was so unfair, while a witch like Bridget had several sound horses to ride.

Maybe Jaye could help? He always had a few nice horses for sale or

knew of horses. Teddi couldn't afford another horse, so she'd need to find her a lease. Lola could afford to buy something. It needed to be a horse that had the training to jump right into competition. Those types of horses were rare.

Sighing, Sam sat her latte down and went back to work. No more than a few minutes later, Jaye appeared in his pristine breeches and shiny boots.

"So, girlfriend, I understand I missed some excitement at the show over the weekend?" He leaned against the stall, snatched her latte from her hand, and took a sip.

"Not much. Something got into my stuff and scattered it all over."

"Did you call the police?"

"No, I didn't see the point. After all, the show manager swore they'd been having problems with a pack of coyotes."

"Really?"

Sam shrugged and bit the bullet. No time like the present. "By the way, Jaye, I really need that board check."

"You didn't get it? I left it with Juan. That guy is so irresponsible. I wonder if he lost it or what."

"Can you stop payment on that one and write me another?"

"I don't have my checkbook. I'll get one to you tomorrow."

"I can't wait much longer." Sam was annoyed and tired of Jaye blowing her off. The board on six horses was not insignificant. If Carson found out she still hadn't collected, she'd get another lecture on irresponsibility. Even worse, he'd come up with another list or project plan. There was no way she could stand that.

"Sam, how long are you going to stick it out here before you try to make a go of it somewhere else?"

"I'm not giving up yet."

"Hans will most likely be the new head trainer. Where does that leave you? Under his thumb for the rest of your career?"

"No, it buries me knee deep in spreadsheets and under my stepmother's thumb. I have to find a way to get the Cedrona job."

"Why don't you just go back to work for your family, pay them off, and start over?"

"Because I've come too far to do that now. Do you want me to leave or something?"

"No, no. That's not it." Jaye put an arm around her shoulder. "I just hate to see you get hurt again. Blue Eyes isn't going to give you a permanent commitment."

"Maybe I don't want one."

Jaye shook his head. "You can't fool me."

"Quit changing the subject. Don't you think these little incidents are suspicious? Someone is trying to get rid of me."

"I'm sure that's not the case."

"Jaye," she lowered her voice. "It's odd that we have an epidemic of horses that are injured or unrideable. Something's going on."

"You're starting to sound like Juan."

Maybe Juan was the only one of them that had a clue. She opened her mouth to tell Jaye about the two phone calls—the one only a few weeks ago and the one six months ago while she was still in Germany. Something stopped her. Maybe Juan's suspicions were getting the best of her. Now everyone was a suspect—even her most trusted friend.

* * * *

"Are you okay?"

Sam turned to find Lola watching her. "I'm fine. I should be asking you that."

Lola's eyes shone with determination and annoyance. "I don't buy it."

"Buy what?"

"Harvey. I don't think it's a suspensory."

"Dr. Matt's the best around. He's got a great eye for lameness."

"I know that. There's just something not right. I'm getting a second opinion. I have an appointment next week with a clinic in Portland."

"You're hauling all the way to Portland?" Sam frowned.

"I'm not going to let him do surgery on a horse that doesn't need it."

"Dr. Matt would never do that. He's the most ethical vet around."

"He may well be, but I want a second opinion."

"That's your right. It's your horse."

"You think I'm in denial, don't you?"

Sam shrugged.

"I might be, but I won't rest until I have another opinion. It's sound

business practice.”

“You’ve been hanging around Carson too much.”

“I’m not the one that’s been hanging around Carson. You are.” Lola winked at her. “Not that I blame you. He is one gorgeous hunk, especially now that he’s loosened up a little. That man’s butt looks great in a pair of faded Levi’s.”

“Don’t I know it.” His butt looked even better in no Levi’s. “You’re a happily married woman. You shouldn’t be looking at other men’s butts.”

“Honey, I might be married, but I have 20-20 vision. I like what I see.”

Sam shook her head and laughed. “So do I.”

* * * *

Gabbie, nosy in the manner of all alpha mares, stuck her head over her stall door. *He* was back. He didn’t turn on the barn light. Instead he hovered near the barn door, waiting for someone. He didn’t have to wait long. The other one showed up. Gabbie pricked her ears and listened, though their words didn’t hold much meaning to her.

“Why the hell did you call me out here so late at night?”

“We need to talk?”

“But here? Why not a neutral spot?”

“If we’re spotted together outside this place, people will be suspicious.”

“And they won’t be suspicious if they find us standing here at midnight in the dark?”

“Not if we’re checking on a horse we’re concerned about.”

“You are one devious individual.”

“Is she in the apartment?”

“No, she’s with Carson.”

“That figures. What do you make of that?”

“It won’t last, but it serves our purpose. It’ll keep them both distracted.”

“So what’s the deal?”

“She’s figuring things out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure.”

“Get rid of her.”

“That’ll take care of itself.”

“She might win.”

“She won’t.”

“She’d better not. We need her gone.”

“Don’t worry. Once this stupid contest is over she’ll be knee-deep in spreadsheets in some tiny little office in Eastern Washington.”

“There’s a way to guarantee she won’t win.”

“The mare?”

Gabbie lifted her head as they both turned to gaze in her direction.

“Yes, the mare.”

“Easy enough.”

“What about Juan?”

“No one believes him.”

“It only takes one person.”

“Maybe we can find him another position far from here that is too good for him to pass up.”

“I’ve tried that. Money doesn’t motivate him.”

“Let’s figure out what does; then let’s make sure Sam doesn’t stand a chance of winning.”

“I’m trying. It takes time.”

“That may be something we don’t have.”

The two humans walked out of the barn and out of Gabbie’s earshot. Their words meant nothing to her, but she didn’t like their negative tone and the closed angles of their bodies. Even worse, they didn’t give her any treats or acknowledge her in any way. As their cars rumbled into the darkness, something rustled nearby. Sniffing the air, she caught Juan’s scent. Expectantly, she turned her head in his direction and nickered as he emerged from an empty stall. She loved Juan. He never made her work and fed her breakfast and dinner everyday.

He skittered past her and disappeared into the inky black night, not giving her any notice. Disappointed, she lowered her head and searched for stray wisps of hay.

Chapter 29

Bridget Spills the Beans

“Sam, my brother is more sensitive than he appears.” Bridget popped a cup of tea in the lounge microwave and flipped it on high for two minutes.

“I know that.” Sam’s hackles rose. She’d like to pit Carson’s sister with her stepmother and may the biggest bitch win. She wouldn’t put money on that one. It’d be hard to predict the winner.

“So why don’t you do us a favor and get your claws out of him?” Bridget tapped a manicured fingernail on the top of the microwave and peered at the time with characteristic impatience. Sam looked down at her own ragged nails and slipped her hands behind her back.

“Why don’t you mind your own business?”

“My brother is my business. Besides, I know what you’re up to. I’ve seen it over and over again with all my brothers. You want his money, and you want this farm. What better way to be locked into that fortune than to marry him.”

“I’m not trying to marry anyone.”

Bridget snorted. “Bullshit.”

“It’s true.”

“My brother is vulnerable to women like you. I’m not going to let you break his heart like Marcia did.”

The only heart that would get broken in this little affair would be hers. “I have no intention of hurting Carson. Underneath all that stuffiness and tight-ass attitude is a real good guy.”

“Leave my brother alone. He deserves better.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ll make you regret it. Once this is settled, I’m going to kick you out on your ass so fast, you won’t know what hit you.”

“Well, gee, and I like you, too.”

"You're a walking disaster. You screw up everything you touch, intentional or not."

"You're never going to forgive me, are you?"

"Why should I when you can't even forgive yourself? You won't win, there's no way. I understand your two best students are without horses."

"How did you know that?"

"Barn gossip. Bad news travels fast."

"Good news for you and Hans." Sam narrowed her eyes. "You wouldn't be hurrying my demise along, would you?"

"Not necessary. You won't need my help. You can screw things up on your own. You'll never win our little contest."

"What contest?" Whatever ground she'd gained dropped out from underneath her as she struggled through unknown terrain.

A feral smile graced Bridget's beautiful face. "What? My brother never told you about our father's competition for Cedrona?"

* * * *

"Carson! What were you thinking?" She'd been waiting all night for the right moment, and that moment had come. Sam stood by the side of the bed, hands on her hips, and scowled at Carson. He owed her an explanation, and a big one.

"I thought you'd be happy for a chance to prove yourself." He stretched then reached out and pulled her next to him.

"So happy that you didn't have the guts to tell me yourself?" She struggled to free herself, but he held tight.

"I was getting to that. I just needed the right time to present it to you." Carson nuzzled her neck and pulled her closer. It was dark and a full moon dully illuminated the inside of the bedroom. Romance was the furthest thing from her mind. Murder and permanent maiming ranked high on the list, though.

"Stop that. You're clouding the issue."

"Exactly." Carson sucked on her ear.

"You've committed me to a contest I most likely won't win."

"Now that's no attitude to take." He pushed the strap of her nightgown down and took an exposed breast in his mouth and sucked her nipple until it

was hard. Her traitorous body ached for more and rubbed against him.

“Carson.” In spite of her best intentions not to be distracted, she moaned.

“You like that?” His voice was deep, husky, muffled against her skin.

“Please.” She feebly resisted his brand of exquisite torture. He moved to the other breast and gave it the same treatment. Sam threw her head back and whimpered with pleasure. *Damn that man.* She fisted the comforter in her hands to prevent them from playing his back like a piano.

“Didn’t you get enough earlier?” She pushed his head away.

“Oh, baby, I’ll never get enough of you.” He reared back to look in her eyes. She was a goner. That’s all it took.

“I bet you tell that to all the girls.” One errant hand snuck up to stroke his bare chest.

“I bet I don’t.” He tensed, his jaw tightened.

“How could you make such a deal with your father and sister?”

“Because I have faith in you. It’s a no-brainer. Your scores get to count. Hans doesn’t show. We’re ahead already.”

“We’re behind. BIGTIME. I have to count two other students’ scores.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Hans has the students with the expensive, well-trained horses, like your sister. My two best students have horses that are out for the season.”

“I know about Teddi. Who else?”

“Lola. Just this morning.”

“Well, isn’t that convenient.”

“Carson, as much as I’d like to blame your sister for this, I don’t really see how I can.” She brushed a stray lock of dark hair from his forehead.

“She would have the most to gain from it.”

“And Hans. I’ve talked to Jaye. He has a few horses to show Lola that might be suitable. As far as Teddi goes, she can only afford the board on the one horse, and he’s out for months.”

“Maybe she’ll find a generous benefactor.”

“Maybe that’s breaking the rules.”

“I never saw any rules. You sure as hell know if Bridget can figure out an advantage, she’s not going to care if it’s fair or not.”

“I’m sure she isn’t. But what about you?”

“All’s fair in love and war.”

“Fine then. One good turn deserves another.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” His dark head was moving further down her body, kissing and licking as he went.

Sam forced herself to concentrate. “You owe me. Since you’ve set me up, I’m setting you up. Every year, my father and brothers and their families get together for a big picnic at a small resort on the Olympic Peninsula. You’re going with me.”

“Why do I sense a trap?” He lifted his head and studied her, while his clever fingers did clever things to the sweet spot between her legs.

“Because my brothers are ruthless and unrelenting when it comes to protecting baby sister.” She panted with desire, while her entire body tingled.

“I see.”

“Seriously, Car, I get hassled every time I go to one of these about my choice of career and all the money it costs. My evil stepmother leads the charge. She’s a mega bitch.”

“I’ve heard. I need to meet this woman that’s unbalanced enough to want you as her bookkeeper. That requires a level of exactness and precision that you...”

“Okay, I know. Enough already. She keeps books for Dad’s business and her crafts store. She wants out of it, and he wants to keep the business in the family.”

“What exactly is your father’s business?”

“Dad has a sports bar in Spokane. He bought it a few years ago after he retired from thirty years of teaching and coaching. He’s doing okay with it. My brothers work there off and on.”

“Does anyone like your stepmother?”

“Not me or my brothers. My father adores her. He doesn’t see the side of her that the rest of us see. She’s controlling, abrasive, and a fake. She makes Dad happy, though, so I tolerate her. I just couldn’t stand to be under her thumb.”

“Sounds like a nice lady. About Teddi, find her a horse to finish the season. I’ll pay the board.”

“I’ll ask Jaye. He might have a sale horse Teddi could show and ride for a month. It’d be good advertising.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Find Teddi a ride?”

“Well, that, too, but I had something else in mind.”

“What about my family picnic?”

“When is it?”

“Next Saturday.”

“Don’t you have a horse show?”

“Sorry, big fella, but good try.”

“Damn. I’m screwed.”

“More than you’ll ever know.”

“You win a few and lose a few.” Carson pushed her down into the pillows and worries about the future disappeared in puffs of dust.

* * * *

Brad flopped into the chair and propped his feet on the desk. Carson pushed his laptop to the side and studied his brother. Whenever Brad turned serious, he dreaded the outcome. “I’m here under duress.”

“Yeah? Spill it.”

“Bridget is concerned that you’re getting in too deep with Sam.”

“So she sent you?”

Brad shrugged. “Not my idea.”

“Well, assure her that I’m an adult, and that I can take care of my own life.”

Brad grinned. “Unlike her?”

“Well, yeah. Since when has Bridget ever taken care of herself?”

“Never.”

“So you’ve said your piece. Anything else?”

“How’s the construction going?”

“Well, let’s see. Two subs quit this week because Bridget changed things in the plans three times. The project is out of money unless I can convince Dad to dump a few more bucks into it or find an investor.”

“Who in their right mind would invest in an equestrian facility? They’re notorious for being black holes.”

“No shit.”

“Since failure isn’t an option, how are you going to pay for Bridget’s grand ideas?”

"First of all, I've scaled the project back to bare bones without compromising the ability to hold large horse competitions on the grounds."

"Does Bridget know this?"

"Not if I can help it. Even so, it's still a money pit. Not to mention this therapeutic riding program wants to be based in the old facility, though I'm having difficulty locating the director."

"Not a good sign. But, hey, there might be a way to wriggle some money there."

"Sam and I are working on the grant angle. Mom is working on fund-raising. It would involve a long-term lease. We'd have to guarantee that the place would be ready for them by next June."

Brad glanced out the dirty office window at the huge, half-built structure on the other side of the parking lot. "Is that doable?"

"It has to be."

"So Carson, what are you getting out of this? I've never been clear on that? What did dear old Dad hold over your head to get you to see this mess through?"

"The brewery."

"You mean *The* brewery?"

"Yep. That's the one; that is if I can come up with the financing by the end of the year. I'll need a large down payment to be a good credit risk. That's where that damn horse comes in."

"And if not?" Brad scratched his arm.

"Ed will sell it."

"I know he's liquidating a lot of assets."

"He's not well, and times are tough."

"Yeah, especially in logging and building." Brad sighed. "What do you think would happen to it if someone else bought it?"

"It's across from both baseball and football stadiums. It'd most likely be knocked down for a parking garage."

"And what are your plans?"

"I already have tentative commitments from a coffee roasting company, a few specialty shops, a bar, and a restaurant."

"You have this all thought-out."

Carson raised one eyebrow. "And that surprises you?"

"Hell, no."

“But I need to start the remodel process within the year, or I’ll lose my investors and future tenants.”

“You’ll find a way to get it going.”

“That horse is my way. She’d better be worth what I hope she’ll be worth.”

* * * *

“A schoolmaster? Hmmm. Those are hard to come by, especially during show season. What is she willing to pay?” Jaye propped one shiny black leather boot on the tack trunk in the aisle, pushed his designer sunglasses onto his head with a flourish, and regarded Sam.

“She can’t pay anything. This would just be a lease situation through the show season. We’ll take care of the board, any vet bills, and show entries.”

“So what do I get out of it?”

“Jaye, you are so self-absorbed.”

He laughed, not the least bit put-off. “That’s what every one of my ex-boyfriends says.”

“The horse will be shown by a very good amateur rider. That should increase his worth immensely.”

“Well, let me think about it. I don’t really have anything that’s appropriate.”

“What about Galahad?”

“I have interest in him.”

“What interest?” Carson interrupted, walking up to join them. He looked great in his faded Levis and t-shirt. When did he stop wearing those dang polo shirts and slacks? She didn’t know, but he looked damn good in a real man’s clothes.

“I have a few possible buyers. I can’t commit him for the remainder of the show season.”

“Fine, we’ll just look somewhere else.” She expected Jaye to change his tune at her hollow threat. He didn’t bat an eye.

“I’m sorry, Sam. Really, I am.” He faked contrite. It didn’t work, not for her.

“Not as sorry as I am.” She felt sick inside. Something just happened, but she wasn’t sure what it was. She did know that Jaye was shining her on.

“I’d help you out if I could, but business is business.”

“I know you would.” Sam sighed; lying didn’t sit well with her.

“Oh, by the way. Here’s that board I owe you.”

Sam and Carson watched in amazement as Jaye pulled out several hundred-dollar bills and counted them out in her palm. “Well, ta ta. I have to go now. I have an appointment for a manicure.”

Carson watched him go. He turned to her, a quizzical expression on his face. “Did he sell a horse recently?”

“No, not that I’m aware of. But he’s an agent for lots of sale horses, and not just in this barn, so I wouldn’t know everything he’s got his hands into.”

“Hmmm.” Carson stared after him. Sam swallowed, trying to rid herself of that sick feeling in her stomach. Only, it wouldn’t go away.

Chapter 30

Batter Up

If Carson ever thought his family was bad, Sam's family was competitive to the point of obsession. Her father, brothers, assorted nephews, nieces, and cousins finished one game to start another. So far, Carson avoided the line of fire, but he suspected his minutes were numbered. They'd ignored him up until now because he was wearing a light blue Ralph Lauren polo shirt and nice slacks, not exactly down and dirty sports clothes. He'd intentionally picked his clothes for that purpose. He was clean and planned on keeping it that way.

He asked himself more than once what he was doing here with Sam. The family seemed to assume he was a "real" boyfriend. He'd been grilled by each of the four brothers and the father. By the disapproving expressions on their faces, he didn't quite measure up to their expectations, whatever they were. The stepmother, on the other hand, drooled all over him to the point of embarrassment. She was a climber, that one. Not the type Carson would have put with Sam's good-old boy father. But then, who would have put Sam together with Carson?

Not that they were *together*, at least not the way most people thought of together. He wasn't sure what they were, and he didn't want to examine it too closely. He had this morbid fear that if he did, he'd reach the frightening realization that he was in this deeper than the manure pile behind the barn.

"Carson!" Sam called to him. She held a baseball bat in one hand, a ball in the other. "We need one more person for softball."

Carson rolled his eyes. He hadn't picked up a baseball bat in years. He didn't want to pick up one now.

"Sorry, bad knees."

"Bullshit." She crooked her little finger at him.

"Put him in a wheelchair in centerfield." That suggestion came from the

oldest brother. Carson couldn't remember his name. There were too many of them. He struggled to single out which of the myriad jocks milling around the park were her brothers.

"I don't have a mitt."

"We have extras." Another brother, this one was an annoying smartass—a little like his own sister. Before Carson composed a suitable comeback, the jerk tossed an old worn mitt at him. Carson stared at the thing in his hand. He had a problem with using other people's mitts.

"Hey, come on, pretty boy. You're holding up our game." Sam glared at him, challenge in her voice.

Resigned to his fate, Carson slipped the mitt on his hand and stalked out to the field. The smart-ass brother signaled for him to take shortstop, the toughest fielder position. He was being setup. A slow smile spread over Carson's face. He hid a few tricks up his mitt. Assuming he could resurrect even a fraction of his baseball skills, they'd never know what hit them. He'd catapult Sam and her obnoxious brothers down several notches for making too many assumptions.

He smiled at her standing at second base, hands on hips, total tomboy. Too bad they weren't on opposite teams. She glared at him. "Don't screw up. I hung myself on a limb by picking you for my team."

"You didn't pick me. I was the last one standing."

"You were sitting. Still, I'm stuck with you. Let me field the balls, just get out of my way."

"You take your baseball seriously, don't you?"

"Honey, in case you've been sleeping the last couple hours, my family takes their sports very seriously."

"I hadn't noticed." Carson rolled his eyes. "Fair warning, I take everything seriously."

"Like I haven't noticed that?" She shook her head and assumed her position. "The loser has to buy the winners' beer for the rest of the weekend."

"This group? Hell, you don't have that kind of money. I'm not sure I have that kind of money."

"Exactly why my team can't lose."

"What do I get if our team wins?"

"The thrill of victory."

“Rather than the agony of defeat?”

“You got it, PB.”

“I really wish you’d quit calling me that.”

“Look at you. I told you to wear jeans.”

Carson shrugged. “Too late now.”

“You dressed like that on purpose.”

“You know me too well.”

“Just stay out of my way, so I can field the ball.”

“Maybe you’d be smarter staying out of my way.”

“You?” Sam looked him up and down and snorted in disbelief. “Do you know which end of the bat is which?”

“Just like I know which end of the horse is which.”

“My point exactly. Mike will cover to here, and I’ll take care of the other side.” Mike nodded, an irritating smirk on his face.

“You seem to have little confidence in my abilities.”

“I have confidence in your abilities, just not your athletic prowess. What a shame for such a beautiful body to be wasted in an office.”

Carson choked on the bile that rose in his throat. He’d swallowed that bitter pill years ago. That dream disappeared when he picked the family business over his passion. Had fate dealt him a different hand, he may well have used his body for a living. Shutting his eyes momentarily, he prayed for inner strength.

Sam and her family were beginning to grate on his nerves. It was time to teach them a lesson.

* * * *

Sam sighed. Poor Carson. He looked so out of place among this motley crew with his perfect clothes, perfect hair, and perfect face. They’d chew him up and spit him out if she let them. So far she’d run interference. That was about to end. She couldn’t protect him from this. Her brothers would smell the scent of a wounded animal and move in for the kill.

Already Brian and Mike eyed him like pickpockets eye a naïve tourist.

Brian stepped up to bat. On her nephew’s first pitch, he slammed the ball, a line drive straight toward Carson’s head. Mike and she streaked toward the ball, knowing they’d never make it.

Carson reached out his mitt and casually snagged the ball.

Sam braked to halt within inches of crashing into him. Mike slid in behind her. Calmly, Carson raised one eyebrow and lobbed the ball back to the pitcher.

“Lucky catch.” Brian muttered as he stalked back to the dugout. Sam shot a hard look at Carson. He lifted one broad shoulder, his face expressionless.

Suspicion began to sink in when Carson caught an infield fly ball and threw a runner out at first with a bullet of a throw, putting Sam’s team up to bat.

With two on, Carson took the bat Mike handed him.

“Do you know how to use it?” Mike sneered.

Carson smiled. “I’ll figure it out. I’ve watched baseball on TV.”

Sam glared at her brothers when they snickered. Carson stepped up to the plate with the easy confidence of a man who knew what he was doing. He positioned himself in a perfect batting stance and stared down the pitcher.

Steve wound up and threw a wicked ball across the plate. Carson didn’t blink. He parked it. The softball sailed over the infield fence as if it was a hard ball.

Carson grinned at Sam’s stupefied expression. “Dumb luck. Is that how you’re supposed to hit it?”

Mike and Brian stared at him, unable to speak.

Sam glared at him. “I’ve been had.”

* * * *

Sam sat on the edge of the bed in the small cabin they’d rented near the campground. Carson had some explaining to do.

“Why didn’t you tell me you played baseball?”

“And ruin your impression of me as a man with decorative muscles? Not on your life.”

“You were an All-American in college.” She shook her head; even now she couldn’t believe he’d kept such a secret from her.

“That was a lifetime ago. That naïve kid doesn’t exist anymore.”

“You almost played pro ball.”

“Almost is the key.”

“Carson.” Sam turned toward him and put her hands on his shoulders.

“Why didn’t you? Why did you give up your dream?”

“Pressure from my family and my fiancé. At the time, I thought it was the right thing to do.”

“And now?”

“No use crying over what could have been.”

She reached for his hand and held it. “It hurts, doesn’t it?”

Carson swallowed and was silent for a long moment. “As much as it would hurt for you to give up horses. When it comes to giving up dreams for family obligations, you and I understand each other perfectly with one huge difference.”

“And that is?”

“It’s not too late for you.”

“That’s why you told my stepmother to plan on finding another bookkeeper?”

“Yeah. Stupid move on my part, I admit.”

“You’ve backed me into a corner with no way out.”

“You’re going to win this contest with Hans.”

“I’m glad someone has faith in me.”

Carson pulled her into his arms and held her close. Sam laid her head on his shoulder.

Something beautiful and delicate formed between them. Like her grandmother’s fine China, Sam feared she’d bobble it as she did everything else and send it crashing to the floor. It’d shatter in a million pieces, never to be made whole again.

Chapter 31

Gullible Hearts and Conniving Sisters

Bridget walked out of the barn and almost ran into Jaye. *Shit*. So much for a quick escape. The man had hounded her every step today. Whatever he wanted, he wouldn't get it from her. "Jaye, I'm in a hurry. What do you need?" Irritation boiled under her indifferent surface.

"Actually, I'm here to speak to you about a confidential matter that causes great personal discomfort to me."

Bridget raised one eyebrow and leaned against her little sports car, giving Jaye her full attention. She specialized in digging up dirt. "And that would be?"

"It's about Sam. Let me preface it by making it clear that this isn't easy for me."

"I see." Jaye might be shrewd, but Bridget was shrewder. She recognized a kindred spirit when one held her captive in the doorway. He never did anything unless he chose to profit.

"I am rather fond of your brother. He's a good man, perhaps a little too trusting in the relationship department."

"You think so?" The man was up to something, and it had nothing to do with personal concern for her brother. She understood his type; after all, they shared a lot of similarities.

"Yes, I saw what Marcia did to him. It's taken him years to get close to another woman again."

"Sam?" Bridget revealed nothing and feigned boredom, while her mind raced faster than a shopper at Nordstrom's One-Day Sale.

"Of course. None of us are blind."

"So what's your concern?" Bridget, who normally enjoyed hearing and dishing out dirt, felt a surge of protectiveness toward Carson and his private life.

"Sam is a close personal friend of mine. Coming to you breaks her confidence, but I feel I have no choice."

"And?" The man reeked of bullshit.

"She wants a shot at the Olympics in the worst way. We both know the kind of money that requires."

"And you think she's using Carson?"

"I know she is."

"Well, the joke's on her. He doesn't have that kind of money. At least, not at this moment." Bridget's eyes narrowed. "I tried to warn him about her, but he wouldn't listen."

"No one ever does when they think they're in love."

"So why are you telling me this? I don't have any power over my brother."

"You do over your father."

"She won't be the head trainer. There's no way that'll happen."

"She'll stay on as assistant, while she's working on Carson's pocketbook. She'll bleed him dry. I've seen her do it time and time again."

"You have?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Why are you telling me? What do you really care? I don't believe for one damn second that it's out of concern for my brother."

"I have my reasons for needing Sam gone. Yes, she's a friend, but I need out from under my obligation to provide her students with good horses. I want to work with Hans, which is to your benefit. Besides, did you consider that she might win this contest and be your head trainer?"

"Who told you about the contest?"

"Sam."

"Well, she doesn't stand a chance of winning."

"You'd better have a backup plan."

Bridget frowned. Sam as the head trainer of her equestrian center was not going to happen.

Bridget always got her way.

She'd see to it.

* * * *

Carson picked up Sam's show jacket, the expensive one he'd bought for her, and waited. Sam tightened Gabbie's girth one final time and led her out of her stall to the warm-up arena at the show grounds. After handing her the jacket, he tagged along behind, keeping a safe distance from his mare's inquisitive nose.

Halfway there, Hans fell into step beside her. "It's counter-productive for me to be helping you considering we're competing for the same prize."

"Then don't." Sam huffed and walked faster. Hans' long legs had no problem keeping pace. Carson dropped back but stayed within eavesdropping range.

"Ya, but I will help anyway. I desire a fair victory." He slipped so easily into that German accent.

"Really? Is that why my best students' horses have come up lame in the past couple weeks?" She grimaced, as if she regretted the words as soon as they tumbled from her big mouth. Carson braced himself for the impending rebuttal.

Hans grabbed Gabbie's reins and pulled Sam to a stop. "What are you accusing me of?" Sam whirled around to face him. Both combatants ignored the horse.

Gabbie snorted and tugged on the reins, seeing a prime opportunity to steal a little grass. Sam paid her no notice. She propped her hands on her hips and glared at Hans. "Just what it sounds like, Herr Doctor."

"I see your devious plan. Ya, you are going to tell Mr. Reynolds that I am a charlatan if you lose. You think you have a win-win situation."

Carson watched his mare wander off. He snagged the reins as she slipped by, but stayed near Sam in case there was bloodshed.

"That's bullshit, and you know it."

"You are the devious one."

"Me? Your ethics are seriously in question. You've been stealing my students. The ones you can't steal meet a different fate."

"You are making some serious accusations. The Schraders came to me of their own free will. They need my discipline instead of your lackadaisical instruction."

"My instruction is NOT lackadaisical. I give each student one hundred percent."

"One hundred percent from you is equivalent to fifty percent from a

master like me.”

Oh, shit. Carson held his breath. Perhaps, they would draw blood. He prayed neither of them was armed.

“You’re trying to rattle me before my class.” Sam was locked and loaded.

“Bah. That is not my fault. You always were one to crumble under pressure and adversity.”

“I am not crumbling. I’m pissed.” That wasn’t an understatement.

Hans smirked. Carson saw steam coming out of Sam’s ears. He battened down the hatches and waited for impact.

“It is one and the same. Look at you. Even with the expensive clothes and equipment your benefactor has purchased for you, you still look like a ragamuffin.” Hans paused to cast a meaningful glance at Carson. Carson bit his tongue and stayed safe. “Have you paid no heed to what I’ve taught you? You are not fit to manage the pony rides at the circus, let alone a world-class facility.”

“Why you pompous ass!”

“Bah!” Hans threw up his hands and stalked off. “I do not need to listen to your nonsense. You are an ingrate. I have students who take my advice seriously. When you are ready to admit that I am the master and you are the student, I *may* consider your apology if delivered with the proper amount of remorse.”

Sam spun around and glared at Carson. “Don’t you say a thing.” Her eyes followed the path from his hands, to the reins, to the animal at the end of the reins. She gaped in horror. Green grass slime ran down Gabbie’s chin and caked on her curb bit as she munched away. “Carson, why did you let her eat?”

“I didn’t see what harm it would do.”

“You didn’t see the harm?” She turned her fury on him.

“Well, look at you.” Carson made a show of looking Sam up and down. “I buy you the best riding outfit money can buy, and you look like you just crawled out of a dumpster. How the hell do you do it?”

Her hair had escaped from the bun at the back of her head and stuck out from under her top hat at odd angles. Horse slobber and splotches of dirt adorned her new jacket. Her white breeches were smeared with green and yellow spots. He didn’t even want to think about the origin of those spots.

“It’s a special talent.”

“It might be, but I don’t think there’s any money or glory in being a dumpster diva.”

“No more than there is in being a tight ass.”

She might have him there.

* * * *

Steaming, Sam rode through the open gate in the warm-up arena. She’d had it with men. Germans or Americans—they were all assholes.

Dumpster Diva? She’d show Carson, and she’d show Hans. She was riding right after Bridget. She’d beat her skinny, rich butt. That’d shut them up.

Can’t ride under pressure?

Bullshit. Of course she could. When she applied herself. She just hadn’t applied herself yet. Her underachieving ended today. Right here. Right now. Move over Bridget. There’s a new girl in town. Bow to the master? Get ready to bow, Hans.

Swallowing hard, Sam nudged Gabbie into a ground-covering, forward trot and forced herself to relax. Gabbie moved around the arena, loose and supple. She felt like heaven.

For a moment.

Gabbie had other ideas about who the master really was. Without warning, she performed her signature vertical leap then careened sideways, almost hitting a child slogging around on a pony. Horses and riders scattered to all corners as her redheaded mare proceeded to buck with such enthusiasm that she’d put a championship rodeo bronco to shame.

Sam hung on for everything she had, pulling the mare’s head up and whipping her around in a tight circle. Gabbie shook her head and snorted for pure pissiness. She almost had the mare under control when she heard a snap. The stirrup leather had broke. Gabbie took advantage of the situation. She launched Sam into the arena dust then she ran to Carson and pressed her big head against his chest.

Sam jumped to her feet and stalked to the mare. The riders behind her went back to work, keeping a safe distance from the crazy mare and furious rider.

“What the hell was that all about?” Sam fumed.

“She seems to have a problem with you.” Carson’s innocent expression infuriated her all the more.

“She has a problem with everyone. That’s why she was so cheap.”

“She doesn’t seem to have a problem with me.” Carson stroked the mare’s blaze, and she uttered a muffle sound like a purr.

“Then you ride her.” Sam shot daggers at the traitorous mare.

“Are you giving up on her?”

“Hell, no. There has to be a way to get through to her.”

“I don’t seem to have that problem.”

“Of course not. You don’t ride her.”

“You’re jealous.”

“Of what?”

“That this animal likes me better than she likes you.”

“Horses don’t think that way. She’s lazy, spoiled, and needs a serious attitude adjustment when it comes to her work ethics.”

“Sounds like my sister,” Carson muttered.

“There are similarities, and she is a horse’s a—” Sam paused when she heard her name called over the loud speaker as the next one to ride. “Damn. I haven’t even warmed her up yet.”

“Her back is warmed up pretty well if you ask me.”

Sam glared at him. She wanted to slap that smirk from his smug face. “I wouldn’t be so amused if I were you. This is your future we’re talking about.”

Gabbie nuzzled him, as Carson sobered. “I’m sorry, but she’s got your number.”

“And how do you propose I fix that.”

“I’m no horse trainer. Ask Herr Doctor.” Carson held the reins as she swung into the saddle. She cringed, feeling sick to her stomach as Gabbie danced underneath her. Carson’s eyes met hers, and she read the concern there. “Be careful.”

She nodded.

Asking Hans for forgiveness was the last thing she wanted to do. Even worse, it would probably be the next thing.

* * * *

“Sam, maybe you should admit defeat and move on?”

Carson hesitated near the door when he heard Jaye’s voice coming from the tack room.

“I can’t imagine giving this up. When riding is good, when everything goes my way, there’s this incredible connection that is the greatest natural high in the world.”

Carson backed up a little, feeling guilty but unable to help himself.

“It wasn’t good last weekend.”

“It wasn’t that bad.”

“It bordered on catastrophic.”

“My stirrup leather broke, and I went flying. Someone tampered with it.”

“Oh, Lord, now you sound like Juan. Sam, really. Just last week you told me the leathers were wearing thin, and you needed to replace them.”

“They weren’t that bad.”

Jaye snorted. “You’re your own worst enemy.”

“I can’t quit. Nothing feels better than this when it’s right.”

“Better than really good sex?”

“Much better.”

“Except with the right man.”

“I don’t think there is a right man.”

“What? You don’t get wet all over for the pretty boy?”

“He’s all right.”

“Just all right? What? The pretty boy doesn’t set your world on fire?”

“I said he’s okay.”

“I thought the two of you were ready to go ring shopping.”

“That’s crazy. Once Gabbie is sold, Carson and I will be over.”

“When you’re done with him, send him my way.”

“I think he’d have something to say about that.”

“I suppose. Just my luck.” They both laughed.

Damn.

Carson backed away. He’d heard enough. Numb, he walked out the barn door and into his truck.

He thought she’d enjoyed it with him. Surely, she couldn’t be faking pleasure. Yet, women did that all the time. Marcia had fooled him for over two years. It’d all been lies, just like every other woman he’d been with.

He'd been okay, but not great.

He could have sworn it was different with Sam. Now it sounded like it wasn't. She was shining him on for reasons he wasn't sure he wanted to delve into. Money for one, but she had no idea. His liquid cash was at a serious low, and this job meant everything to him.

Carson pressed his forehead against the steering wheel. His head throbbed, and his heart ached. He'd been used and betrayed. Been there, done that. Would he ever learn? He'd been getting in deeper and deeper with Sam only to find out that she didn't feel the same. He'd gone against his cardinal rule, and now he'd pay with the one thing he couldn't afford to gamble.

His stupid, gullible heart.

Chapter 32

A Lapse of Judgment

Carson directed one of the subs to the back of the new arena where the building materials were stored. He paused to survey the massive metal building. Large panels of metal sheeting covered three-quarters of the roof. Once that work was completed, the interior work could begin, which would most likely take longer than the exterior.

The arena would need to be prepared for footing. The stabling area would need to be walled off from the arena and the stalls built. They'd also prepare the all-weather outdoor competition arenas. So much left to do, but if their crews worked weekends, they might make their deadlines.

Frowning, he squinted into the sun. Speaking of crews, specifically roofers, where were they? The place should be buzzing with activity. A notoriously undependable bunch, these roofers challenged his patience, yet they'd been on the job for three days straight. Frowning, he walked to the side of the barn where they'd parked their vehicles earlier this morning.

They were gone.

Shit. Now what?

He eyes narrowed when he spotted Bridget's car parked nearby. He rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming on. She'd pissed off one roofer yesterday by demanding he be her personal go-fer. What the hell happened today to piss them all off? From this point forward, he'd ban his sister from the construction site. He dialed the foreman's number on the cell phone. After several pleading conversations, he convinced the crew to return.

For the next half hour, Carson smoothed his subs' ruffled feathers. When he finally finished, Bridget had made herself scarce. Lucky for her because he was in a foul mood, and Bridget deserved a good butt chewing.

He'd been cruising for a rousing argument ever since he'd overheard

Sam's comments about his ho-hum performance in bed. Instead of confronting her, he'd avoided her and focused his frustrations elsewhere. He knew the moment of truth neared, and he had no idea in hell of how to deal with it. Right now he had business to attend to.

Carson stomped away from the new arena in need of a short walk to cool off before his dreaded appointment with the director of the therapeutic riding center.

Then his day went from crappy to potentially disastrous.

In front of the barn, Juan *entertained* a middle-aged woman in a frumpy gray suit. It was *her*. Carson glanced at his watch. She was two hours early. Carson walked to meet her, pasting a welcoming smile on his face.

"Ms. Malone, I've been expecting you."

"Kate, please." The worry lines on her face made her look much older. He recognized that look; he'd worn it too many times himself. On her it made her look like a prune. Did it look that bad on him?

"Certainly. Kate."

"Juan has been kind enough to give me a tour and discuss horse care while you were indisposed."

"I apologize for not being available when you arrived. I was under the mistaken impression that our appointment was later in the morning."

"Oh, it was. When I'm evaluating the merit of a facility, I like to show up early or unannounced to get a feel for the place."

"Could I answer any questions for you about the facility or our future plans?"

"It needs some work to be safe. For one, that burned out barn needs to be cleared away."

Carson couldn't agree more. "It will be. When we bring in the equipment for leveling the outdoor competition arenas next week, we'll clear that area as well. The plans call for additional parking and a small garden with picnic tables on it."

"That's the least of your problems."

"I know it's not aesthetically pleasing yet." Carson bristled. He didn't like her attitude, as if she was doing him a favor. His mother had twisted his arm until he'd agreed to meet with her. Sam actually wrote a good plan on how the program fit into Cedrona. Those two things considered, he felt obligated to hear her out. Instead, she was making demands of him.

“Appearances don’t concern me like they do your wealthy dressage clients. My clients care about safety and the ability to function in a quiet environment conducive to healing.”

“I can appreciate that. We’re willing to work with you to make reasonable improvements when we have a lease agreeable to everyone.” He wasn’t going any further than that. She’d need to meet him halfway. She harrumphed, as if she didn’t believe him. He bit back a retort and forced a stiff smile.

“I don’t see how the new facility will be ready in time for our program to move in with a minimum of downtime.”

“I guarantee it’ll be ready. You received the contract?”

She nodded.

“It’s acceptable to you?”

“One of our board members is an attorney. He has concerns. I’m not sure the risk is worth it. If we act now, we still have time to find another place.”

Despite his annoyance with her, Carson understood where she was coming from. Up until Cedrona had been shoved down his throat, he’d never been a risk-taker. Now he took them left and right, agreeing to contracts he wasn’t 100 percent certain they could meet, backing Sam rather than a sure thing like Hans, and letting a temperamental redheaded horse control his future.

Maybe this was what happened when you had so much to lose that you risked it all in order to keep it.

An hour later, Carson escorted her back to her car with mixed feelings. A signed contract and financial commitment from the handicapped riding program could be a mixed blessing. If his mother’s fund-raising efforts for the program yielded a reasonable amount of donations, it might be enough to finance the completion of Cedrona.

It’d be a scaled-down version of the grandiose scheme his sister envisioned, but they’d have a solid foundation to build upon. With Sam’s knowledge of show grounds and his building knowledge, they’d carefully designed the facility with room for future expansion. It’d satisfy their horse show contracts for the ensuing summer.

If they didn’t make it, the show sponsors would sue their asses and irreparably tarnish Cedrona’s reputation. His father would declare him a

failure. He'd lose the brewery and his fledgling business. And ReynCorp? Who knew? He didn't. Could it survive one more failed project? His stomach twisted in knots. If he didn't have ulcers already, he would before this was over. He rolled his shoulders in an attempt to loosen them and ease some of the tension.

Yet, at the end of a very long tunnel shone a dim light. He could salvage Cedrona with a little business ingenuity and a lotta luck. First things first, control his sister's spending. Bring in a few more horse show contracts. Pray the handicapped program agreed to the terms and provided the necessary funds.

Now if he could only find a way for that damn horse to start performing up to expectations, so he could maximize his investment. Of course, that involved Sam. She wasn't progressing with the animal as he'd hoped. In fact, they'd gone backwards since she and Herr Doctor started their cold war.

Herr Doctor refused to teach her until she groveled in apology for offending him. She refused to grovel. It was time to forget personal pride; her livelihood depended on her groveling, as did his future.

Sighing, he slugged down a cup of cold coffee and trudged across the gravel parking lot to the old barn, intent on dealing with his most immediate problems, his sister and Sam. He dreaded this confrontation with Sam, but it needed to be done. From what he'd overheard, he bored her. He didn't need that, not from her. And certainly not with everything else on his plate.

He met Sam in the doorway, as she led Gabbie out to pasture. Faking a smile he didn't feel, he braced himself for another unpleasant confrontation. The mare made that rumbling noise. He wished women found him as intriguing as that damn horse did.

Sam walked up to him but avoided his eyes. He'd been avoiding her and owed her an explanation. Gabbie shoved her nose between them, sniffing at Carson.

"You've been feeding her snacks, haven't you?"

"Me? Why?" Carson pushed the mare's nose, but she wasn't budging.

"Because she obviously expects them every time she sees you."

"She does not. She just wants to wipe her big nose on me and is disappointed I'm wearing a t-shirt."

"You're ruining all her fun." She made an attempt to keep her voice

light, but it cracked. "Carson, have you been avoiding me?"

"What makes you think that?" Now, he was the one avoiding her eyes. Suddenly that horse became the most fascinating creature on earth.

"For one, you make it a point to be where I'm not, and you've been sleeping alone at night. Did my brothers scare you off?"

"Them?" Carson snorted. "Hardly. I've been rethinking things. Perhaps us getting involved was a lapse of judgment on my part."

"I'm a lapse in judgment? That's it? That's all I mean to you?" She clenched her fists, and her body stiffened.

"Yes. Judgment. Don't worry; you'll get over it. After all, riding a horse is better than sex with me."

"What are you talking about?" Her eyes flashed fire, and he realized she wasn't his only lapse in judgment—opening his big mouth was worse. He couldn't stop himself. He wanted to hurt her as much as she hurt him.

Bracing himself, he pushed on. "You told Jaye there was no right man. At least, that man doesn't appear to be me."

"Carson?" She shook her head, confusion etching lines in her face.

"I heard you talking with Jaye. You don't think I'm good in bed." She'd offended his masculinity and downplayed their relationship, after he'd thought she was different than the rest.

"I didn't mean it that way. He was prying, and our relationship is none of his business."

"You could have found a different way to tell him to mind his own business. Admit it, you think I'm boring, don't you?"

"Oh, of all the stupid." She threw her hands up in the air. "They say women are hard to figure out."

"It's not stupid." He studied her face. "What am I to you?"

She stared at him. "I...I'm not sure how to answer that."

"You don't need to. What you don't say, says enough. You've been using me."

"Me? Using you? What about you using me?"

"What the hell would you have that I'd want?"

Sam bristled. "My riding ability."

"You're paid well for that. Besides, it's really done me a hell of a lot of good." He was stepping over the line, but he couldn't help it. She'd wounded his most vulnerable spot.

“Maybe you’d like to ride that mare yourself?”

“At this point I can’t do much worse.”

“You insensitive ass.”

“Better an insensitive ass than a washed-up horse trainer.”

“You have no idea how difficult that horse is to handle.”

“All I know is that you’ve pissed off the one man who can help you. It’s my horse, and you’ll reconcile with Herr Doctor.” Carson, the Tight Ass, was back in fine form, but it didn’t feel right anymore.

“I don’t need him. I’ll do fine on my own.”

“Bullshit. I want you back on that horse tomorrow for your regular lesson, so you’d better beg his forgiveness.”

“But I...”

“Either resume your instruction with Hans, or I’ll pull the horse and find another rider.”

She’d betrayed him and been just like every other woman he’d had the misfortune of falling for. Damn, he was a fool. He’d thought she’d be different, but she wasn’t any different. He should have kept their relationship strictly business. Given his tendency to fall in love, he’d let his guard down.

Not only had he let his guard down, but he’d opened the prison gates and released all his emotions without even preparing them for life in the cold, cruel world.

* * * *

Sam fumed. She hadn’t done anything wrong. If he was getting tired of her and her unsophisticated ways, he at least owed her an honest explanation instead of some asinine reason that didn’t make sense.

Had she blown it when he asked her what he meant to her? How did a person answer a question like that? Especially when they didn’t know how the other half felt. Why should she bare her soul when he wasn’t about to bare his?

Surely, a confident man like him wasn’t bothered by her conversation with Jaye? What she said was as far from the truth as Wal-Mart was from Nordstrom. He had to realize that.

Sam swallowed a lump in her throat. She’d felt a connection between

them like they had something special. How could he deny it? Despite their differences, deep down where it counted, they were a lot alike.

After that baseball game with her family, he'd exposed a hidden side, and she'd fallen that much deeper in love with him. He'd held his own with her sports-crazed family. That said a lot about his strength of character. She almost smiled. The pretty boy was a closet jock. Who would've guessed?

Booted heels clicked on the concrete behind her. Hans, in his impeccable tan breaches and polished boots, walked down the aisle. When he saw her, he scowled and sniffed the air as if smelling a distasteful pile of dog poo. He pivoted smartly, reversed his direction, and strode into the arena.

Praying for a quick merciful end, she followed him. "Hans!" He kept walking. Hans had long ago mastered the fine art of grudge holding.

Sam ran after him. Man, she hated this, but it had to be done. In a weird twist of irony, she needed his help in order to beat him. He ignored her as he waited for his next student to finish her warm-up. With a deep breath, Sam stepped next to him.

"Hans, I'm sorry. I acted rashly at the show. I apologize."

He waved his hand around. "Bah. Is nothing. You are not worth my effort."

"I really am sorry."

"You will do fine without me." Sam was taken aback. The impenetrable Herr Doctor seemed to be licking his wounds.

"You know I won't."

"Apparently, you do not." A muscle worked in his jaw as he studied the arena wall.

"I do. I'm admitting it." She groveled before the master.

"Why should I help you? We both want the same thing. I could be damaging my chances for an ingrate."

"Why does this job matter so much to you? You could go anywhere. Work for anyone."

"I cannot. I have commitments that bind me to this area. This is my best opportunity."

"I don't understand."

"It is not for you to understand. It is personal."

"Hans, I need help with this horse. Carson is counting on her having a

high resale value in a short amount of time. If I let him down, my reputation as a rider and trainer may never recover.” And she’d be counting yarn and thread for the evil stepmother.

“The horse is fixable. *You are not.*” His clipped voice betrayed how much she’d hurt him.

“Then help me fix the horse.”

“And if a miracle occurs, and you win this ridiculous contest, I would be—as Americans say it—screwed.” The man *was* an American, but she didn’t need to remind him of that.

“I need the bonus money to pay off a debt.”

“Bah. I do not care about the money. I want the position.”

“Help me win with this horse, and the position is yours. I keep the money.”

Hans rubbed his chin in thought. “And if I win?”

“You win the position and the bonus. You can’t lose either way.”

“We split the money regardless, and you leave no matter the outcome. That is the final deal.”

The bastard drove a hard deal. So much for him not caring about the money. Taking a deep breath, she nodded. “Agreed.”

“You must follow my instructions to the letter. No deviation.”

“I will. I promise.” Half the bonus money and the commission from the sale of Gabbie would be enough to pay off the majority of her debt. She’d start elsewhere with a new position. Starting over didn’t appeal to her, but she couldn’t stay here, not with Carson so nearby. Not now. She’d deluded herself that they had a future. “No one can know about this.”

He laughed. “I am no idiot. My reputation is at stake. You will leave Cedrona after Regionals. I cannot tolerate the chaos that revolves around you like the planets circling the sun.”

Sam shook the hand he offered, sealing the deal and her fate.

* * * *

“I have no issue with the contest as presented.” Hans shrugged indifferently as he flipped through a horse magazine that had been sitting on the lounge coffee table. His *liaise faire* attitude pissed Bridget off.

“But it’s not fair to you. You teach her.” She tapped one perfectly

manicured finger on the chair arm.

"She is but one student. I have several other advanced students with excellent horses. She cannot teach as I can. Her students will not be able to surpass mine. There is no contest, even though I am competing against my own creation." Hans put his hand over his mouth as he yawned.

"What if her students rise above their level of their competence?"

"You have no faith in me."

"It's not that."

"Sam is her own worst enemy. You, on the other hand, are an excellent rider with two well-trained, obedient, and talented animals. On any given day you will place higher than her. There is no issue."

"She has Gabriella. The horse oozes talent. If she ever puts together one good ride, no one can touch her."

Hans snorted. "That is unlikely, despite my best efforts."

"I won't tolerate her winning. She can't manage this place. She'll ruin it before our grand opening."

"Trust me. She will not be here much longer. I have seen to that."

"Really? How?"

"The how is not important."

"My brother has made some inroads with her lack of confidence and her disorganization. He thinks he can reform her."

"Your brother cannot change a leopard into spots."

"You mean change a leopard's spots?"

"Ya, that's what I said." Impatient, he rolled up the magazine and swatted a fly with a loud thwack. "Enough of this nonsense. I have work to do." On that note Hans threw down the magazine, rose to his feet, and left the room as Carson entered. Bridget jumped up, ready to beat a quick escape.

"I've been looking for you."

"It'll have to wait. I'm busy." Bridget attempted to skirt around him, but he blocked the door. She knew that look. She'd seen it many times in her life.

"Busy making trouble? Sorry, that doesn't qualify as busy in my book."

Bridget shrugged and rolled her eyes. Lecture time. Big brother was on the rag. "Make it quick."

"Sit. Now. And listen." Carson pointed at the old worn chair she'd just

vacated. Bridget slumped into it and pouted. She hated this.

"I'm going to be late." She sounded like a petulant child. She couldn't help it. Carson brought that out in her.

"For what? A massage?"

She cringed. He knew her too well.

"You interfered with my subs' work today. You asked the roofers to quit what they were doing, unload your car and even wash it."

"I had a lot of stuff, and it was dirty."

"You didn't have any problem putting that 'stuff' in the car when you bought it. Surely, you could have managed to get it out."

"What do they care? They're still getting paid."

"My point exactly. They're on Cedrona's payroll, not your personal payroll."

Bridget yawned. He could be so boring when he lectured. "Whatever."

"Bridget," Carson sounded exasperated. "It's time you grew up. Do you really think that Mommy and Daddy will be around the rest of your life to support you like the Princess of Wales?"

"I have a trust fund."

"At the rate you're spending money, it won't last until you're thirty."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"Fine, we won't. Leave my subs alone. You need something from one of them; you go through me. No more talking directly to any worker on this farm."

"What if I don't like how they've done something?"

"Complain to me. I will not tolerate any more interference. The new facility is off-limits to you. If you want a tour, ask me."

"But it's mine."

"Ask me." His mouth formed a tight, thin line.

"They forgot the cupola on the barn." She sulked. It wasn't fair. Big brother was ruining the ambiance of the place, and no one seemed to care but her.

"I had it removed from the plans. It's an unnecessary expense."

"It is not. It gives the barn class and character. Without it, the place looks like some old cow barn."

"Fine. Consider it a cow barn and stay out unless you want to be mistaken for a bovine."

Chapter 33

Misery Looks for Company

Carson nursed a beer on the deck and stared down the hill. A light glowed in Sam's apartment. It cast a warm glow through a dark night, unlike the coldness that seeped into his orange and avocado hell. He'd escaped to the deck to dull this outrageous assault to his good taste. Unfortunately, the ploy backfired because he couldn't stop imagining what Sam was up to. It was times like this when Carson found himself questioning his priorities. He missed her. If only she felt the same. Shifting in his chair, he sighed. Ever since their argument a week ago, she stayed in her corner, and he stayed in his.

It was better that way, yet he still felt miserable. He'd opened up to her when he knew better. He was such a gullible fool where women were concerned, a fact she'd been in a position to exploit to the fullest.

It'd been a hell of a week, first, his defunct relationship or whatever it was with Sam, then dealing with his sister, problems with subs, and no money to finance the remainder of the project. Then just this morning Kate Malone called and had found another facility for her program. To cap it off, they had an injured horse yesterday—one of Hans' young riders this time. Surgery had been unsuccessful, and the horse had to be euthanized.

Carson stood and walked into the house. He crossed the room and slumped on an orange plaid chair at the living room table and started one of his infamous lists to occupy his mind.

There were too many coincidences and unexplained issues.

He'd never been one to acknowledge his instincts, much less feel them. Perhaps, he had Sam and his father to blame for his recent penchant of going with his gut on certain things. He'd been yanked out of his comfort zone, and he didn't particularly like it. Yet, lately, he'd made some good decisions based solely on intuition. He hadn't even known he had such a thing.

Between his newfound intuition and old-found obsessive organizational skills, something should come to light if he wrote down what he knew and examined the angles.

Carson started an Excel spreadsheet. Each column listed a different issue:

Missing or misplaced items

Injured or unmanageable horses

Unexplained or mysterious incidents

In each row, he put a brief description of an incident and a check mark in the appropriate column.

In only three months, they had eight incidents of disabled horses or horses deemed unmanageable for their current rider. Was that normal in the horse show world? He doubted it. He added up fourteen incidents of missing items—most were never found. There were six other out-of-place incidents, including the man that Sam thought she saw in the barn, coyotes at the show grounds selectively ransacking Sam's stall area, and the flat tires.

An unthinkable thought entered his mind. He shivered despite the warm evening.

Could Sam be the perpetrator in order to gain attention? Heaven knows, he'd heard of stranger things. He just didn't believe it any more than he believed she'd been responsible for the deaths of several horses and one woman.

No way. There was something more sinister at work here. That meant only one thing. Sam may very well be in danger.

Should he call the police? And say what? I have this suspicion? They didn't have time for suspicions.

What about Juan? Was he smarter and saner than he appeared? Maybe he really did know something? From the beginning, Juan had been on Sam's side—warning her of impending danger when they'd written him off as eccentric. Maybe he wasn't eccentric. Maybe there was more to the man or maybe he was the one sabotaging things. And maybe something larger was going on at the old farm.

He didn't like the idea of Sam staying in that apartment by herself even with the alarm system.

Frowning, Carson started another column and listed the people that were in the area when each of the incidents happened and highlighted the ones

who had something to gain from each incident.

Once finished, he picked up the phone and called Brad. His middle brother was a damn good computer hacker with this uncanny ability to ferret information out of the most unlikely sources using his innate charm and inborn deviousness. Besides, Brad had time on his hands because he avoided going into the office like the plague.

* * * *

As much as she hated working with Hans, he was a genius when it came to difficult horses. She rode with him three days a week and soaked up every bit of knowledge he had to impart. Afterward, she wrote a summary of each lesson in a journal she'd started keeping, so she could refer to it the next time she rode. Slowly, Gabbie became more cooperative and pliable. The secret was to always ask, cajole, and praise the mare for the slightest effort. If you forced her, she'd erupt into a temper tantrum of gigantic proportions.

When the mare was good, she was like riding a cloud with leashed power just waiting to be tapped. For the first time, Sam began to have hope.

And misgivings.

This was the horse of a lifetime. Even Hans agreed. A horse of such immense talent had international, possibly even Olympic potential. Of course, all the talent in the world added up to a pile of manure if you didn't have the funds. In addition, an Olympic hopeful needed exposure to the best judges and competition with the best riders in the world. That meant campaigning in Florida, California and Europe.

The money issue was insurmountable. The time factor was impossible. She had until Regionals; then the mare would be sold. Some other rider would have the privilege of taking her as far as she could go. Or worse, taking her back to square one if they didn't understand her. What would become of Gabbie if she were sold into the wrong hands? Some unethical trainers forced talented horses to perform with cruel methods. She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat and drew in deep, calming breaths. Only, they didn't calm. She felt heartsick. She loved that mare, but it was an unprofessional attitude for a professional. Maybe that was the crux of why she'd never really make it big. She cared too much for the horses.

Just yesterday, Jaye mentioned a possible millionaire buyer out of

Florida looking for a mount for a former Olympian, a rider who had a reputation for being hard on horses. Sam could never compete with that kind of money, nor could she find such a sponsor. Wealthy sponsors invested in proven riders, not riders plagued by tragedy and a reputation for self-sabotage.

But she didn't have to give up her dream. If she could get beyond Gabbie's temper tantrums and her own fear of success, she could get a job at another facility. It would most likely be out of state. There would be nothing for her here with Gabbie sold.

Nothing but Carson.

Yet, Carson was unreachable. She'd flushed her future with him and Cedrona down the toilet by her deal with Hans. The man kept up his end by making her the best rider she could be and her horse the best in the area.

Now she'd keep her end the bargain. That \$25,000 would pay a majority of her debt, shut-up her stepmother, and place her in a new situation far away from here.

* * * *

Carson did a double take. No way. It couldn't be.

Sam rode toward the competition arena on Gabbie. Only it didn't look like Sam, nor did it look like Gabbie. Gabbie's braids were perfect. Her coat gleamed copper in the sun brighter than a shiny new penny. Her white socks and blaze almost blinded him. Her long, full tail flowed behind her.

And Sam. *Holy shit.*

Carson staggered back a step or two.

Sam's black shadbelly was impeccable, even the gold buttons gleamed. Her white breaches were spotless. Not one smudge adorned her top hat. Her stock tie was perfectly tied, and her stock pin was straight. Her hair was contained in a neat bun at the back of her neck. People stopped to stare as she rode past.

He gave her a thumbs-up as she entered the arena. She flashed him a genuine smile that made his heart do things he didn't want it to do.

He had it bad, worse than he'd had it in years.

Hans leaned against the railing next to him.

"What happened to her?" Carson watched her ride around the outside of

the competition ring, waiting for the judge to signal for her to enter.

“You did, and I did.”

“Huh?”

“She has something to prove to you, to me, and to everyone who expects her to collapse under the pressure.” Hans waved his arms around the area to indicate the unusually large amount of spectators who’d gathered to watch.

“But she actually looks like a...a...”

“Professional.”

“Yeah.”

“I have you to thank for that. She had a list, and she used it.”

“But the horse looks so well groomed.”

“I insisted that Theodora and Lola do the braiding, washing, and grooming of the horse.”

“You are a miracle worker, my man.” Carson grinned.

Hans tipped his hat to Carson. “As are you. Now if she only rides as well as she looks.”

She did.

The mare and rider flowed around the arena in perfect harmony until they came down one diagonal to do changes. Gabbie did three perfect changes then leaped in the air and bolted four or five strides before Sam wrestled her under control. Gabbie tossed her head and kicked at Sam’s leg.

Hans leaned forward and whispered to himself. “No. No. Relax. Do not force. Breathe. Relax or she will blow again. Ask. Gently. Gently.”

Tense, Sam took a visible breath, let it out, and relaxed into the saddle. Gabbie made a few more attempts at rebellion, but Sam sat quietly and asked for cooperation.

Gabbie’s ears rotated back, a sign she was listening. She stopped swishing her tail and carried it proudly; then she settled back to business as if nothing had happened.

“Iz gut. Gut.”

“Incredible.”

“Ya, I am the master.”

Carson glanced at Herr Doctor. The man wasn’t joking. Well, he might be arrogant, but he *was* the master. The proof had just finished her test and was riding out of the arena with a huge smile on her face.

Carson stood back while Hans walked beside her. Jaye flanked them, gushing about the mare's performance. "Wonderful. Oh, so, wonderful! She finally put it together."

Carson beamed at Jaye. "Yes, she was amazing."

"I have even better news. I have an interested client for that mare if she continues to perform like this."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I think we're talking in the mid-six figures."

"Damn. For a horse?" That was more than he'd expected.

"For an Olympic horse. They're rare and coveted."

"An Olympic horse?" Carson felt a sinking sensation. An Olympic caliber horse that Sam wouldn't be riding. Oddly, he'd miss the temperamental mare with her crush on him.

He shrugged it off. No more attachments to animals or people. The mare was an investment, and that was all. He had other priorities.

"Wonderful." He forced a smile.

"I'll keep you informed. I'm sending them a DVD of that performance. Of course, I'll edit out the tantrum."

* * * *

Carson stood in the doorway of Gabbie's stall as Sam groomed the mare. Sam was giddy with excitement as she talked about their earlier performance. He said nothing and let her jabber, which was good, as she couldn't stop herself.

She turned to reach for a different brush and locked eyes with his. Carson moved a step closer. Like two moths drawn to a flame, they couldn't resist each other even though the closer they got, the better their chances of being burned.

"It's good to see you so happy." Carson stood near the mare's head. Gabbie checked his pockets with her big nose. Disappointed, she returned to her hay, grabbed a mouthful, but kept one eye on them. Her ears swiveled forward.

"You haven't been around much. I've missed you." Sam looked down, avoiding his eyes.

"Sure, like a thorn in your side." Carson reached out to scratch the mare

on her neck.

Sam shrugged. If he wanted to make light of it, so would she. “No, more like a burr under my saddle.”

“So you *can* teach an old dog new tricks.”

“I’d say the same of you. I swear I heard you playing country music when you pulled into the parking lot yesterday.”

“You’re hallucinating.” His mouth turned up in a sexy smile.

“You’re petting the horse.” She pointed to the obvious. “The other day I caught you talking to her when you thought no one was around.”

“You’re hearing things.”

“Where are your slacks and expensive shirts?” She noted his faded jeans and t-shirt.

“Around horses? Are you nuts?”

“No, but I thought you were.”

“You looked good today.” His expression grew serious. He stepped even closer.

“Thank you.” She swallowed a lump in her throat and blinked back the tears, a mixture of happiness and sadness for what could have been but would never be.

“You rode her beautifully. Even Hans thought so.”

“We had one blow-up, not bad for her. If it wasn’t for that, I’d have won the class.” Sam glanced at the red ribbon hanging on Gabbie’s stall. It meant more to her than any blue ribbon she’d ever won.

“There’s still tomorrow.”

Sam nodded. “I know.”

“Could I buy you dinner?” His blue eyes lit up with expectation.

“It’s late, Carson. I need to be up early. I think I’ll just cook something in the trailer.”

His face fell like a little boy told he had to stay inside and study on a sunny day. “We could go to that little Chinese place down the road. They’re fast.”

Sam sighed. What the hell? She wanted to be around him. Why not enjoy her triumph a little longer? She was too wired to sleep anyway. “Okay.”

* * * *

Being with her lifted the dark cloud that had been hovering over him for a few weeks. He could be himself around her. Even more incredible, he was beginning to figure out who he really was. Six months ago, he hadn't a clue. He'd lived so long as an extension of his father that the real person inside had never been allowed to surface. It surfaced with Sam.

Strange, but he liked the person he was with her.

The small Chinese restaurant was dark and intimate. They drank a glass of wine and shared a combination plate. The food tasted better than he'd expected. He wolfed down his half and some of hers.

"Jaye has a possible buyer for Gabbie." There he'd put it out on the table. He waited for her response with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"I know." Sam looked away.

"There's a big commission in it for you when that horse sells." He attempted to cheer her up. She didn't bite, but then he wasn't feeling cheerful himself.

"That'll be nice." Her voice had turned flat, lifeless.

"Is there something wrong?" As if he didn't have a clue.

"No, nothing."

"You can't fool me. I can read you like a Powerpoint presentation."

"I'm just a little attached to that redheaded mare."

So was he. "She is charismatic, if you can apply that word to a horse."

"You can. That's exactly what sets her apart from other talented horses and makes her special. She's the horse of a lifetime."

"She is?" Now, he really felt like shit. She was losing a very special horse because to him the bottom line had always been money and family—not necessarily in that order.

"Yes, she is, and I do appreciate having the opportunity to ride her." Sam swiped at her eyes and stared at her empty plate.

"Perhaps, we can find a buyer that will allow you to continue riding her?" Carson knew he was grasping at straws, but she looked so sad it broke his heart.

"Carson, you and I both know that won't happen. With the kind of money that horse can bring, she'll be bought with a rider already in mind, a rider with an excellent reputation and exposure to international

competition.”

“What’s the big deal about exposure?”

“Carson, dressage is judged subjectively. Like figure skating. You have to get yourself out there, be recognized, and build a reputation in order to get the scores you deserve. Americans need exposure to European judges because that’s where the best riders are.”

“That doesn’t sound fair.”

“It’s not fair or unfair. It just is.”

“So if I was a nobody in the Olympics and rode the ride of my life far and above anyone else, I wouldn’t win a gold medal?”

“It’d be extremely doubtful. You have to pay your dues. The good news is that Americans have gotten so much better in the past few decades that we’re earning the respect of the Europeans. It’s not as hard to get those scores.”

“So you won’t be winning the Gold anytime in the near future?”

“Anytime in my lifetime.” Sam sighed. Carson reached across the table and squeezed her hand. She smiled up at him but a tear ran down her cheek.

* * * *

Sam fingered the blue ribbon sitting on her coffee table, which was devoid of all clutter except for a few magazines.

Instead of feeling vindicated and triumphant, she felt empty, as if someone had sucked the life out of her.

Gabbie had won her class with a show-high score of 71 percent. Hans had preened by the side of the arena as admiring dressage divas declared him a miracle worker to have turned around *that* horse and *that* rider. Carson beamed like a proud father whose child had just gotten straight A’s or hit the winning homerun in the state championship.

Even Gabbie put on her sweet mare face and charmed her adoring fans out of every horse treat they possessed.

Everyone around her was basking in the glow of her big win. Why wasn’t she?

Chapter 34

Deja Vu

“What the fuck has you so bummed?” Brad walked past Carson and helped himself to the computer on Carson’s desk.

“Huh? Me?” Carson slumped in the plastic chair across from his desk. “Yeah, you. You look like you’re wearing the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

“Sometimes I think I am.”

“So who is it this time? Dad? Mom? Sam? Bridget?”

“All of the above and none of the above.” Carson rubbed his eyes, leaned his elbows on the desk, and propped his head in his hands. “What’s up?”

“I’ve found something interesting that might break you out of your doldrums. Check this out.”

Wearily, Carson heaved his body out of the chair, moved around the desk, and stood behind Brad. Leaning over his brother, he squinted at the computer screen. “Whoa. That’s some serious debt. He’s operating on a thread, not a shoestring.”

“No, shit. I’d say he’s about to go under.”

“How the hell did he get into that kind of debt?” Carson reached for the mouse and scrolled down further.

“He’s paying for his severely handicapped wife to live in an upscale nursing home on Bainbridge Island.”

“Hans is married? I would’ve guessed he was gay.”

“Just because a man is married doesn’t necessarily mean he’s straight.”

Carson relinquished the mouse to Brad. “What else do you have?”

“His elderly mother-in-law was caring for her daughter, but she died about a year ago.”

“Which must be why he left a lucrative job in Florida to return here?”

“He’d been supporting them both for quite a while. Now he’s paying for the nursing home out of pocket. Those places cost thousands of dollars a month.”

“Yeah and a desperate man does desperate things.” Carson rubbed his chin. The pieces of the puzzle were falling into place.

“So the man has the means and the motive.”

Carson slanted his brother a sideways look. “Have you been reading Juan’s book?”

Brad shrugged. “Hans has a history of employing underhanded tactics to make money.”

“Like stealing students. But would he stoop this low?”

“My money’s on him.” Brad started ticking points off with his fingers. “Here’s what we believe is happening: One: he’s injuring horses so he can sell a better horse for a big commission. Two: He’s convincing middle-aged women to buy unsuitable horses that he then trains for a shitload of money. Three: He’s sabotaging his competition. One thing that doesn’t jive is not all the injured horses belonged to his students.”

“That’s true, but a clever man spreads the disaster around so no one points fingers at him. Besides, the injured horses from his group were owned by wealthy clients who don’t mind dropping a hundred grand or so for a new horse.”

“And he was around when the barn burnt down, and Sam was blamed for the fire. Plus, he made a killing on several insured horses.”

“Bad choice of words.” Carson reminded him.

“Uh, yeah. Sorry.”

“Do you think he’s acting alone?”

“We can’t prove he’s doing this at all, let alone has a partner.”

“So how do we find out?”

“We take a page out of Juan’s book.”

* * * *

Sam pounded on Carson’s door until he opened it. He squinted at her in the blinding porch light and yawned.

“Do you realize what time it is?”

“Yes, Two A.M. Can I come in?” She bounced on the balls of her feet,

full of pent-up energy not released by her late night run up the hill.

“For some odd reason I have this feeling of *deja vu*. Haven’t we done this before? What is it this time? Another cup of sugar? A loaf of bread? A willing body?” Carson leaned against the doorframe giving her a great view of his *muscles*. One corner of his sexy and oh so kissable mouth was turned up in a lopsided grin. She shivered involuntarily and cleared her throat.

“Please, just let me in.” She forced her eyes to meet his.

“Can’t this wait until morning?” He covered his mouth to stifle another yawn.

“No, it can’t.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Really?”

“Don’t get excited, pretty boy. It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“Damn.” He faked a long face.

“Can I come in?”

“I guess.”

Sam brushed past him, trying not to notice the sprinkling of dark hair on his bare chest or his muscled arms. His sweats hung low on his hips revealing that oh so flat stomach and perfect belly button. This was no time to be thinking about sex. They had some serious talking to do. She seated herself on a barstool and propped her feet on the base. He stood opposite her with his arms crossed and face annoyed, and regarded her with a mixture of suspicion and curiosity.

“I remember something.” There she’d said it. She expected him to jump for joy or throw his arms around her or react in some way. He did nothing.

“Good. Now that we’ve settled that, I’m going to bed.” Carson made a move to leave the room.

“Carson!” She stamped her feet on the rung of the stool in exasperation. “Listen to me.”

With a long-suffering sigh, Carson dropped onto the nearby couch. “I’m listening, but only with one ear. The other one is asleep.”

“I remembered something about that night. Something that’s been nagging me all those years.”

“What night?” He stifled another yawn.

“The night the barn burned down, and Dr. Matt’s wife died.”

Carson appeared to be wide-awake now. “What do you remember?”

“Why I couldn’t have done it.”

“Okay. How did you come to this revelation?”

“I had this dream. When I woke up, I knew the little piece that had been eluding me all along.”

When she didn’t continue, he pushed. “And that piece is?”

“That night, I’d come back late from the horse show after having pickup trouble.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

Sam ignored that comment. “Anyway, I’m sorta messy...”

“Sorta?”

“Well, quite messy, so when I unloaded all the stuff from the trailer, I piled it inside the tack room door.”

“And this proves what?”

“I didn’t go inside.”

“So?”

“Carson, the door was at the opposite end of the tack room from the heater.”

“I’m not following you.”

“That tack room was at least fifteen feet long. The door was at one end, the heater at the other.”

“And you just remembered this?”

“Yes, because the heater was by that door, but we had moved it a few days before the fire to the opposite end of the room.”

“Maybe someone moved it back, and you didn’t notice.”

“It was across the room, I’m certain of it. At least, when I unloaded the stuff. Even so, if they had moved it, it wouldn’t have been on. The outlet by the door had a short in it. It was turned off at the breaker until we could get an electrician out.”

“Who knew about the faulty outlet?”

“Pretty much everyone. I left a note on the board and a note by the breaker. I’d covered the outlets with duct tape.”

“So who is ‘pretty much everyone’? Especially the ‘everyones’ in your life right now.”

“Hans, Jaye, Matt, your sister, a few of Hans’ current students and some of mine.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes, those are the people with horses there.”

“What about people who were there often but didn’t have horses?”

Sam frowned. “I’m sure there were plenty that we still do business with now, like the guy that delivers hay, the horseshoers, and the vets.”

“Oh, man. So many people.”

“Do you know what this means? I can prove I didn’t kill those horses or Emily Brandland. I was framed. I just have to figure out what to do about it.” Carson didn’t seem as surprised by her revelation as Sam expected.

“Sam, I’ve been doing my own research. Come over here. Let’s talk.” He patted an empty spot on the old couch. Sighing, Sam sat next to Carson against her better judgment. She had a tendency to check her brain at the door where he was concerned.

She listened intently as Carson explained what Brad had unearthed and what the two of them had deduced from the evidence they’d gathered. It sounded so outrageous, right down to Hans having an invalid wife in a nursing home.

“You think Hans is behind this?” The man might be borderline unethical, but it seemed inconceivable that he’d endanger, even kill, horses for his own personal gain. The horses had always come first with him.

“Yes, I do.”

“So how do you explain the great work he’s done with Gabbie and me?”

“He wants you to do well with the horse because it makes him look like the master he claims to be.”

“I’m the one riding the horse.”

“Yeah, right.” Carson dismissed her with wave of his hand, which sent a twinge of irritation through her. “Hans isn’t going to let you win Regionals because he wants this job and the money.”

Sam took a deep breath. She couldn’t come clean with him. He’d be pissed as hell if he found out about the deal she’d struck with this particular, pseudo-German devil.

“No, I can’t believe it.” Yet she wasn’t sure. If he needed not just the job, but also the cash, then how far would he go? Hans had a sick wife? She’d never pictured the man with a family, let alone caring for a handicapped wife. He seemed so self-absorbed. Yet, someone wanted her gone, and he’d made her imminent departure part of his or her secret deal.

“Sam. Are you okay?”

She glanced up at him. “Not really.”

"I'm sorry." Carson scooted closer and wrapped his arms around her. She didn't resist. He felt good and right even though she knew how wrong it was. And stupid. But her brain was a no-show where this man was concerned.

In a month she'd be gone. She didn't need to get in any deeper and break her heart any more than it'd already been broken.

She pulled away from Carson's embrace. He scowled.

"I need to go now."

"That's it. Just like that? You're saying good night after you've yanked me out of a sound sleep. I'm awake."

"I'm leaving now."

* * * *

Bridget saw Hans' Volvo parked in the driveway. Good, she needed to consult with him on Beau. The big guy seemed a little off, nothing serious, but not right. Hans would know what to do. The man was a virtuoso when it came to horses, not to mention in great shape for someone his age.

If only he was thirty years younger, she'd take him for a ride, but controlling men her father's age just didn't do it for her.

She walked down the aisle, following the voices. She stopped near the lounge when she heard Sam's name. There was nothing wrong with eavesdropping, in her opinion, if it served its purpose, which was to drive a wedge between Carson and that woman. Perhaps she could gain some small tidbit to use in her war against her brother's love interest and ongoing pain in her butt.

"Jaye, I'm not playing this game any longer."

"What game?" Came the muffled voice of Jaye from behind the door.

"I'm onto you. You're jacking up the sales prices on horses you sell to my clients. At other barns your sales price for the same horse is considerably lower."

"What do you care? These women can afford it, and you're getting an obscene commission from the sales."

"I have my integrity." Hans sounded rather pompous.

"Bullshit. You go where the green is, and I don't mean grass. I can't believe you're coaching the enemy."

"I'm not."

"What do you call it?"

"My job. Which Carson pays me well to do."

"She can't become the head trainer."

Bridget raised one dark eyebrow. This was good stuff. Jaye was in cahoots with Hans to get rid of Sam. She wondered how she could get a piece of that action.

"You have no faith in me. I'm devastated."

"We need to get her out of here."

"It's taken care of."

"It is. Why didn't you say so sooner?"

"You wouldn't let me get a word in. She won't accept the Cedrona job, and she'll leave here after Regionals."

"Are you certain?"

"Absolutely."

Bridget moved closer and bumped a rake leaning up against the wall. It almost fell, but she leaped to save it.

"Did you hear something?"

She stiffened and quickly hustled halfway down the aisle. Turning, she almost ran face first into Juan. Taking a deep breath, she calmly sauntered back toward the lounge, calling out, "Dr. Ziegler!"

Hans came out of the lounge.

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you." Jaye followed him out. "Well, well. Jaye, if I didn't know better I'd suspect you two were having an affair. Imagine that. But I do know better, don't I?"

"What do you need, Bridget?" Hans smoothly avoided the subject, as slick as oil.

Bridget smiled like a feline with a big juicy mouse. "I need to consult with you about Beau." She glanced at Jaye. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not; we're finished here."

"You certainly are." Bridget let her cryptic comment float between the two of them. She hadn't had this much fun since she'd found her ex's girlfriend sewing designer tags into her Wal-Mart clothes.

So what to do with this information? Even more importantly, what did it mean? As much as she disliked Sam, Jaye was a dishonest snake, pretending to be her loyal friend and stabbing her in the back. So the schemer had

enlisted the help of the good doctor to get Sam out of the picture.

There had to be a way to use this information to her advantage.

After a brief consultation with Herr Doctor, Bridget headed for her car. She needed to get away from this place and think. Should she tell someone? But tell them what? She hadn't heard anything concrete or condemning. If Jaye was simply protecting his interests, well, hell that wasn't a crime, or he'd have been locked up long ago.

Juan waited for her by her car. She tried to maneuver around him, but the crazy Hispanic blocked her car door. "Excuse me." She used her impervious princess voice, which made most men plead for mercy.

Juan didn't beg for leniency, or show any reaction at all. In fact, he seemed almost menacing, as he pointed a stubby finger at her. "You leave surveilling to me. Is not your job."

"Is not your job either," Bridget mocked as he stepped aside.

She slipped by him and got into her car. What kind of craziness was this? Carson should have fired Juan and Sam months ago. Whatever was going on, she'd get to the bottom of it. Her brothers didn't call her nosy for nothing.

Chapter 35

Cliff Diving

Carson stared at the view outside the wall of windows in his downtown condo. The lights from Seattle's waterfront twinkled below. The faint outline of the Olympic Mountains was visible in the distance, made possible by a full moon.

He'd decided to spend the weekend in his condo rather than his brother's ode-to-the-sixties house. He needed to get away and regain control of his life.

He was changing, but the changes weren't necessarily welcome. He didn't want to change. He didn't want to enjoy the smell of horses or the taste of cheap beer. He didn't want to enjoy the quiet and peace of the country. He didn't want to be entertained by off-key karaoke singers. He didn't want to play country music in his truck. Oh, Lord. That truck. What the hell was he doing driving that monster of a truck as his only mode of transportation? Last, but no way in hell least, he didn't want thoughts of an unsuitable chaos queen invading his every waking moment.

Carson picked up the packet of information that Brad had sent over that afternoon. It included more damning information on Hans and a list of recent horse sales in which he'd collected sizable commissions. He flipped through it, knowing he was missing something. Putting the packet back on the table, he paced the floor. He was beginning to suspect Hans wasn't working alone. If only Sam were here to bounce ideas off of. He missed Sam. He missed her common-sense insights and country girl ways. She'd hate this condo in the middle of Seattle with its noise and city smells.

Carson opened the sliding glass door. The traffic noise several stories below bombarded him. He used to enjoy the sounds of the city. Now he craved birds chirping, hell even that evil-incarnate woodpecker beat the constant artificial racket of the city. Frowning, he slammed the door shut.

Carson glanced around his condo. The modern interior had been designed by one of Seattle's top designers in muted beiges and tans with a splash of tasteful color here and there. The furniture was ultra modern and sleek, chrome and glass with a tasteful touch of wood in places. The original paintings on the wall didn't resemble anything found in nature, but they'd been trendy. The one above the couch looked like an abstract toilet and had cost a fortune.

Carson walked over to the grey marble mantle and picked up the worn baseball. He turned it over in his hand. The signatures were faded, but he could still make out the names and the words, "State Champions." He smiled. It seemed like a long ago dream. Even back then, he'd known that the heir to the Reynolds throne would never be allowed to step down in order to play baseball. He'd lived the dream as long as he'd been able. Then reality and Marcia had burst his bubble and brought him back to earth. He'd given up a pro career for a career at his father's side and an over-achieving wife—the wife that never came to be.

Carson snorted. Ten years later, look where it'd gotten him? His life that could have been would now never be.

He placed the baseball back on the mantle.

His gaze swung around the living room. Nothing seemed the same, or maybe he was looking at it with different eyes. This cold luxury condo didn't feel like home. He missed the warm tackiness of the orange and avocado hues in the ranch house.

He shuddered at the thought.

Carson stared down at his faded jeans and old t-shirt. His scuffed boots needed polish, but he hadn't taken the time. He always used to take the time.

This couldn't be happening to him. He was turning into someone else. Even worse, perhaps he was letting the real Carson out of his cage. He didn't want to let Carson out. The old Carson didn't allow himself to feel. The old Carson kept his emotions under firm control and his business dealings under a tight rein. The new Carson acted on instinct, took risks, and worst of all felt things, things that sometimes really hurt.

He couldn't get the picture out of his mind of Sam standing at his door last night. Obviously, that was why he'd escaped to the city. Only the city didn't feel like an escape. It felt like a concrete prison.

He wanted to get into his truck and go to her, but that would be

impulsive. The old Carson didn't do things that were impulsive or reckless.

After a moment's hesitation, Carson picked up the truck keys and headed out the door. Snatching the baseball on his way past, he shoved it in his pocket.

The chaos queen had introduced chaos into his ordered life. And what was worse, he liked it.

* * * *

Sam wrote down one more item on her list of things to do tomorrow then checked off the things she'd finished earlier that day.

She walked into her kitchen and washed the small pile of dishes in the sink. Next she took the magazines scattered around the room and placed them in a semi-neat pile on the coffee table. Only then did it occur to her. Sam eyes widened as she stared around the room in wonder.

Her place was tidy. It wasn't Carson-tidy, but it was Sam-tidy. You could see the kitchen counter and the tabletop. Books were stacked on bookshelves rather than piles on the floor. Her clothes were put away, either hanging in a closet or stuffed in drawers, rather than strewn about the bedroom.

Incredible. When had that happened? And the lists? When had she started actually not only making lists but also using them?

What did it all mean? Too much, she feared.

She jumped when the door opened.

Jaye walked in without knocking. So much for organization, she'd forgotten to lock the door and turn on the alarm system.

Her old friend gazed around the room in shock.

"You haven't been in here for a while, have you?"

"What happened?"

Sam shrugged.

"It's Carson." Jaye put his hands on his hips and stared at the tidy little apartment in disgust. "When are you going to learn?"

"Learn what?"

"That guy isn't right for you."

"You don't need to tell me that. We're as different as an Arabian and a draft horse."

Jaye shrugged, helped himself to a glass of wine, and stopped to admire that it was actually in a bottle, not a box. He sat down on the old couch and propped his feet on the coffee table.

“Make yourself at home.”

“I always do.”

“I can’t believe you don’t have a date. It’s Friday night.”

“I’m in between men. The last bored me.”

“In other words, he didn’t have a big enough bankroll.”

“You’ve got that right.” Jaye leveled a knowing look at her. “Neither does Carson.”

“His financial status is none of my business.”

“It should be, if you were smart. Just because he’s a Reynolds, don’t assume he’s wealthy. The man’s business is in major debt.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“Sure you do. You have Olympic aspirations. The Reynolds’ family holdings aren’t looking much better. They’re going through some tough times. So don’t think you have a chance there.”

“I’m sure his father is shrewd enough to pull them from the brink of disaster.”

“Are the boys shrewd enough to keep it there?”

“Carson is,” Sam countered too quickly.

“He’ll never settle down with someone like you, Sam.” Jaye spoke gently as if to soften the blow. It didn’t soften it. She knew the truth in her heart, but it didn’t make it hurt any less.

“I know.” Sobs bubbled in her throat, and she savagely fought them back. She would not cry.

“Assuming Hans is named head trainer, what are your plans?”

Sam shrugged. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.” Something prevented her from confiding in her best friend about the deal with Hans. Jaye had been weird lately, and Sam just didn’t want to talk to him about, well, about things. “You seem concerned.”

“Of course, I am. I’m your friend. He’s using you to get his horse sold, while he gets a little on the side. You’re reading too much into it.”

“Your concern is past its due date. Carson and I are through as far as a relationship. We’re strictly business.”

“Well, that’s good. I’m relieved. I’d hate to see you hurt.”

Sam studied her friend and wondered if that was the real reason he was here or what was really going on. She didn't buy the concerned friend act. Jaye was good. He'd fooled countless men over the years, and he'd fooled Sam. This time something didn't ring true.

Another knock at the door interrupted their conversation. Sam felt relief. She opened the door expecting to see Juan on one of his midnight surveillance runs, checking on her. He still spent his nights in an empty stall. She considered it unnecessary since there hadn't been an incident in a while, but she'd heard rumors of other barns having issues.

Sam opened the door to a very sexy, disheveled Carson. Jaye raised one eyebrow and rose to his feet.

"Carson. What brings you here in the middle of the night?"

"I wanted to make sure everything was fine."

Frowning, Jaye slid past him in the doorway and fired one last shot. "Don't be a fool, Sam."

Carson watched him leave then shut the door and locked it.

"Carson, what are you doing here?"

"I'm not sure. I just needed to see that you were okay."

"You drove all the way from the city to find out? A phone works just as well."

Carson grabbed a can of beer out of the fridge and flopped onto the couch. "You have a bottle of wine in the refrigerator." His gaze swept the room in incredulous amazement. "What happened to this place?"

"Jaye said the same thing. Nothing. It always looks like this. You've just caught me at some bad times in the past."

"Bullshit." He snorted and leveled a direct gaze at her, sobering quickly. "I wanted you to stay last night."

"We've been over this ground. Our personal relationship is over. You ended it yourself."

"Maybe I want to start it again."

"Maybe I don't." Sam sat in a chair a safe distance from him, if there was such a thing as a safe distance.

"Sam, I miss you."

Her heart caught in her throat. She forced herself to breathe. "There's no reason to start something that's going nowhere."

Carson moved closer. "I want another chance."

“For what?”

“To show you I can be good in bed.”

“You idiot. You are good in bed. Fantastic. I just said that to Jaye to get him off my back. He doesn’t approve of our relationship.”

“So now you’re admitting we have a relationship?”

“We have nothing. We *had* a fling, and we *have* a business partnership until that horse is sold.”

“What then?”

“Then we go our separate ways.”

“What if you get the job at Cedrona?”

“I won’t.” If he only knew the truth.

“Now there’s the power of positive thinking. You did great at your last show. So did your students.”

“Car, please don’t make this any tougher.”

“You can take the assistant job.” His Caribbean blue eyes were drawing her into their warm depths.

“You know I can’t. You can’t afford to pay me enough. I need to be able to pay back my debt and get the evil stepmother off my back.”

“What did Jaye want?”

“To warn me away from you.”

“I’m a regular playboy. I should be watched.”

“Carson, he’s just doing what any friend would do. I know what you’re thinking. Jaye wouldn’t purposely damage horses in order to make money.”

“He’s not getting any younger. I haven’t seen him with any viable prospect lately. Maybe he’s getting desperate for money.”

“He finally paid his board bill in cash. That’s a hefty chunk of money.”

“Three weeks late.”

“He must have sold a horse.”

“I’ve been poking around. I think his reputation has been tarnished lately. He’s sold too many unsuitable horses or unsound horses to clients. I’ve heard a few rumors that ‘permanently’ injured animals made miraculous recoveries and were sold for big money to clients in Florida after he bought them back from clients here for pennies on the dollar.”

“When did you find that out? You didn’t say anything about this last night.”

“Brad gave me the information this afternoon.” Carson handed it to her

and watched as she scanned the papers.

"I just can't accept this. I've known Jaye for years. He was one of my mother's best friends. He's been in my life as long as I can remember. If you're insinuating that he had something to do with the fire and all the incidents lately, you're wrong."

"What if I'm not?"

* * * *

He'd upset her, but he didn't see an alternative. Her uncertain, vulnerable expression was his undoing.

Carson stood and crossed the room to where she was standing. He needed to protect her, to touch her. His male ego needed to know that he could turn her on. His heart needed to know that she cared.

"Sam." He placed his hands on her shoulders. She turned to him.

"Carson." Her lioness eyes were clouded with confusion.

God, he loved it when she said his name like that, her voice all husky and full of need. She looked at him like he was her hero, and he really wanted to be that guy. Had any woman ever looked at him like that? Not Marcia, she'd been too busy competing with him or molding him into her own creation.

Her tousled caramel hair looked sexy as hell. He wanted to bury his fingers in it and feel it brush across his naked body.

Damn. Hell. Shit. Fuck. He was done for and hard as a rock. He pulled her into his arms, and she came willingly. Burying his face in that wild mane of hair, he held her tight. She wrapped her arms around his neck. Her lips caressed his cheek. He moaned, the deep guttural moan of his primitive ancestors. Carson the tight ass was conspicuously absent. He had to have this woman even if this sharp razor of need cut him so deeply that he never recovered.

"Car, I..." He felt her breath in his ear.

"You need me as much as I need you. Say it."

"I need you."

With a growl, he picked her up and carried her to an unusually clean bedroom; even the bed was made, but it wouldn't be for long. He'd be sure to destroy that one detail.

He threw her on the bed, and she bounced, laughing the whole time while her eyes burned with the same lust he was certain burned in his. “What is it about you?” He muttered.

“What is it about you?” She opened her arms to him as he settled beside her.

“Take that off.”

She complied, sitting up to whip the t-shirt over her head and onto the floor. He unzipped her jeans and pulled them off, then stood to remove his jeans, t-shirt, and underwear. He took his time just drinking in the sight of her naked body.

“You are so beautiful.”

“So are you, pretty boy, even with those non-decorative muscles.” She stared at one muscle in particular.

Carson grinned and fell across her body. His mouth hungrily found hers while his hands massaged her breasts. She wriggled underneath him as her tongue and mouth drove him wild.

He pulled off her underwear and plunged deep within her. She rose to meet him, her fingernails raking his back, her long legs wrapped around his waist as her heels dug into his naked butt. They rocked with a rhythm that took them higher and higher until they stood on the brink of heaven or hell. Carson was treading on dangerous ground near an ocean cliff with a 300-foot drop-off. One step closer, and he’d never recover from the fall. Flipping caution the bird, he walked to the edge and dived off into the wild, swirling waters below.

Chapter 36

The Past is but a Memory

Sam stirred to the soft sounds of snoring. Carson snored? She'd never heard him snore before. *Holy noise control, Batman, the guy was human.*

He was safer when he wasn't, because the cold, precise, anal Carson was much easier to dislike. She turned and studied him in the sunlight that filtered through the bedroom window. Dislike was the furthest thing from her mind and her heart.

She was undeniably, head-over-her-cowboy-boot-heels in love with him. The real question was did he know or suspect her true feelings? She hoped not because nothing good would come of that. She was bound to leave this place, and he was bound to stay.

His father wanted him back in the family fold, and Cedrona appeared to be a trial by fire. Carson would succeed somehow. The man was relentless when he wanted something. He would lead Reynolds Enterprises into the next era, and he'd do it well. She had no doubt about that.

A pang of regret sliced through her. She wouldn't get to see the dreams they built come into being. She'd be gone within the month, either slaving for her stepmother or working on some faraway farm.

She was tired of fighting. Why not enjoy one more month of pleasure in the arms of this man? She'd deal with the consequences and the heartbreak later. And there would be heartbreak—lots of it—but she'd live and so would he.

Carson stirred and opened his eyes, squinting in the early morning light. "Are you leering at me?" His mouth turned up in a sleepy grin.

Sam allowed herself the pleasure of running her eyes up and down his body, naked except for the sheets wrapped around his legs and thighs. He was one gorgeous man.

Carson returned the favor, his gaze going from sleepy to sizzling in a

split second. He pulled her to him, and she had her way with him, even though he thought the situation was reversed.

* * * *

Sam's face broke into a big smile. Lola and Teddi had both won their classes on their second-rate borrowed horses beating Hans' students on their expensive, talented warmbloods. Bridget was steaming, blaming the judges, and threatening to lodge a complaint.

Gabbie won every class with flawless performances and impressive scores. They qualified easily for Regionals. Sam kept waiting for the bomb to drop, but so far the mare didn't put a hoof wrong.

And Carson, well, they just didn't talk about the future. They lived in the present. She didn't want to think about what would happen after Regionals. She'd made a deal with the devil in the form of an exacting German pain in the ass. She intended to keep it, win or lose. The agreement gave her an out she wouldn't normally have had. In a way she was glad that it removed her choices. She would leave. That was a given. Where she would go was the question burning in her soul.

She didn't dare confide in anyone. Carson would never forgive her if he found out what she'd done. It would be better for all involved if he thought she left because she wanted to leave. That way he wouldn't try to keep her there or void the verbal agreement she'd made.

And he wouldn't look for her.

* * * *

Carson looked up from the stack of paperwork littering his desk.

"Jaye. What can I do for you?" Jaye strutted into the room, better dressed than Carson had ever been, and that was pretty well dressed.

"My client is prepared to make an offer for Gabriella."

Carson sat up. "Really?"

"A very generous offer." Jaye preened like a peacock.

"How generous."

Jaye waited several seconds for dramatic effect. "A half million."

"For a horse?"

"Assuming she passes the vet check."

"Holy cow." Carson raked his fingers through his hair. His stomach nose-dived to his feet. He should be thrilled. It was all coming together. Heck, just this morning his mother had called. She'd convinced Kate Malone to give them another chance. He was meeting with her in a few days.

"They want her by next week."

"But she'll miss Regionals."

"So what, she's as good as sold."

"I can't do that to Sam."

Jaye heaved a dramatic sigh. "You don't have a choice. You won't get another exceptional offer like this for that mare. They're paying too much but don't seem to care."

"They'll have to wait."

"They won't wait. The trainer is leaving for Germany within a few weeks with some horses. He wants her among them."

He'd probably be named the idiot of the year, but he couldn't do it, not to Sam. He couldn't ruin her chances of winning the Cedrona job. She was so close.

"Sorry, no deal. Not until after Regionals."

Jaye's jaw dropped. For a brief moment, fury flashed in his eyes. "Carson, you won't get a portion of what they're offering from anyone else. Sam's proven herself. She doesn't need Regionals. Between her and Hans, they've worked miracles with that mare in a few short months. Everyone's talking about it."

He couldn't tell Jaye about the competition that was his father's brainchild, so he just shrugged. "They can wait, or they can find another horse."

"I worked damn hard to get this deal through." Jaye propped his hands on his hips.

"Sorry. This isn't about you." Jaye'd been salivating over a possible ten percent commission. "You'll have to find a different buyer—after Regionals. And Jaye, if you breathe one word of this to Sam, I'll find another sales agent for this horse and make sure my sister buys her horses elsewhere, too."

Jaye's expression turned murderous, and this time he didn't try to

conceal it. "I'm a professional. All transactions are confidential between the parties involved." Carson had just made an enemy. Gabbie was one thing, but his sister bought horses more often than his mother went on a shopping spree. "I'm not taking no for an answer. You have 24 hours to reconsider."

"Time won't change my mind."

"Think about it." Jaye stomped off.

* * * *

Carson opened the ranch house door to find his father standing on the front porch. Dad never visited him at home, only in the office or on a job site, never at home.

"Dad."

"Yes. Now that we've established that I'm still your father, may I come in?"

"Uh, yeah, certainly."

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" Joe glanced around.

"I'm alone if that's what you're getting at. I'm working on the Cedrona budget."

"I see. How's it going?"

"Better than expected." Carson led him to the living room and stepped over to the bar to make him a drink. He caught his father's wide-eyed look as he took in the décor of the room.

"This place affects everyone like that."

Joe shook his head. "For a moment, I thought maybe I'd gone color blind."

"You just wish you were. Can I help you with something?" Carson handed him a drink and sat down in the chair across from his father, nursing his own glass of Scotch.

"Bridget's unhappy with your cost-cutting measures."

"Are you?"

"No. It appears that you've managed to find ways to cut costs without cutting the base quality."

"Bridget doesn't think so."

"Bridget isn't paying for all this, is she?"

"You'd think she was."

"She tells me you were offered a half mil for that mare."

"Did she also tell you that I turned it down?"

"You turned it down? Do you have a better offer?" Joe savored a long sip of his Scotch.

"No. I doubt I'll ever get a better offer. Not too many people are willing to spend that kind of money on a horse that was dumping every rider a few months ago."

"Why would you turn down that kind of money for a horse you don't even want?"

That was the problem. It wasn't just about Sam's future. He'd gotten attached to that damn horse. "They won't wait until after Regionals to take possession of the horse. They want her shipped to Florida next week."

"Carson, you can't give up what you've worked so hard for because of Sam."

"She stands to win, Dad. I can't pull the rug out from under her. Speaking of working hard, she's come a long way with herself and that horse."

Joe sighed and almost smiled. "First Jake, then you."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Maybe you don't, but you will. Where do you think this relationship with Sam is going?"

Carson stared at the stack of papers on the coffee table. "I'm just taking it one day at a time."

"She's been good for you. She's loosened you up, made you see that there's more to life than work, helped you with your rigid ideas."

"I've helped her, too." Carson felt a little defensive.

"I know. Bridget is fit to be tied. She can't stand the thought that Sam might be our new head trainer."

"I know. It's been fun to watch."

"How do you think Hans will take it if that happens?"

"That concerns me."

Joe read Carson's expression not like a savvy businessman but like a man who'd known him since diapers. "In what way?"

"I've had him investigated. I think he might be involved in some shady dealings with horses over the years."

"We don't want someone with a questionable background running

Cedrona. God knows Bridget gives us enough problems.”

“I don’t have enough on him yet.”

“But you’re hoping you will.” Joe suppressed a smile.

Carson played dumb. “I’m not sure what you’re getting at.”

“You want to keep Sam here.”

“That prospect is somewhat attractive to me.”

“Carson, I haven’t seen you like this in a long time.”

“Like what?” His ignorant act didn’t fool Dad. He hadn’t allowed himself to be like this in a long time. And it wasn’t intentional on his part. He’d fought it every step of the way and was still fighting it.

“Don’t play dumb with me. I’m your father. Remember?”

He remembered all too well. This was the man he’d once emulated, worshipped, and for whom he had the utmost respect. This wasn’t the man he remembered playing ball with or going to the zoo or any of those things a normal father did with his sons. Instead, his father made money. That’s what he did best, and that’s where he’d concentrated his energy during Carson’s childhood. The fact that the man now wanted to be a real father to his adult children was disconcerting in the least.

“I know what you’re thinking. I can see it in your eyes. If I could take back those years I would, Car. Don’t make the mistakes I did. There are more important things in life than money.”

“I’m figuring that out.”

“I can tell.” Something gentled Joe’s eyes. He clapped his son on the back and headed for the door.

For the first time in a long time, he’d just made his father proud of him.

* * * *

Sam did a double take when Jaye walked into the coffee shop. “What did you do to your hair?”

“I needed a change. It’s called passionate auburn. Do you like it?”

“I...uh...love it.” It looked like a tomato plant had nested on his head.

“So, girlfriend, what did you want to talk to me about?” Nothing like getting to the point.

Sam sat up straight and looked him in the eyes. “Jaye, I didn’t do it.”

“Didn’t do what?”

"I didn't burn the barn down."

"Oh, and to what do you owe this sudden revelation?" Jaye should have been ecstatic. He seemed anything but.

"I remembered a small detail. Isn't it funny how the mind works sometimes? How one thing can trigger a memory?"

"What did you remember?" Jaye played with his napkin.

"The electrical outlet by the door was faulty. We'd moved the tack room heater to the other end of the room and placed a sign by the faulty outlet."

"I'm not sure what that proves."

Sam filled him in on what she remembered. "You don't seem very happy for me."

"It's not that. I just don't understand how you can remember any of this after all these years."

"Would you believe it came to me in a vision?" Her attempt at humor received a sour look.

"I'd believe just about anything at this point."

* * * *

Gabbie watched the man with the new chestnut hair pace back and forth in front of her stall. She didn't care much for the redhead even if they did share the same hair color. The man gave off a bad odor, and Gabbie didn't trust him. Regardless, a human is a human and treats are always within the realm of possibilities. She stuck her head out the stall door and concentrated the full force of her sweet mare act on him.

The man ignored her and talked to the little box stuck to his head.

"She remembers." A pause. "How the hell am I supposed to find that out? She could put it together in a matter of minutes or never. No. He's refused the offer. I need another way to get rid of her." Another silence. He glanced Gabbie's way. She pricked her ears, but he looked away. "How do you propose we do that?"

The chestnut man left the barn without so much as a treat. Gabbie flattened her ears in disgust and stomped one big hoof.

Juan slid out of the stall next to hers and down the aisle.

* * * *

Two weeks before Regionals, Juan was still sleeping in an empty stall next to Gabbie all night long. Carson didn't like it because he wasn't sure who to trust at this point.

Of course, nothing happened, leading Carson to believe that the whole thing was bullshit. There hadn't been a suspicious incident on the farm for almost a month. Ever since Sam had become more organized, the problems seemed to have gone away. Maybe there wasn't any grand conspiracy. Maybe it really was a combination of Sam's carelessness and coincidence.

That would mean that she'd been careless enough to endanger several horses and cause their death, not to mention the death of the farm owner. As much of a flake as she could be, Sam would never endanger her beloved horses or intentionally hurt another person.

He'd never buy it. Never. Was it because he was a lovesick fool or because he really did understand her character? Damn, he wished he knew. His heart was untrustworthy when it got involved in any situation.

Carson guessed that issue was what had brought him down to the barn late at night. He'd left Sam sleeping in his bed with the former barn cat turned house cat on the pillow beside her. When had his life undergone such a drastic change that he'd allow a cat in his bed?

Carson flipped on a light as he walked into the barn. "Juan?" He called out, not wanting Juan to freak out and pull a toy gun on him or something.

The place was quiet, eerily so, not even the sound of horses munching hay or Juan snoring peacefully in the end stall. Carson walked down the aisle. A sense of foreboding came over him. "Juan? Hey, man, are you around?"

Nothing.

Battling back fear he neared Gabbie's stall. The big mare poked her head out and made that odd sound horses made when they wanted to charm you out of treats. All was fine here.

He stopped to scratch the mare on her big nose. She was a beautifully noble creature. Even someone as ignorant about horses as him recognized quality when he saw it.

Where the hell was Juan?

Carson walked out the back door into the dark night. Juan always parked behind the barn. Carson saw him in his old pickup, talking on his cell

phone. He frowned. Juan had a cell phone? Carson had never seen him use one before. Juan caught him staring and snapped the phone shut. He exited the truck and walked toward Carson.

“Is slow night.” Juan stared at the stars.

“Not much to survey?”

“Sí, nothing. No hombres lurking in woods tonight. You need something?”

“Just checking things out.”

“I have under control.”

“I’m sure you do.”

Carson’s instincts went on full alert. Perhaps the very man they’d considered honest and harmless was the one they should fear. What was Juan doing out here on the phone at 1:30 A.M.? Who would he be talking to this late at night?

Instead of investigating Hans and Jaye, he should have concentrated more of his time and money on Juan. Granted, a preliminary investigation had turned up nothing—absolutely nothing. That was odd in itself. The guy didn’t have much history, no credit cards, and no records of any kind. He could simply have a trumped-up green card, or it could be more sinister.

Could he be the brains behind this scam? Could he be Hans’ partner in it all? Or was he just an eccentric barn manager?

Chapter 37

A Warm, Tropical Breeze

Sam and Carson sat in Character's Corner and sipped beer from the bottle. It was a quiet night without country music blaring from the jukebox. Only a handful of customers were scattered at tables or playing pool in the corner.

"You can't think Juan's involved in all this?" Sam wouldn't accept that. Juan might be strange, but he'd always been loyal and honest.

"I don't know what to think." Carson concentrated on peeling the label from his bottle.

Sam studied him. He looked so different from the day she'd first met him. He was still neat to a fault, and gorgeous as a man could be—but he'd changed. She really liked this Carson. Okay, maybe that wasn't totally accurate. She'd *liked* Tight-Ass Carson. She *loved* this combination neat and casual Carson.

She needed to get out and soon while she could still salvage her dignity and her heart. Regionals were in a week. As soon as it was over, she'd hit the road. She didn't know where, but that'd depend on whether part of the \$25,000 and Gabbie's commission would amount to enough to pay the balloon payment and hold the she-wolf stepmother at bay. If it were, she'd keep enough to get started elsewhere.

"What're you thinking?" Carson smiled at her; concern softened his blue eyes. "You seem a million miles away." He reached out and held her hand.

"No, just a few miles down the road, wondering what to do next."

"There's nothing to wonder about. You're going to win. Even if you don't, you can stay as assistant."

He made life sound so uncomplicated. Her life wasn't anything like that. She doubted his was either. "You know I can't. You can't pay an assistant

enough. I need the money to get my stepmother off my ass.”

Carson frowned, as if he’d conveniently forgotten that fact. “Oh, yeah. That.”

“*That* is a big deal. Maybe not to you, but it is to me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He looked insulted.

“That you don’t understand things that average people live with everyday.”

“I’m going to pretend you never said that because, frankly, lady, you don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“Sure, rich boy, of course I don’t. I’ve never been in a situation where \$10,000 to me was like a dollar to your average guy off the street.” She baited him into an argument, and she wasn’t even sure why.

“Sam, do you really think I have that kind of money?”

“You’re a Reynolds, aren’t you?”

“You’d be surprised by our current financial situation.”

Sam rolled her eyes. “What? You might have to sell the condo in Hawaii or the waterfront home in Bermuda?”

“You think I’m loaded?” Irritation seeped into his voice.

“Carson, you can dress down all you want and slum with us poor people, but you still drip money. You may not have ready cash in your pocket, but you’ll find a way to get it, and watch out anyone who gets in your way.”

“If I didn’t drip money, would you be hanging out with me right now?” His Carson the Tight Ass mask slipped into place.

“Are you accusing me of seeing you for your money?” How dare the bastard. She’d never asked for anything from him but to be treated fairly.

“Should I be?”

“Like you aren’t using me to get what you want?”

“So now you’re admitting to it.”

“I’m admitting to nothing except that you can be an insensitive ass at times.”

“Me? Insensitive? What about all I’ve done for you and never one word of thanks?”

“Like you weren’t benefiting, too, in more ways than with that horse?”

“I’ve helped you become more professional. When your career was going down the toilet, I resurrected it.”

“Oh, that was you cleaning those stalls, riding those horses, and teaching those lessons? I could have sworn that was me.” The sarcasm flowed from her like a broken water main. She couldn’t seem to stop it even though she knew the damage it was causing.

“You know what I mean. Don’t be a twit.” His eyes hardened like an Alaskan pond in thirty-degrees below zero weather.

Sam blew out an angry breath. Damn him. She slammed her now empty beer bottle on the table so loud that the pool players paused to glance their way. How dare he call her a twit? “I think I’ve had enough of this conversation and this relationship. They’re both going nowhere.”

“What’s changed?” A muscle jerked in Carson’s jaw. His eyes grew dark and flat. He stood up. “I think it’s time we go now.” He threw some money on the table and stalked out the door, not even looking back to see if she was following.

Sam hurried after him. She might be mad, but she wasn’t stupid. She had no intention of walking the few miles back to her place on a dark road. They had a silent ride to the barn. Carson dropped her off without another word and sped up the driveway to the ranch house.

Her big mouth had gotten ahead of her brain again. What had she expected him to do? Profess his undying love and beg her to stay? Instead she’d insulted him, hurt his feelings, and all in all alienated him. It was over. She’d pushed him out of her life because she couldn’t stand ending it any other way. The pain felt almost physical, it hurt so much.

Sam threw herself on her neatly made bed and sobbed her heart out.

* * * *

Had they just broken up again? He couldn’t believe it. Hadn’t they made up from the last fight only a few days ago? The making up had been great, but Carson preferred less drama in his life than a roller-coaster relationship ride. He didn’t want a constant break-up, make-up scenario.

Now he sat alone in this seventies hell and pined for a woman he shouldn’t be pining for. He should have gone home to his condo, but he couldn’t stand the thought of a night in that sterile place. In fact, when he was done at Cedrona, he’d sublease it and find a place in the country. If only he’d bought the condo back when prices had been reasonable, he’d have the

money for a down payment on that brewery. He wouldn't have to sell Gabbie out from under Sam. Riding Gabbie would keep her here. He was certain of it.

Was that really what he wanted? To keep her here?

All along, he knew one of them would go, either him back to his city life or her back to Eastern Washington or another barn with a better opportunity.

Life without her depressed him. Before Sam had floundered her way into his life, he'd felt frozen inside, like a bitter-cold winter day. She had melted the ice in his soul like a warm, tropical breeze. He felt alive around her. He knew what all this meant, even though he kept denying it. He'd done the stupid thing. He'd fallen in love again.

It was best they'd had this fight and called it quits. He'd keep it that way. He'd wade through the pain until his emotions froze again, so he wouldn't feel this immense ache of loving and needing but not having.

Love was not an option in his life, nor would it ever be. It hurt too much.

* * * *

Sam glanced over to see Carson leaning against the rail. She used her newfound powers of concentration and tuned out his presence, concentrating on Hans' booming voice. He was in a mood, yelling, stamping his foot, and at one time throwing his hat to the ground and stomping on it.

Sam did her best to ignore Herr Doctor's threats and insults and extracted the best from his tirade.

She'd come to know Hans well enough to realize he was purposely throwing a temper tantrum to test her ability to react under pressure. Gabbie took the man's ranting in stride instead of over-reacting, as she would have a few months ago.

As Sam was cooling the mare out and cooling off her burned butt, Hans sauntered over to talk to Carson. She rode closer to listen, not the least bit ashamed of eavesdropping. After all, she was most likely their topic of conversation.

"It is a shame that you are selling this horse. Sam has gotten through to her. They have built a rapport."

“The way you were just yelling at her, I thought you were displeased.”

Hans glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice. Sam rode closer. “That is just for incentive. You cannot let a woman like this get lackadaisical and sloppy.”

Carson nodded. “Boy, do I ever know that.”

* * * *

“Jaye, we need to talk.”

“Sam, I know my board is late again. I’m transferring some assets and waiting on a large interest payment from my investments.”

Sam frowned. Jaye’s inconsistent bill paying hadn’t been the first thing on her mind, but it was a concern. Especially since he’d walked into the barn this morning sporting a brand-new, custom-made saddle for a horse he would eventually sell. It didn’t make sense.

“It’s not that. I need to talk to you about that night.”

Was it her imagination or did Jaye’s face turn a little white? Did Jaye know something? Did that explain why he stuck with her all these years—out of guilt?

“What about it? Did you remember any more?”

“Carson and Brad have been investigating. They think Hans had a part in this.”

“I see.” Jaye’s voice was devoid of emotion, flat and dull. “What did he stand to gain? He was out of a job when the barn went under.”

“He had several horses in that barn at the time that he personally owned. Every one was insured.”

“Oh.”

“He also managed to get a lucrative job in Florida when one of the boarders moved to Florida permanently.”

“Hans is an opportunist.”

“The one thing that doesn’t make sense is that the horses come first with him. I can’t picture him harming a horse for monetary reasons.”

“Desperate men do desperate things.”

So they did. A warning twinge vibrated up and down her spine.

* * * *

Carson hooked the hands-free device over his hear, as he piloted the big truck down I-5 and answered his cell.

“Carson?”

“What’s up, Brad?”

“I’ve been doing a little nosing around. I found out a few things.”

“Don’t you ever work?”

“No more than I have to. This is much more entertaining.”

Brad and Bridget certainly shared more in common than a womb. “What kinds of things?”

“I think I’ve found my niche. I should be a PI.”

“Great, you and Juan can open a business together.”

“Well, listen to this.”

“I’m waiting with baited breath.”

“Hans Ziegler was having an affair with the dead woman, Emily Brandland. I’ve spoken with Brandland’s wife’s friends. She wanted to leave her husband and marry Hans. She’d made plans to divorce. In fact, she’d seen an attorney a few days before her death.”

“But Hans couldn’t have legally married Julie Brandland. He was already married.”

“She didn’t know that.”

“So did Hans deliberately kill her to get her out of the way? But why bother? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Because he’d backed himself in a corner. Her friends said she seemed increasingly worried about something. She’d never give any details but hinted at a horse scam. It was something that she wanted out of. They said she was going to turn herself in.”

“So someone killed her to shut her up and made it look like an accident. Hans? Or someone else? Brandland?”

“The police checked Brandland out. He had an alibi for that night. They ruled it a negligent accident.”

“Which Sam paid for because of her reputation for being sloppy.”

“Every one of them suggested I talk to Jaye. He was the wife’s best friend. They were very tight, did everything together. If anyone would know, he would.”

“I’ll find him today. See what he knows. I suspect he’s known all along,

which is why he's supported Sam through thick and thin."

"Guilt. He's feeling bad about not going to the police."

"My guess exactly."

"Well, it's time for him to come clean."

"I'll head over that way right now. If he's not there, I'll get his phone number and address out of the board records."

"Car, one more thing. I hate to bring this up but it needs to be said. It's right there between us."

"What?"

"If Bridget wasn't our sister, and we were neutral, she'd be at the top of the suspect list."

"I can't even go there right now. It's too much for me to wrap my mind around."

Carson ended the call and took the next exit. He still had business to do in Seattle, but it could wait for another day.

He needed some answers. He doubted he'd get them from Hans, but he suspected he could from Jaye without much effort, particularly if there was something in it for Jaye.

Chapter 38

Trusting a Friend

Sam stood as far away from the man behind the desk as she could in the small cramped office. Carson kept his distance, too. He backed up his chair until it hit the wall behind him. Then he propped his booted feet on the old scarred desk, which sat between them like a Kevlar shield, and crossed his arms over his chest. Her throat constricted as she glimpsed misery and anguish behind that emotionless tight-ass mask. Regardless, she'd be smart to remember that Carson's emotional state or lack of wasn't her business anymore.

"You think Jaye knows something?"

"It's a possibility."

Sam considered that for a moment. Her insides sloshed about like a small boat tossed on a stormy sea "It would make sense."

"In what way?"

"It'd explain why he's stuck with me through it all and been a loyal friend."

"Exactly my thoughts; he's been operating out of guilt."

"I want to be the one to talk to him, Carson. I think he'll open up to me more than you. It's time he comes clean."

"What if we're wrong, and he's somehow involved? You could be in danger."

"Jaye? Never. He might be as flaky as your sister when it comes to spending money, but he doesn't maim horses or murder people." Sam clamped her mouth shut, intent on not revealing that she'd told Jaye what she remembered. Now wasn't a good time.

"Sam, I know that look. Stay out of this. Don't talk to him on your own." Carson's face hardened all the more. She wouldn't have thought that possible. If he kept that up, it'd splinter in a million pieces and litter the

floor.

“What kind of a fool do you take me for?”

“One who trusts those she considers her friends.”

* * * *

Sam stood with hands on her hips as Dr. Rosa Carlos presented the results of her findings and tests. “The horse has a minor injury. It’ll be fine in a few weeks.”

“Are you certain?” Lola asked. “I was told he’d need surgery.”

Dr. Carlos raised on eyebrow. “Did Dr. Brandland tell you that?”

Lola nodded.

“Expensive surgery, I imagine. And in his clinic?”

Lola nodded.

The vet’s mouth tightened in disapproval. “I’d stake my career on my prognosis of this horse. I’m that certain. Besides, the x-rays and ultra sounds don’t lie.”

“I guess that’s good news for me.” Lola cast a glance at Sam. Sam shrugged.

“If you don’t have any more questions, I’ll go. I’m running late as it is.”

“No, Doctor, none. Thanks so much.”

Lola led her horse back to the stall. Still struggling with the awful truth, Sam watched as Dr. Carlos drove down the driveway. She’d known and trusted Dr. Matt for years. He’d stood by her through thick and thin, and he had always been a supporting older brother figure. Most of all, he’d had an innate love for his patients, the horses. Or she’d thought he’d had.

Lola returned to her side. “You’re thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I can’t believe it.”

“Neither can I.”

“How many others?”

“We’ll probably never know.”

“I’m reporting him.” Lola’s expression set in a stubborn line.

“I don’t blame you.”

“I came this close to spending \$100,000 on a horse that Jaye is selling.”

“I know.”

“You don’t think they’re running a scam, do you?”

"I don't know, but I'm going to find out." Sam turned on her heel to find Jaye.

"Sam, be careful."

* * * *

"Jaye, I've been looking for you. Do you have a few minutes?" Sam approached him after one of his sales clients left.

Jaye glanced at his watch. "I'm pressed for time, but I need to take this young horse for a hack. He's getting sour in the arena. Why don't you ride along with me? Besides, I want to talk about a couple business opportunities. It seems like we never get time alone." Jaye glanced at the office. "Mr. Tight Buns has you all tied up." Jaye fanned himself at the thought.

"Drag your mind out of the cellar, we're not into that. Besides, it's Tight Ass, not Tight Buns."

"You see it your way, I see it mine. He can tie me up any day."

"You're disgusting." Sam rolled her eyes but laughed in spite of her misgivings. "For your information, our relationship is strictly business."

"Again? You two break up and make up as often as I change clothes."

"We aren't that bad."

"Whatever, girlfriend. So how about a nice leisurely trail ride?"

"You're on. Works for me. Gabbie needs to get out before Regionals and relax, but I thought you were pressed for time."

"Only because I need to work the horse. We can talk and ride at the same time." He glanced around. "Where's Carson?"

"He went to Seattle on business to see a possible investor for the farm. He won't be back until later." She wouldn't be confronting Jaye if Carson were around. He'd dogged her like a hawk lately to keep her from *danger*.

"Does that guy ever rest?"

"No, not really."

"No excuse for you not to. Let's ride."

"Gabbie will appreciate it. She needs some down time. Hans has been working us into the ground."

A twinge of guilt hit her. Jaye was a dear friend and ally. No way could he be involved in this mess. She loved him like a brother.

* * * *

Carson parked his big-ass truck in a spot near the barn door and got out. He paused to frown at the layer of dust covering his truck. He'd need to run it through a car wash before Regionals.

Bridget was walking one of her horses in large circles in the driveway to cool him out. She stopped the horse a few steps away and regarded him with a mixture of disgust and amusement. "Did I hear country music booming from your truck?"

Carson cringed. *Shit, caught in the act.* "Oh, uh, Sam must have turned it to that station. I wasn't paying any attention."

"Bullshit. As loud as that was, you couldn't miss it."

Carson dismissed her comment. "Have you seen Jaye?"

"About an hour ago. He and Sam took off on a trail ride."

Carson heaved a sigh of exasperation. "Damn her. What about Hans?"

"I haven't seen him at all today. If I remember right, he's doing a two-day clinic in Oregon before Regionals."

"Good, I'm glad he's out of the picture. I don't trust that guy."

"Why?"

"Bridget, I'm sure this might be impossible for you, but what I'm about to tell you is in confidence."

"I can keep my mouth shut." She pursed her lips and pouted.

"Since when?"

"If you're going to be rude—" She turned to walk off.

Carson grabbed her arm. "Wait. We need to talk about this."

Bridget shrugged his hand from her arm. "Does this have something to do with whatever Brad and you have been whispering about?"

"Yes." Casting one final look around, he lowered his voice. "I think Hans has been sabotaging Sam. He wants her gone."

Bridget threw back her head and laughed. "You two are worse than Juan. He doesn't need to sabotage her; she does a good enough job on her own."

"Bridget. I'm serious. Brad and I have been investigating him. We believe he's behind the horse injuries and missing items, perhaps even the fire six years ago."

Bridget smiled her smug, superior smile that had always irritated the hell out of him. "Hate to tell you big brother, but you're sniffing around the wrong fire hydrant. You see, Hans and Sam have a deal, so he has no motive."

"What? What kind of deal?" He hated it when Bridget knew something he didn't.

His sister paused a moment for effect. "He agreed to train her if she agreed to turn down the Cedrona job and leave the area *if* she won."

"She never said anything to me. I can't believe she'd do that." Carson shook his head and studied his sister. She seemed sincere for once.

"Believe it. She needed his help with that horse, so you'd get your money out of her."

"She shouldn't have done it." His stomach sank. It made sense. She sacrificed her future, so he could earn a return on his investment with a horse she'd turned into a winner.

"Carson, he's the better man for the job. You know it; I know it. He's the organizer, the exacting taskmaster. Imagine what this place would look like if she managed it?"

"She's improving." He felt the need to defend Sam.

"Maybe, but not enough to please me."

"No one can please you."

"Hans can."

"I still think he's responsible. That \$50,000 would get him out of debt. There's more, a lot more, but I can't talk about it now."

"Hans might want her gone, but Jaye is no friend of hers either." Bridget revealed this tidbit in an annoyingly condescending tone.

"Jaye? What do you know about him?" This didn't sound good, not at all.

"I overheard something." With great glee, she reiterated the conversation she'd overheard between Jaye and Hans.

"Why the hell didn't you mention this before?" His blood boiled in anger and frustration.

"I wasn't sure what it meant. It wasn't Hans doing the talking. It was Jaye." Bridget yawned and removed a glove to inspect her fingernails.

"Damn, I broke a nail."

"Jaye?" *Shit. Shit. Shit.* If he pushed cold, practical tight-ass Carson out

of the way and listened to his intuition, it screamed danger. Big time. And Sam had no clue. His cell phone rang. He glanced at caller ID. It was Brad.

“Yeah?” He spoke with impatience.

“Wait’ll you hear this. I tracked down Emily Brandland’s sister.”

“And?”

“It appears that Dr. Brandland and Jaye were having an affair.”

“What? The vet is gay?”

At that Bridget’s ears perked up. She moved closer and listened. It was easy enough to do since Brad’s booming voice could be heard clearly even over a cell phone. Carson waved her away. She shook her head. Juan appeared out of the woodwork and crowded next to the cell. Carson shot him a glare, but Juan didn’t flinch or move.

“Yup. They were both having affairs, her with Hans, as we’d already known. The Brandlands were in huge financial straits because of this big clinic he’d just built. In fact, the barn was in foreclosure. They couldn’t sell it because it was mortgaged to the hilt for the clinic and not worth what they owed.”

“They were about to lose everything?”

“That’s right. Emily told her sister that they were running some kind of horse scam involving misrepresented horses, and she wanted out.”

“So we were right? Wow.” Carson absorbed the implications of what Brad was telling him.

“She didn’t know the details. Her sister was afraid to share them because she didn’t want anyone else to be in danger, too. She said Brandland and Jaye would do anything to make money.”

“Even kill Brandland’s wife when she confronted him with the truth.” Carson swallowed down the fear that threatened to choke him. “Why didn’t she go to the police?”

“She planned to the next day.”

“Did her sister tell all this to the investigators?”

“She did, but they blew her off. They thought her sister was nuts. She had a history of depression.”

“Depression doesn’t make a person crazy.” Carson gripped the phone tighter. “Dammit. Sam’s on a trail ride with Jaye right now.” Panic seeped into his voice.

“He wouldn’t do anything in broad daylight, but I’m on my way.”

"I've got to find Sam." Carson snapped the phone shut. Fear sliced at his gut, the agony as real as a physical injury. Turning on his heel, he ran to the truck as his sister called after him. "Should I call 911?" Her voice wavered.

"And tell them what?" For once, she didn't have a smart-ass comeback. Carson glared at Juan as he climbed in the passenger side. "This is not a game."

"Exactly. I go with you. Something not right. You need 'forcements. I know trails."

Carson didn't bother to argue. "Fine." At Juan's direction, he drove the truck at breakneck speed up the old logging roads. He hoped like hell Juan wasn't leading him on a merry chase. Relieved, he saw a couple piles of fresh horse manure on the road. He pushed the accelerator even more. They bounced over the rutted road and were on the verge of being out of control. It was a good thing they were belted in, or their heads would be hitting the ceiling.

"You think Sam in danger?"

"I think Sam might be. She knows she didn't set fire to that barn."

"How she know that?"

Carson filled him in, though he wasn't sure why he was confiding in a guy who considered a barn cat a viable suspect.

"You let me handle. Is dangerous."

He didn't answer. He wasn't arguing with Juan, but he'd do as he pleased. He did question his sanity in allowing Juan to escort him. What if the guy was in on all this? Then he would have had an even bigger problem. And where was Hans? Was he really out of town?

Chapter 39

Riding for *Her* Life

They cantered through the woods on a narrow logging road, side by side. The sun shown through the trees and cast patterns of light and dark on the road. Birds sang and a faint breeze rustled the branches. Sam breathed in the fresh fir scent of the woods. Life didn't get any better than this; although a certain finicky straight man by her side would have been preferable to this finicky gay man.

Jaye's horse kept crowding Gabbie, almost veering into her at times. Gabbie flattened her ears and threatened him, but the youngster didn't seem to understand the pecking order. "Can't you control that thing?"

"He's green. His steering isn't exactly honed yet."

The young horse swerved into them again, this time with quite a bit of force. Sam struggled to stay in the saddle as Gabbie was forced off the trail into the brush. The big mare stumbled and went down on her knees. Sam sailed over the mare's head and crashed headfirst into a tree. A loud crack reverberated through her ears. A sharp pain shot through her shoulder and head. She lay in a heap, her empty lungs screaming for air. She gasped and fought for breath, almost in a panic. Finally, she gulped air into her lungs. Thank God above she'd been wearing a helmet. The crack must have been her helmet hitting the tree.

Woozy and disoriented, she lay on the ground for what could have been a few seconds or several minutes. Eventually, her brain began to clear, and she struggled to sit up. Jaye stood over her. He had something in his hand, but it didn't register what it was. Sam blinked, trying to bring him into focus.

"Jaye, what happened?" She stared at her friend. Something in his eyes didn't look right. She touched her helmet gingerly, rubbed her eyes, and struggled to stand. On her knees, she held a hand out to Jaye. Her *loyal*

friend kicked her in the stomach. Her legs buckled, and she went down. She had to be hallucinating. Jaye wouldn't hurt her. "You stupid bitch. You should have minded your own business." He sounded like someone different, not like her old friend, almost as if he were unhinged.

Shielding her eyes from the sun with her hand, she squinted her eyes and tried to focus. A big blur loomed over her. "Jaye? What? What are you doing?" She zeroed in on the large, sharp rock in Jaye's hand. He intended to bludgeon her to death? Panic rose inside her, overloading her already confused brain. She scooted backward. He advanced toward her, one step at a time, an angry panther toying with his prey.

Everything inside her went cold. Carson had been right but about the wrong man. She hated it when Carson was right, even partially.

"Why didn't you just leave it alone?"

"I had to know the truth. You know what happened all those years ago, don't you? That's why you never blamed me." Keep him talking and distract him. She glanced around for the horses. The young horse had already run off down the trail and in the direction of the barn. Someone would come looking for them when he showed up without a rider. Jaye wasn't stupid; he'd know he didn't have much time. Gabbie stood off to one side, her expression one of equine concern as she munched on a mouthful of grass.

"I couldn't blame you for something you didn't do. You know that."

"No, I didn't until now. Carson was right, wasn't he? You may not have held me responsible personally, but you knew something, and you let me bare the brunt of the blame."

"If you'd just stayed in Germany..."

"Jaye, you don't need to do this. I'm sure it was an accident." Her voice wavered. She couldn't back up any further, her body wedged between two large tree trunks.

"It was an accident that wasn't an accident. Like you, she knew too much."

"Jaye, what are you saying?"

"You need to have an accident. I'm sorry, but that's the way it is." His eyes were glazed, almost evil. He leaned close to her. If he was trying to intimidate her, he was doing a damn good job, especially when she noticed a gun tucked in his belt. How the heck had she missed seeing that before?

"You can't mean that." She flattened her back against the tree, but he

only moved closer.

“She wanted to expose the good deal we had going. I couldn’t let that happen.”

“You and Hans?”

“You are a naïve bitch. Ziegler doesn’t have the balls for this type of work.” He laughed, a crazy, maniacal laugh. “Matt and I are lovers. She found out.”

“You and Dr. Matt?” Her heart lodged in her throat.

“I told you to stay in Germany, but you didn’t. I can’t be responsible for your stupidity.” Dark and menacing hatred shown in his eyes.

Sam looked around for something, a weapon, anything. Not that it would do any good, he’d drop her before she could make a move. Her eyes settled on Gabbie again. She’d moved several feet away and greedily pulled up grass by the roots while keeping one eye on them. Even if she could make it to the horse, she’d never be able to mount in time. She couldn’t possibly move fast enough. She didn’t even know if she could stand. What she’d give for a nice guard dog right now rather than a horse with the stomach of a pig.

“Put down that rock. You won’t get away with it this time.”

“Of course, I will. I’m smarter than the rest of you. I’ll race back to the barn and tell everyone you fell off your horse, hit your head, your helmet popped off, and you aren’t breathing.”

“No one will believe that.”

“You’d be surprised what people will believe if you’re clever enough, and I’m clever enough.”

Jaye paused for a moment. His face went blank as he listened. “Shit,” he mumbled under his breath. A car or truck rumbled in the distance, moving fast and coming nearer. Jaye turned to listen to the sound, taking his attention off Sam. She saw her chance. Grabbing a small tree for support she heaved herself to her feet. Staggering, she rushed toward Jaye and knocked him off-balance. She threw an elbow into his stomach. He dropped like a tree cut in the forest, and she ran as fast as her unstable legs would take her toward Gabbie. Grabbing the stirrup, she shoved her foot in it, and clawed her way into the saddle.

Jaye was one step behind her. He grabbed her ankle and wrenched it, yanking her out of the saddle and slamming her to the ground. She

attempted to roll away from him, as he raised the rock and smashed it against her helmet. The last thought in her head was that she'd never had the chance to tell Carson she loved him.

* * * *

Juan ducked down low in the seat, as Carson lunged from the truck. Sam lay on the ground several feet away, blood pooled around her head. Jaye stood over her, a sharp rock in one hand as he bent down to remove her helmet and apparently finish what he started. Hearing them pull up, he dropped the bloodstained rock and whirled around. He whipped out a small handgun from his belt and leveled it at Carson, stopping him in his tracks. Carson might be a lovesick fool, but he was no idiot. Getting shot wouldn't help either of them.

"No closer, or she's dead." Jaye waved the gun in an arc between Carson and Sam.

The way he saw it they were both dead. Juan had hightailed it from the truck as soon as they'd slid to a stop. He doubted Jaye even realized the chickenshit had been with him. A lot of help he was. He prayed Bridget would call 911 when the horse they'd passed on the road showed up at the barn. Plus, Brad was on his way. He had no idea how long it would take him, but it didn't appear the cavalry would arrive in time.

"Get over here where I can keep track of both of you." Jaye gestured with the gun. "Believe me, I know how to use this, and I'm quite good at it."

Carson did as he was told. Right now his options were slim. Maybe if he stalled long enough, Juan would get help. He studied Sam, relieved to see the rise and fall of her chest. She was still breathing.

"Get over here. Now. Where I can keep an eye on both of you."

Carson started to comply then stopped. He saw movement behind Jaye. He mustered every ounce of poker face he possessed and focused his attention on Jaye, so he didn't give anything away. He walked past the crazy shit, keeping his attention away from the figure stealthily coming up behind them. The last thing he wanted to do was clue Jaye in.

"Drop the gun." Juan stepped behind Jaye and leveled his own weapon point-blank-range against his head. "Now."

Jaye dropped it and looked ready to pee his pants. It clattered to the

ground and Juan kicked it out of range. "I doubt you even know how to use that thing. Is it loaded?" Jaye spat the words in frustration and anger.

"I assure you it's loaded." Juan answered in perfect English with hardly a trace of an accent.

Carson's mind registered the incongruity of it. He filed it away for future reference. Trusting Juan had things under control, Carson ran to Sam's side. He knelt down and checked her pulse. It seemed fast and weak. His stomach lurched in fear. There was so much blood, but then head wounds always bled a lot. "Oh, baby." He unbuckled her helmet and pushed it off her head. "Sam, Sam."

She moaned and moved a little.

"Carson, how is she?" Juan called to him.

"I'm not sure. We need to get help and soon."

"We will. First, he needs to be tied up. Do you have anything in the truck?"

"Uh, yeah, duct tape."

"Perfect, get it."

"What about Sam?"

"Hurry. The faster we get this done the sooner we can get her out of here." Juan never took his eyes off his prisoner. That PI book he'd been reading must have been a damn good book. Carson just hoped Juan did know how to use that weapon if Jaye decided to get stupid and rush them.

Carson ran toward the truck, dug under the seat, and grabbed the duck tape. He turned to hustle back to Juan but as he straightened he felt cold, hard metal pressed to his head just behind his ear. Damn. Now what?

Dr. Matt Brandland stood next to him with his own weapon trained on Carson. "Okay, walk slowly around the truck." Brandland's voice was cold and determined.

They rounded the side of the truck, Carson in front, Brandland and the gun right behind him. Juan, who'd been concentrating his attention on Sam and Jaye, looked their way. His mouth dropped open then snapped shut.

"Drop it, Juan, or I'll shoot him in the head and finish off the rest of you one-by-one."

Swearing a blue streak in Spanish and English, Juan dropped the gun. Not one to squander any opportunity, Jaye swooped in and picked it up along with the third gun.

"Let's get out of here." Brandland ordered and gestured toward Carson's truck with the butt of his gun.

"We should kill them now. They can identify us." Jaye brandished both weapons in their direction.

"We're already fucked. You should know that. Get in the truck; it'll take them a few hours to walk back to the barn and call for help. By then we'll be on our way."

"I still think we shouldn't leave witnesses."

"Enough killing. I'm done." Brandland was already opening the driver's door. Jaye ran to follow. He turned once and fired a few wild shots in their direction. Juan knocked Carson to the ground and out of range. One of the shots hit Gabbie in the chest. She gathered her huge haunches and launched herself into the woods in an attempt to escape.

Jaye and Brandland jumped in the truck and sped off, dust billowing behind them.

* * * *

"They won't get far." Juan rolled off Carson and to his feet. Carson sprang up after him and ran to Sam. They both bent down next to her.

Carson didn't bother to ask Juan how he knew that. Sometimes simple ignorance was preferable to the weird truth. "Do you know first aid?" Carson panted, still trying to get his breath back after Juan had tackled him to the ground.

"Sí."

Who the hell was this guy? Carson dug for his cell phone. It was gone. Shit, it was in his truck, and his truck was on its way to Canada or Sea-Tac Airport by now. "Do you have a cell?"

"No, it's in the truck, too."

Carson hugged Sam to him, unmindful of the blood. "Sam, don't you die on me, baby. I love you." He felt a tear run down his cheek, but he didn't give a damn. She'd broken through his emotional walls, and no way in hell would he go through the rest of his life without her.

"She's in shock. I can't tell how badly she's injured." Juan whipped off his shirt and covered her. Carson did the same. "I'll keep her warm. You need to go now. Get help. I'll stay with her. I'm good at first aid. Make it

fast, amigo.” The accent was still there. Gone was the broken English.

“I...” Carson whipped around. Even if he ran, it’d take precious minutes to get back to the barn.

Juan pointed at Gabbie, who’d come back and stood eyeing them warily from several feet away. Blood seeped from a gash in her chest. The big mare shivered in fear and shock. “Take the horse.”

Carson stared at the huge animal, and she stared back. Her reins trailed on the ground. Any second, she could whirl around and bolt. Carson held out a hand. Gabbie took a tentative step toward him. One ear swiveled forward. “Come here, girl.” He spoke softly, cajoling her and promising her everything would be okay.

The mare snorted. Carson grabbed for the reins. Gabbie whirled and dragged him several feet. Carson held on for all he was worth. The mare stopped and looked at him, blowing and indignant. Carson hadn’t been on a horse in years, and never on a worthless saddle like that.

He cast one more worried glance at Sam. Juan was monitoring her vital signs. “Get the hell out of here! Now!” Juan yelled at him.

Damn.

Turning, Carson pulled the mare to a stump and leapt into the saddle like a sack of grain. Gabbie didn’t move, as if sensing the guy on her back wasn’t exactly competent on a horse. Instead of taking advantage of his neophyte riding abilities, she became the model horse.

Wheeling her around, Carson booted her sides. The mare broke into an easy gallop, as smooth as silk. Carson clung to her neck and hoped she’d find her way home and that he’d stay on her back.

She weaved and cut through the trees; boughs scraped his face and grabbed at his arms. He held on. As if sensing his urgency, her speed increased. Her feet beat out a frantic rhythm on the logging road—or was that the wild pounding of his heart?

With a confidence born of desperation, Carson squeezed harder and urged the mare even faster. Soon she was eating up the earth under her feet in huge leaping strides. Carson clung to her. At one time, he started to slide off. Gabbie slowed and waited for him to right himself.

Hang on, Sam. Hang on, baby. Carson prayed, and he begged. He promised his soul to any deity that would save Sam.

No way in hell was he living without her.

Chapter 40

Re-Gifting the Gift Horse

Carson raised his head from the mare's neck and spotted the farm buildings in the distance. He urged the mare faster. She responded by increasing her speed. They skidded into the parking lot. Brad and Bridget grabbed for the reins as Carson slid off.

Bridget gaped in horror at the blood spattered on the mare and the open wound on her chest.

"Oh, my God. What happened?" She screeched, going into panic mode.

"Shut the fuck up and call 911." Carson yelled at her to take the horse and call a vet.

Brad wrenched the cell from Bridget's frozen fingers and dialed the number.

Gabbie pressed her head into Carson's chest. "It's okay, big girl. It's all going to be okay." Sweat drenched the mare's sides, mingling with the blood, and making it impossible to determine the damage. Carson stroked her big head. "What the fuck is taking them so long?"

"Give them a minute, they'll be here." Brad kept his voice calm.

"Carson, give me the horse. I'll take care of her. The vet's on her way." Bridget pried her brother's fingers from the reins and led the horse away.

"I need to get back to Sam." The panic in his voice shocked him. He'd always been good in a crisis.

"You need to wait here so you can lead them to her. What happened, Car?"

The words tumbled from him in a garbled rush. Brad moved closer and put an arm around him. "She'll be okay. I promise."

Carson stared up at his brother through teary eyes. "I love her, Brad. I can't lose her."

"You won't. She's tougher than that."

* * * *

Carson pulled into the ranch house driveway. Sam sat in the driver's seat next to him.

"Are you having a party?" She pushed herself up straighter in the seat and stared at the cars littering the driveway. She didn't feel like a party.

"Hell, no." Carson sighed. "It's just my family and yours."

"Why are they here?"

"I guess they want to welcome you home."

She swallowed a lump in her throat. This wasn't her home. "I was only gone one night. It wouldn't have been that long if I hadn't been stuck in emergency forever. Then those agents interrogated me like I was the criminal."

"They're pretty thorough. We all had the same treatment."

Sam raised one eyebrow. "Bridget spent a long time talking with the hunky looking one."

Carson sighed. "Yeah, I noticed that, too. The poor guy never knew what hit him. Well, let's get out and face the music."

Sam had experience with overwhelming families, but Carson's family still overwhelmed her just the same.

Carson insisted she sit in a recliner, while he waited on her hand and foot. She didn't protest much; she was still woozy. Her helmet had saved her life. When Jaye had hit her with that rock, the helmet had split like an egg, but it had protected her head. She had a minor concussion and a few large lumps and lots of bruises. She'd needed some stitches on her arm and her head, but mostly her cuts had been superficial even though there had been a lot of blood. It seemed like hours before the place cleared out until the only people left were her, Carson, and Bridget.

Sam wanted Carson to herself, but Bridget settled into a chair with a full glass of wine. A knowing look passed between her and Carson. Bridget would leave when Bridget was ready to leave. There would be no hurrying her.

Sam rubbed her eyes and smiled weakly. "Have you seen Juan? I want to thank him. Carson and I stopped by the barn. He wasn't there."

"He's gone."

“Gone?”

Bridget nodded. “He packed up whatever stuff he had at the barn into that old piece of crap of his and left.”

“Why would he do that?”

“He gave me a note to give you.” Bridget dug around in her Coach purse and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

My work here is done. Take care, Juan

“How odd.” Sam frowned and passed it on to Carson. “You don’t think...”

“I don’t know what to think.” Carson’s brow wrinkled in puzzlement.

“He’s not undercover. He was just plain crazy.” Bridget rolled her eyes.

“Then why would he leave just like that?”

“I think he bit off more than he could chew and ran out on us. Who’s going make sure the stalls are clean tomorrow? Who’s going to...”

“Shut up, Bridget.” Carson glared at her.

“Well, how rude.”

Carson shot her one of his patented tight-ass glowers. “There was more to him than first appeared. He lost his accent when he was under pressure. He knew how to handle a gun. I think the guy might have been undercover.”

“Well, duh. He always played like he was under cover.”

“I mean for real. He was an agent of some kind.”

“An agent of strange maybe.”

“He could have been.” Sam chewed on a fingernail. “What happened to Dr. Matt and Jaye?”

“They’re locked up for horse scams and murdering Brandland’s wife.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Emily Brandland knew that Jaye and her husband were having an affair.” Bridget took another slow sip of her wine. At this rate she’d be here all night.

“Dr. Matt is gay?”

“Or bi.”

“Anyway, she didn’t care because she was having an affair with Hans, who is actually married to an invalid woman in a nursing home.” Bridget sat in a chair and scooted closer to Sam. Her eyes lit up at the excitement of dishing out the dirt. “They killed her because she was onto their scams. She’d threatened to report them.”

“Hans has a wife?”

“That was our reaction, too.” Carson shot her a lopsided grin.

“What kinds of scams were they operating?”

“Oh, they were very diverse, which is why the feds were always one step behind them. That, and horse fraud doesn’t get much attention.”

“So what were the scams?” Sam was getting annoyed and impatient.

Bridget paused to make sure she had their full attention. “They were selling unmanageable and unsound horses for top dollar to rich middle-aged women. Brandland would keep the horses drugged during the sale to mask the problems, and of course, they’d pass the vet check. When the horses didn’t work out, no one thought anything of it because their victims were usually horrible riders who had ruined horses in the past. Once the horse became unrideable, Jaye would offer to buy it back for a portion of the price, they’d resell, and start over again. They were also selling perfectly good horses, making them appear lame or unmanageable down the road by injuring or drugging them. Some they’d buy back cheap, and resell for a huge price when the horse miraculously recovered. If the animal didn’t recover, it didn’t matter to them because they’d most likely sell another horse to that client. Brandland was also performing surgery on horses when they didn’t need it and charging clients astronomical amounts for treatments and surgeries he didn’t do.”

Sam was in shock. She’d known both men for a very long time and had the utmost respect for them as decent people and as dedicated horsemen. It appeared they were neither. “Dr. Matt has always been considered one of the best vets in the state. Why would he resort to something like this?”

“Money.” Carson inserted before Bridget could open her big mouth again. “Brandland was deeply in debt because of his expensive new state-of-the-art vet clinic and the costs of running it. He also had a closet drug problem, as did Jaye. They both lived way above their means and needed to finance their lavish lifestyles.”

* * * *

Hans watched as she loaded another box in her beat-up pickup truck, which Carson had resurrected from the dead.

“You’re leaving?” He sounded surprised.

"That was the deal."

"It was. Then."

"Has something changed that I'm not aware of?"

"You didn't get a chance to show at Regionals. You would have won."

"It's hard to tell with horses. They do have their own minds."

"Especially that horse."

Sam shrugged. "A deal is a deal."

"I'm willing to reconsider and continue to work with you. I believe I can make a silk purse from a cow ear."

"You want me to stay?"

"I would be honored to have you as my assistant trainer."

"I can't stay here." It wasn't working for Hans that would be the problem. Nor was it that small matter of paying back her father and stepmother. It was the larger matter of being in love with Carson. She'd ended up back in his bed this past week, her personal reward for all she'd been through. Carson had been attentive and affectionate. Yet something was going on. He'd been behaving strangely since her near-death experience, making secret phone calls, disappearing for hours without explanation. Maybe he had someone else?

"Sam?"

Sam jumped at the sound of her name. "Oh, sorry, Hans."

"This is for you." Hans handed her a letter. Sam took it and studied it. It was opened. "You opened my mail?"

Hans shrugged. "It came in the midst of all of this chaos. I believed it might be important and time-sensitive, so I took the initiative to look after your best interests."

Or his? Sam saw the United States Equestrian Team logo on the envelope. She held her breath, not daring to think what it could mean. With trembling hands, she ripped the envelope to get at its contents. "Oh, my. Oh, my." She grabbed a stall door. For a moment she came close to fainting. "They're inviting Gabbie and me to train at the Team headquarters this fall as part of their developing horse and rider program."

Hans smiled a rare smile. "You've earned it. So has the horse."

Sam's face fell. "She's for sale, and I'm leaving."

"This changes things. We need to find a buyer who will be willing to keep you as the rider as long as I am the trainer. I have many connections."

"You would do that for me?" She ignored that persistent voice warning her to leave now while her heart was semi-intact.

"Of course, and for me."

Sam laughed, despite her feeling of dread that even Hans couldn't pull this rabbit out of his hat. And if he could, perhaps it'd be better if he didn't.

* * * *

Sam leaned against the stall door and watched Gabbie munch contentedly on her hay.

"Good news from the vet." Carson walked up beside her.

"Yes, it was." Sam swallowed.

"She'll be fine. No side effects from our wild ride, and the bullet just grazed her skin."

"She looks good."

"You don't sound too thrilled."

"I'm thrilled for you."

"For me?" Gabbie left her hay to nuzzle Carson. His old t-shirt once again had a swath of horse slobber on it.

"You're going to get your money out of her."

Carson was quiet for a moment. "I met with the director of the handicapped program this morning."

"Oh, Carson. How did that go?"

His blue eyes lit up like a cloudless summer sky. "She signed a long-term lease. It's not exactly going to make Cedrona solvent, but Mom's working on fund-raising options."

"That's wonderful. So you must have sold Gabbie." She hated asking but had to know.

"No, I didn't."

"Why not?"

"She's not for sale."

"She's not?"

"No, she's not. She's an Olympic team contender. You can't buy that kind of publicity. She'll make a name for the new equestrian center and the competition expenses will be a tremendous write-off."

"How did you afford the brewery?"

"I didn't."

"Oh, Carson. I know what that place means to you."

"Sometimes you have to make tough choices." He smiled at her. "My grandfather would approve of this one."

What are you going to do with Gabbie?"

"She's going to be a wedding present."

"Bridget is getting married?" Sam held her stomach as it threatened to rebel. She felt ill. All her hard work and Bridget would realize the benefits. Life wasn't fair.

"Guess again."

"I haven't a clue. Who?" Her throat tightened, and she found it hard to speak. He couldn't mean...

"My wife." He moved toward her until they were toe to toe. He pulled a small box from his pocket. "This wasn't exactly how I planned to do this, but somehow it seems appropriate for you and me."

Sam opened her mouth then shut it. She didn't dare voice what she was thinking.

"I love you, Sam. Do you realize that?"

"I hoped that you did, but I didn't know for sure."

"Well, I do."

"If you're giving me a wedding present, there has to be a wedding."

"And a groom?"

"Any volunteers for that job?"

"It'll be tough, but I think I know a man for the job."

"Do you know him well?"

"The real question is do you know him well enough to spend the rest of your life with him?"

"Oh, yes, I do. He's the nicest, sweetest man on earth. For a tight ass, that is." She put her hands on his chest. "I love you, Carson."

"I love you, too, baby. You aren't just marrying me for my horse, are you?"

"Well, that's a tough one. She's a pretty attractive incentive." Gabbie pricked her ears, knowing they were talking about her.

Carson took the ring from the box and slipped it on her finger. Sam wiped tears from her eyes. "It's not very big, but I didn't think you'd want anything large."

“It’s perfect. I love it.” And she really did. “So what’s your plan for our future, Carson?”

He laughed. “For once I haven’t worked out all the details. Hans is staying on. We’re living in the ranch house. Dad’s retiring next year and wants me to take over ReynCorp. I’ve got some ideas that I think will put us back on top. We’ll pay off your father as soon as we can. Gabbie and you are going to train with the Team. Other than that, who the hell knows?”

Sam wrapped her arms around his neck. “We know. We’ll make it with our own combination of organization and chaos.”

Carson pulled her close and kissed her until their gift horse stuck her big head between them and demanded attention.

THE END

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Jami Davenport has been writing since she was old enough to know the alphabet. An advocate of happy endings, Jami writes sexy romantic comedy, sizzling suspense, and equestrian fiction. Jami lives on a small farm near Puget Sound with her husband, a former Green Beret turned plumber, a chocolate Lab with a tennis ball fetish, a prince disguised as an orange tabby cat, and an opinionated Hanoverian mare.

In her spare time, Jami rides and shows her dressage horse and grows roses. An avid boater, Jami has spent countless hours in the San Juan Islands, the setting for her first two books. In her opinion, it is the most beautiful place on earth.

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