Chapter 5

Lauren pushed open the door, kicked it shut behind her. She dropped her clutch on the floor, and trudged into the kitchen. She put the kettle on to boil, pulled out a mug and a packet of cocoa, and buried her face in her hands to cry again. Everything had seemed so perfect, so wonderful, for those few short hours. It had even been great to see old friends again. There was none of the pity that had driven her away in the first place left, just honest joy at seeing her again.

Of course there had been pity before, Everyone knew what it was to lose a horse, through either sale or retirement, but Lauren had done the one thing that every rider feared most; she had been the cause of the loss. And knocked herself unconcious for three weeks as well. She remembered what her father had said to her afterwards. “Nothing for it, sweetheart. Girls fall, horses get hurt. Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, mount up and keep riding. Can't let gravity win.” Maybe she would have, but the stream of well-wishers through her hospital room were all so cautious, so afraid. Once she was well, she couldn't stand to face them anymore, and her desire for isolation had driven her father out of the public eye as well.

But there was none of that left tonight. It had been wonderful to be surrounded by friends, and to be in the arms of a wonderful man, one Lauren felt she had been really and truly falling in love with. And that kiss! Full of the promise of eternity, it had left her feeling scorched and heady.

The kettle started to whistle, and Lauren sighed and reached up to turn it off. She wandered back to her bedroom, and dug out an old pair of comfortable pajamas. She took them into the bathroom, and caught sight of herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red and puffy, surrounded by thick circles of smeared black mascara. Her hair was still perfect, though, bedecked with flowers to match Tyler's boutenieer.

Suddenly she was angry. She ripped the flowers from her hair, crushing the delicate blossoms in her fist and flinging them into the garbage. How dare he! How dare he play games with her like that. Kiss her, and then kiss his girlfriend. Lauren wondered if Rachel knew what kind of a man she was dealing with. What kind of lieing, manipulating, two-timing man she was dealing with. Well, Rachel could have him. Lauren wanted nothing to do with him any more.

She left the gold dress crumpled on the floor and stepped into the warm, comforting shower. She scrubbed away the tears, the make-up, and the scent of him that still clung to her skin. Tomorrow was a new day, one that would start without Tyler McLellan in it. Finally she climbed into bed, cocoa, dress, and clutch forgotten about, and cried herself to sleep.

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Tyler slept fitfully, his dreams haunted by green eyes and strawberry-blond hair. When he wasn't dreaming of her, he lay in bed thinking of her. Finally, the sun creeping over the horizon, he gave up and rolled out of bed.

He set a pot of coffee brewing in the kitchen and leaned against the counter to wait for it. His gaze fell on the table where he'd tossed his keys and phone when he came in. Surely it was too early to call Lauren. Even if they had parted on the best of terms, he doubted she would appreciate a five o'clock wake up call from him. And he wasn't even sure what terms they had parted on. Calling her now could ruin everything.

He lunged for the phone and dialed Lauren's number. It rang, and rang, and shuffled him off to her voicemail. Tyler hung up. Of course she wouldn't answer. She probably wasn't even awake yet. Maybe he should call back and leave a message. No, he didn't want to wake her. He would call back at a decent hour, and if she didn't pick up then, he would leave a message for her. He set the phone down, got the creamer out of the fridge. He put the creamer on the counter, and picked the phone up again. He stared at it for a minute, as if it could answer all of his questions. Tyler put the phone down again, and yanked a mug out of the cupboard.

This was ridiculous. He'd barely known the girl for two days, she was fast mounting up to more trouble than she could possibly be worth. He can't sleep at night, can't think of anything else during the day. They're having a great time together, and then she runs off. Joe seemed to think she had some reason for it, but wouldn't explain what it was. That's another thing! At some point in the conversation, you think she would have mentioned she was John Macon's daughter. Not that she knew about the stable, but even just as a couple of race fans.

He snatched up the phone again, but this time it was Jeremiah's number he called.

“Speak,” Jeremiah's sleep-thick voice came over the line. “And make it good, man. The sun's not even up yet.”

“She ran off last night. Just took off, no good-bye no explanation, nothing.”

“Who did?”

“Lauren.”

“Lauren?”

“Yes! Lauren! Dunk your head under the faucet or something and keep up!”

“Hey, I'm allowed to be slow. You're the one that called me at this uncivilized hour remember?”

Tyler covered his eyes with his hand and took a deep breath. Jeremiah was right, after all. It wasn't even five thirty, Tyler's phone call had dragged him out of bed, there was no reason to be snapping.

“Yeah. You're right.”

“Damn straight I am,” Jeremiah answered. Tyler could hear rustling on the other end of the phone. “Let me dig out a Red Bull, and then start at the beginning.”

Tyler made himself a cup of coffee while he waited for Jeremiah to collect himself.

“Okay,” Jeremiah said finally. “What happened between you and your peony?”

“I picked her up, she was beautiful. I swear, Jer, angels couldn't look that good. Roommate or no, I wanted to just fling her onto the couch and find out exactly what that dress was hiding.”

Jeremiah snorted. “Doesn't sound very angelic. Also doesn't sound like any reason for a five a.m. phone call.”

“No. Well, I didn't, we went to the benefit instead. We should have skipped it, I swear. Anyway, we get there, and guess who it turns out my date is? John Macon's daughter.”

“Who?”

“John Macon. He's a big-shot trainer. Doesn't do public appearances, but people say he can take any horse and train it to do anything inside of a week. I was hoping to use last night to schmooze my way into getting him to take on one of my horses.”

“Not seeing the problem here, Tyler.”

“Tell me about it. I didn't do much schmoozing. Mostly I just danced with Lauren. And then we had this toe-curling, earth-moving, mind-blowing kiss. She seemed fine. More than fine. She seemed really happy. She says she's just going to go take off her lipstick and be right back.”

“Still waiting for the punchline.”

“That is the punchline. She goes to the bathroom and never comes back. Joe said he saw her take off, I ran outside and tried to call her, but she didn't answer. I have no idea what's up. Joe seemed to think she had some reason for taking off, but I couldn't get a straight answer out of him.”

Jeremiah was silent for a long time. Tyler sipped at his coffee in frustration, trying to keep from yelling at his friend again.

“Maybe she got spooked,” Jeremiah finally offered.

“What?”

“Remember that girl Mordechai tried to date once? The Mormon or whatever? They'd get along really well, but every time he did so much as hold her hand, she'd go running for the hills and not return phone calls for days. Maybe it's something like that, and she just thinks things are moving to fast.”

“She didn't seem to think things were moving to fast while we were kissing.”

Jeremiah snorted. “There's a lot of time to while you're scrubbing away the smeared evidence, Ty. Just give her some time. Call her up later – much later – and talk things over. If she's not completely crazy, you can apologize for rushing her, and promise to start slow.”

Tyler stared into his coffee. “Yeah I guess. I wasn't rushing anything though. It just sort of . . . happened.”

“Pin Joe down and find out what he was talking about, too. Get this sorted out before you moon away another Poker Night.”

“Right. Thanks, man.”

“Yeah. I'm going back to bed.” The line went dead, and Tyler set the phone on the counter.

Maybe that was all it was. Maybe she just got spooked. He'd head in early, corner Joe, and demand to know whatever this mysterious thing about Lauren was.

Tyler dumped the rest of his coffee into the sink, and set the mug in after it. It was nothing that couldn't be worked out, he was sure.

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The stables were in an uproar when Tyler arrived. People were scrambling back and forth, and Tyler was shocked to see Gerry leading one of the mares back to her stall. She was matted with burrs and looked like she had spent the night rolling in mud.

He tumbled from his Jeep and called for Joe.

“He's in the far pastures, boss,” Gerry called out, throwing the lock on the stall. “Hop on the tractor, I gotta bring more nails up there.”

“What's going on?” Tyler asked when they were rolling down the trails.

“That horse,” Gerry answered. “He's been pulling down fences all night. I think he was just trying to get in with the mares, Diamond Dust's in estres. But he's made a fine mess of things..”

Women and horses. Tyler was about ready to forswear both.

He lept off the tractor as soon as they reached the pasture where Joe was repairing the fences. “Joe, I need to talk to you.”

“You sold that hellion to a Canadian butcher?” Joe asked without looking up.

“No, I -”

“Then it can wait, boss,” Joe said, shoving a hammer into Tyler's hand. “These fences can't.”

Tyler opened his mouth to argue, closed it again and set to work. Joe was right. The fences needed to be taken care of, or his livelihood would be wandering all over the North Carolina countryside.

When Gerry's wife showed up with sandwiches and sodas, and their newborn bundled into a sling, Tyler still hadn't managed to pin Joe down for an explanation.

Tyler took his sandwich and kissed her on the cheek. “Remind me to double Gerry's Christmas bonus.”

She laughed. “Oh, I will.”

Tyler wolfed down his sandwich and pulled out his cell phone to check if Lauren had called. She hadn't. He knew she hadn't. He'd gotten no calls all morning. Tyler took a swig of soda, and dialed Lauren's number. Once again, it rang, then shuffled him off to her voice mail. He waited for the beep, and left a message this time. “Lauren, it's Tyler. I was calling to make sure you're all right. You left pretty suddenly last night, so I – If I moved too fast, I'm sorry. Give me a second chance, and I'll make sure we don't go any faster than you're comfortable with. Call me back, anytime is fine.” He hesitated for a moment, then hung up. There wasn't much more he could do now but try and pin down Joe, and wait.

The sun was setting before Tyler was able to make it out of the pastures and into his office. He hadn't seen Joe in hours, wasn't even sure if the man was still there. Tyler had resigned himself to having to wait to talk to Joe the next day. He was plugging away at the work that had been waiting for him since morning when a voice startled him.

“You still here, boss?” Joe had sunk into the other chair in the office. “I figure you cut out hours ago.”

Tyler leaned back and chuckled. “Nope. Stayed out there until I couldn't see anymore.”

Joe's grin was tired, but appreciative. “I'll walk the fences tomorrow, make sure we didn't miss anyplace. Meantime, everyone's been rounded up, and I locked that black bastard in the box stall down at the end.”

Tyler nodded.

“Gonna be just as long a day tomorrow, getting those horses cleaned up. Can't wash any more of them tonight, can't risk it getting cold and the horses catching a chill.”

Tyler nodded again. “Joe, I need to talk to you.”

“You said something this morning about that. What do you need, boss?”

“Lauren Macon,” Tyler answered. He grinned at Joe's raised eyebrow. “She took off last night, you said something about her being overwhelmed or something?”

Joe nodded. “It's understandable, though. Considering.”

“Considering what?” Tyler didn't mean to snap. It had been a long and frustrating day, and he was bone tired.

Joe just raised an eyebrow again. “Sometimes I forget you haven't been around forever.” Joe settled back in his chair. “Lauren's an old hand at this horse thing. I think, if you'll forgive the cliché, she was riding before she was walking. She was a presence on the hunt show circuit by fourteen, and ran her first steeplechase at sixteen.”

Joe counted back on his fingers. “I guess it's four years back now. She was riding Harry. Mad As A March Hare. Damn good horse, he was. Fast, good jumper, and patient. The two of them, they were a great team. She could get him to work harder than anybody else, and they trusted each other. That was part of the problem, I think. How attached she got to that horse. Anyway, they were running together in the Queen's Cross, I think they were in third, but just barely. Real tight clump of horses that year. They go to make a jump, and just as Harry springs off, this other horse jumps off at an angle right in front of him. Well Harry tries to correct, but he's already in the air, and the two horses crash into each other, pulled the whole fence down too. The other rider went flying off and got off with just a sprained ankle. His horse was all bruised up, but they walked him off the track, too. Harry and Lauren though . . .”

Joe shook his head, his eyes distant. “We thought Lauren was dead. She was laying there underneath horse and fence, not moving at all. Harry's screaming in pain, he's cut all over from the fence. There's blood everywhere. We can't tell what's from her, and what's from him, they're both soaked in it. The paramedics come out to get Lauren, and Harry won't let anyone near. He keeps trying to stand up and falling over again, just hurting himself worse. We thought we were going to have to shoot him. Then John comes out with this big needle in his hand. He walks toward Harry, and he's talking to him. 'Look here, horse,' he's saying, 'We need to get Lauren out of there to make sure she's all right. You're no doctor, so you need to shove off. I'm gonna jab this into you, and it's gonna make you go to sleep so we can get the both of you taken care of. Don't even try to bite me, horse, or I'll knock you out with my fist instead.' He walks up, and he jabs that needle into Harry, and then there's paramedics and vets all over every place.”

Joe was quiet for a minute. “They put Harry out to pasture. He spooks at anything taller than about three feet now, and he tore himself up so bad on that fence trying to protect Lauren from help that he can't carry any weight. Lauren was in a coma for three weeks. She hasn't been near a horse since. Or anything that reminds her of horses. Lauren cut herself out of this world, and John just let himself fade away. I guess it was horses or his daughter, and he chose his daughter.”

“And I dragged her right back into the middle of all of that with no warning or anything. No wonder she took off.” Tyler laughed bitterly.

Joe looked confused. “She didn't know where she was going last night?”

“No. She had Friday morning's race on when I bought Gerry's wife those flowers, I thought she was just a fan. I figured I'd bring her to the benefit, and she'd be surprised and thrilled. She'd be really impressed, you know? She didn't want to go in when we got there, I thought she was just being shy.”

Joe laughed. “Just give her a call and explain things.”

“I've been calling. She hasn't called back.”

Joe shrugged. “So stop in and see her at work. She's always been pretty reasonable, and never been one to hold a grudge.” He stood and stretched. “I'm going home before I fall asleep in that chair.”

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It was deep in the afternoon before Lauren dragged herself out of bed. She hadn't turned on her alarm, and Emma hadn't woken her. She would have stayed in bed all day if hunger hadn't drawn her eventually to the kitchen. There was a napkin covered basket and a note from Emma on the kitchen table. Emma had been brief, “Got muffins, your favorite.” She had drawn an arrow pointing toward the basket. “If you don't feel up to coming in, don't. I can fly solo for as long as you need. We'll talk later. I'll make dinner.” Lauren lifted up the corner of the napkin. Three lemon-poppyseed muffins from the bakery up the road nestled cheerfully in the basket. Of course Emma would have noticed that something had gone wrong last night. The dress and towel on the floor in the bathroom, the crushed flowers in the garbage, the mug and cocoa that Lauren had left out. All were sure signs of tragedy.

Lauren managed a tiny smile. At least she knew Emma wasn't just using her for family connections. Lauren tugged one of the muffins out of the basket and onto a plate, and made her way into the living room. She settled on the couch, wrapping an afghan around herself. She reached for the television remote on the end table, but her hand wrapped around her clutch instead. She hesitated a moment, then pulled the tiny beaded purse onto her lap, and dumped the contents unceremoniously onto the coffee table. Lauren picked up her phone and looked at the screen.

Five missed calls and one voice mail, all from Tyler. She checked the times. Three from last night, within minutes of each other, but he hadn't left a message until this afternoon. Why not? Had he needed time to compose a new set of lies to feed her? Her finger lingered over the button. She didn't care to hear what excuse it had taken him half a day to come up with, and at the same time, Lauren longed to hear his rich voice, telling her there had been some mistake, some grave misunderstanding. The image of Rachel in Tyler's arms flashed through Lauren's head. There had been no mistake. She may not be the most experienced girl out there, but some things couldn't be misundertood. Gritting her teeth, Lauren deleted the calls and the voice mail without listening to it.

Lauren blinked hard, staring down at the blank screen of her phone. She wouldn't cry anymore, not over him. Finally, she dialed a number and lifted the phone to her ear.

It rang once, twice, three times. Then, “Macon,” her father answered the phone.

“Hi Daddy,” Lauren said, trying to keep the tears out of her voice.

“Lauren! Honey, what's wrong?” She only called him “Daddy” when she was upset.