Chapter 2

Tyler parked his Jeep in the gravel parking lot outside the stables and hauled Buddy and the flowers from the passenger seat. The delicate scent from the bouquet tickled his nose and teased him with memories of the scent of strawberry-blond hair. What a place to discover a beautiful woman - but he couldn't think of anyplace better for her than that charming little shop. All long lines and lithe curves, those intense green-gold eyes watching him from that delightful face, with its pert little nose and those delicious-looking lips. Maybe he could think of a better place for her . . . He grinned to himself as his thoughts turned decidedly unprofessional.

“You're in a chipper mood, boss,” a gravelly voice broke into his fantasies. “Break up with that girl of yours again, then?”

Tyler's grin broadened as he passed of the tortoise to Joe, his stable manager. “That. And I lost a bet this morning.”

Joe laughed and stomped his cigarette out, tucking the tortoise under an arm. “She must have been quite a looker to have you grinning like that over losing.”

“Oh she was,” Tyler agreed, leading the way through the barn tack room and his tiny office behind it. “How's my problem child this morning?”

Joe made an exasperated noise as he set the tortoise down in a corner of the tack room. “That horse. Too smart for his own good. You let him loose on a track and he'd leave any other horse on the field in his dust. We can't seem to build fences high enough that he doesn't think he can jump 'em, and the bastard doesn't even bother to slow down before he tries. Put a saddle on his back, though, and suddenly he can't remember how to trot. Or if he'll move for you, he won't jump. I'm about at the end of my rope with him.” He shook his head and lounged against the door frame.

Tyler set the flowers down and shuffled some papers on his desk. “When Gerry comes in, these are for his wife,” he said absently, his brow furrowed in thought. He picked up a bill to open it, and set it down again, looking up at Joe. “Anybody's Guess.”

“What? I suppose. But I'm not the only one out of ideas,” Joe answered, looking puzzled.

“No, no; Anybody's Guess. The four-year-old that won this morning's race. Who was the trainer they had working with him?”

“Macon?” Joe raised an eyebrow. “Macon won't work with one of your horses, boss. You just haven't been around long enough.”

Tyler nodded. More than once in the two years since he'd bought out the then-failing stable had he run into the same problem. He wasn't “horse people”. Some of the stables had been owned by the same family since before the Depression, it was old money and old friends, and there seemed to be a lot of people who thought that some East Coast, Ivy League business school graduate had no place breeding horses. Sure there were some people, like Gerry and Joe, who were willing to lend him their expertise. Sure his horses made a showing, when they didn't win, in almost every race. But everyone, including Tyler, knew that all he'd had to do with that was some smart business decisions. The one horse he'd bred himself had turned out to be, well, a problem child.

Joe shrugged. “I'll throw out some feelers. Maybe we can get him interested, but don't get your hopes up.”

“Thanks, Joe. Another eighteen years, and I won't have to worry about this kind of thing anymore right?”

Joe laughed. “Right, boss. You'll be old blood then. Come find me when you're done paying the bills so we can talk about that outdoor ring.”

Tyler nodded again, and reached for the pile of envelopes as Joe started to walk away. He hadn't taken two steps when he snapped his fingers and turned around, pointing at Tyler. “The benefit Sunday,” he said.

It was Tyler's turn to look puzzled. “The benefit?”

Joe nodded. “I know you got the invitation, you handed out tickets to all of us. Everybody'll be there, and if we get lucky, maybe we can do some schmoozing, and get somebody to pull some strings with Macon.”

“There's an idea,” Tyler said, grinning as he leaned back in his chair. “I'd forgotten completely about it. This is why I keep you around, Joe.”

“No it isn't,” Joe winked. “You keep me around because the only thing you know about horses is that they're mammals.”

“There's that,” Tyler shrugged, crumpling up a piece of paper and throwing it at the other man. “Now go away so I can write these checks in peace.”

Joe laughed and ducked, and headed off into the stables.

Tyler sighed and picked up the phone. If he was going to the benefit on Sunday, he should call and make up with Rachel, even though she'd dumped him, again. They'd been on and off since freshman year of college, and every time she blew up at stormed out, he swore it was the last. And every time something would come up and he'd take her back. But those tickets were expensive, and he didn't want to waste one.

He was halfway through punching in her number when his eyes met the glassy stare of the stone tortoise. Of course, there were other girls he could take with him. Tyler hung up the phone. Girls with strawberry-blond hair and deep green eyes. Girls that watched races and laughed at his jokes. Girls whose supple body he could wrap himself around and dance with til dawn. Girls he knew nothing about. Girls whose first name he didn't even know. Tyler covered his face with one hand and reached for the phone again. His hand stopped halfway there. He may not know her name, but he did know where she worked. The sign said the flower shop closed at four. He'd just leave a little early and ask her, that's all. Tyler rested his chin in his hand and gazed back at the tortoise.

“Thanks, Buddy,” he said quietly. “I think I'll end up enjoying this little get-together after all.”

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Tyler pushed open the flower shop door. The sweet earthy smell filled his nose, and he breathed in deeply.

“Mr. McLellan,” a musical voice greeted him. “Did you come back for more tortoises?”

She was smiling, a smile that reached all the way to her green eyes, and he smiled back. “No, there was something else I wanted,” he echoed her words from that morning. Her eyes widened slightly, and a sudden flush colored her cheeks. He savored the way she looked for a moment, before adding, “There's a black-tie thing for work this weekend, and I need flowers for it. You know, a corsage and one of those . . .” he pointed to his jacket and made a vague hand motion around his chest. “Those button-hole things. For guys.”

She laughed, the sound of her joy warmed him unexpectedly, and he grinned sheepishly. “You mean a boutonnière?”

He suddenly needed to be much closer to her, and he crossed the small shop in a few long strides. “That's it,” he answered, standing across the low counter from her.

She pulled a little pad of paper and a pen in front of her. “When do you need them?”

“Sunday,” he answered, watching the graceful movements of her hand as she wrote. “It's at eight on Sunday.”

She paused, resting the end of her pen on her bottom lip. “You'll have to pick them up tomorrow,” she said, tapping the paper with the pen, and turning her eyes up to him. He stared into their silky green depths, counting the little spots of gold that shone in them like stars. “We're not open on Sundays,” she finished quietly.

“That's fine,” he answered, leaning on the counter so she could look at him without tilting her head up in that way that made her look so very kissable.

She nodded, and dropped her eyes to the paper, and Tyler cursed silently. She didn't look any less kissable from this angle. “What color dress will the lady be wearing?”

“You know, I don't know,” he answered thoughtfully, trying to picture her in formal attire instead of the tight jeans and top she was wearing now. His imagination seemed to get stuck somewhere between taking these clothes off and putting the others on. He reached out and tilted her chin up with one finger so she would look at him again. “What color dress do you think you'll wear?”

Her eyes widened, and her perfect pink lips formed a little “O” of surprise. She took a step back and stared at him. “What?” she said finally.

“To the benefit. What color dress do you think you'll wear when you come with me on Sunday?” he asked, straightening up. He couldn't help but grin as her mouth opened and closed while she looked for something to say. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “Even if you don't want to make your own flowers, I'll still need to know what color dress you're going to wear.”

“Look, I -” she started, but a voice from the back interrupted.

“She won't have to worry. I'll make them for her.” Tyler assumed it was the brunette from the morning, and grinned at gaining an unexpected ally.

The beautiful creature in front of him threw up her hands and looked at the ceiling for help. “I don't – You don't even know my name!” she tried.

“It's Lauren,” supplied the voice from the back.

“Sure I do, it's Lauren,” Tyler answered, he could feel his grin stretching broader as she searched for some other reason to turn him down.

“All right, you know my name,” she admitted grudgingly, with a glare toward the back of the store. “But you don't know anything about me, and I don't know anything about you.”

“What time do you close tomorrow? We could meet at a park or something and you could fill me in on all the details.”

She waved one slender, long fingered hand at him. “We close at noon, but that won't do, I'll need the afternoon to find a dress to -” Lauren clamped her mouth shut hard and turned her fierce glare on him.  “Fine. Breakfast. If you want me to come to this party with you, you can meet me tomorrow morning at six for breakfast.”

“Breakfast it is!” he cried triumphantly. He caught her hand in his and brought her fingertips to his mouth for a tiny kiss. “Don't be late,” he told her, the sizzling warmth of her hand in his changing his playful grin to a different kind of smile.

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Lauren slumped against the wall when he left, gazing down at fingertips that still tingled where his lips had touched them.

"So, what color dress do you think you'll wear?"  Emma asked, appearing beside her.

"Ooh, you!"  Lauren cried, swatting playfully at her friend.  "How did I let myself get talked into this?"

"I'd say there's a few good reasons,"  Emma answered, ticking them off on her fingers.  "One pair of gorgeous blue eyes.  Some delightfully broad shoulders.  The six-pack that shirt was covering."

"But I know nothing about him!  I don't know what he does, I don't know what this benefit is for, we might not have anything in common at all!"  Lauren fussed around the shop, straightening things that didn't need to be straightened, rearranging things back into the same place she took them from.

Emma lounged against the door frame.  "Look, make all the excuses you want.  I don't think this is a bad idea.  And neither do you, missy, or you wouldn't have been deciding the best time to go shopping while you were making your case not to go."

Lauren sighed and flipped the sign on the door to "Closed".  "You're right.  If it turns out we don't have anything in common, I can just break it off tomorrow at breakfast."

"That's what first dates are for!"  Emma declared, slipping into the back of the shop.

Word Count; 2081