Chapter 7

Tyler had explained the situation to the guys earlier in the week, but Mordechai had insisted on setting up the poker table anyway, and now glared at Tyler from across it. Jeremiah had joined Mordechai, and was shuffling the cards. Ethan and Hunter had settled themselves on Tyler's leather sofa. The phone rang at the same time as the doorbell. Tyler leapt for the door, and Jeremiah reached over to answer the phone.

“Emma,” Tyler said, stepping to the side and holding the door for her. “Please come in.”

He made introductions, and briefly explained Sloan. Emma said hellos, and raised an eyebrow when Sloan declared that she “sounded like a babe.”

Emma settled on a chair in the living room. “I tried all week to talk to her, she just won't listen. Have you got any ideas?”

“Yeah,” Mordechai spoke up. “Buy a baseball bat.”

“A baseball bat,” Ethan repeated slowly. “What good would that do?”

Mordechai and Jeremiah shared a grin. “Knock her over the head with it,” Mordechai explained, “and drag her home by her hair.”

Sloan's laugh filled the room, and angry color filled Emma's cheeks.

“Well isn't that delightfully paleolithic,” she spat. “Small wonder you're still single.”

Mordechai just shrugged. “I've never had a problem finding a girl, when I want one. Even you prissy Southern Belles come when I call.”

“Excuse me?” Emma leaned forward in her chair, her voice dripping venom.

“You heard me just fine,” Mordechai drawled, resting his chin on his hand. “I could rock your world, flower girl.”

Emma shot out of her chair, murder in her eyes. Mordechai rose slowly, and Tyler and Hunter jumped to intercept them.

“Look, let's just sit back down and be reasonable,” Tyler suggested.

“He's just sore we're not playing poker,” Hunter explained to Emma.

“No,” Mordechai shot over Tyler's shoulder. “I'm sore this chick can't take a joke. She floats in here, disrupts my Saturday night, and then gets mad at me for hanging out with my friends.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “It's just poker, it's just a game. There will be another Saturday.”

“And Lauren's just a girl. There'll be another.”

“She's not just a girl,” Tyler said, his jaw tense. “There won't be another.”

The room went quiet, Emma took a step back, and Tyler and Mordechai stared at each other across the green felt.

“Well,” Sloan said into the silence. “Now we know how Tyler feels.”

Mordechai nodded once, and sat back down. “Let's get this figured out, then.”

“Send her flowers,” Jeremiah suggested.

“Write her a letter,” Hunter offered.

Jeremiah snapped his fingers. “Send her flowers with a letter attached!”

“Jer, you're brilliant,” Sloan laughed. “Just one thing though. Could somebody explain to me what exactly is going on there?”

Jeremiah laughed, and Tyler proceeded to fill Sloan in on the details, with assistance from Emma.

“I see,” Sloan said when they had finished. “Tough spot.”

The doorbell rang then, and Mordechai threw his hands up. “Who else did you invite?”

“No one,” Tyler answered, looking suspiciously at Emma. She refused to meet his eyes.

Ethan glanced between the two of them before standing up. “I'll get it. Maybe the pizza kid has the wrong door.”

Ethan pulled open the door and found himself being scrutinized by a tall, lean man in his fifties. “Tyler McLellan?”

“I'm Tyler,” Tyler said, standing up.

The man strode past Ethan and stopped in front of Tyler. He planted his fists on his hips and looked him over. “John Macon,” he said, green-gold eyes staring straight into Tyler's. “What are your intentions toward my daughter?”

“Her father's here?” Sloan exclaimed. The string of curses and laughter that followed had Emma's eyes wide with shock, but John never looked away from Tyler.

The room quieted, and stayed that way for a long time. Thoughts whirled around Tyler's head almost faster than he could catch them. Finally he looked back at John. “Mr. Macon,” he started. “I honestly don't know how to answer that question.”

John raised one eyebrow slowly, but said nothing. Tyler swallowed hard and continued. “I've never met anyone like Lauren. She's amazing. When she's around, I'm aware of things I've never noticed before. Things about her, sure, like the way her eyes light up when she laughs, but things about me, and things about the rest of the world, too. I don't think I ever knew how beautiful a sunset was until she was with me Sunday evening. But, I hardly know her. One breakfast and one failed charity event hardly make us fast friends. I know one thing, though. If I lose Lauren, I will never find this again with anyone else. Whatever this is.”

John nodded. He extended one hand, and Tyler took it with relief. The man's handshake was firm, and to the point. Then, “Tell me about this horse.”

“What?” Tyler glanced around the room in confusion. Hunter looked intrigued, Mordechai, Ethan, and Jeremiah shared his confusion, but Emma appeared to be fighting a grin. “What horse?” Tyler asked, his gaze still on Emma.

“This horse of yours. Can't Win For Losing? That right? The one you're looking to get trained.”

“That's right, Can't Win For Losing,” Tyler dragged his eyes back to John. “He's two years old, and a handful.” Tyler proceeded to fill him in on the details of the last few months trying to train the headstrong horse. John listened attentively, only stopping Tyler once or twice to have something clarified.

“Bring him around Monday,” John said when Tyler finished. “We may be able to kill two birds with one stone, here.” He winked at Emma, and her grin spread across her face.

“What?” Tyler said again. Hunter was grinning, too, but Ethan just shrugged when Tyler looked questioningly at him.

“Bring that horse around to my stables on Monday,” John repeated. “I'll start working with him. I'm speaking at Cornell the week after next, so I'll need someone to keep an eye on him while I'm gone, and I'll call Lauren to do it. In a few weeks, when she's fallen in love with that horse - she will,” he said, when Jeremiah opened his mouth. “She's always had a soft spot for the stubborn ones. In a few weeks, you come by to visit him, and she'll have to talk to you. By the end of the summer, she'll be back in the saddle, and you'll be a little clearer on how you feel about my girl. Make sense?” John nodded toward the poker table. “What's you boys' game?”

“Texas Hold 'Em, sir,” Ethan answered, standing up.

“Mind if I buy in?” John pulled a five dollar bill from his wallet.

“There's no need,” Jeremiah said quickly. “We just play with nickels.”

John nodded, and set the bill down on the table. “All the same. If Emma and I have five dollars between us at the end of the night, I'll take the bill back.”

Mordechai glanced over at Emma. She looked about to object, but Ethan had already pulled two more chairs up to the table. “Oh all right,” she said, standing up. “But I'm not very good, I haven't played poker in ages.”

John snorted as he took his seat.

“Sounds like the lady's a hustler,” Sloan laughed. Jeremiah pulled out his visor and began to deal the cards.

“Boy,” John said. “You look like an idiot. Who's that fellow on the phone?”

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"Lauren, it's your dad,"  Emma said, handing her friend the phone.

Lauren tucked the phone between her cheek and shoulder and continued working on the flower arrangement.  "Dad, what's up?  You never call during the day."

"I need a favor from you, Lauren.  I'm not sure I have any right to ask you this, but I'm asking anyway."

Lauren set down her scissors and shifted the phone into her hand.

"I'm speaking at Cornell next week, all week.  I'm speaking to the vet school at the beginning of the week, and to the animal science undergrads at the end of the week.  I might be gone the week after, too.  I've been talking to the Cazenovia horse program about speaking sometime.  It's short notice but they might be able to put me on for a presentation one day.  Even if I have to do it for free, it'll open up the door for them to bring me back as a paid speaker later."

Lauren turned away from the table and stared at the wall, waiting.  Whatever her father needed to ask her, she was sure he'd get to it.  Rambling wasn't like him, and the more he talked, the more nervous she got.

After a moment, he continued.  "The thing is, I've taken on this horse.  I didn't think much of it.  He's a young horse, with a young trainer, and I thought that was the problem.  Turns out, he's a little more stubborn than I'd counted on.  I don't want to leave him here for a week or more without some one I trust keeping an eye on his training."

Lauren said nothing, and her father plowed on.  "So I'm asking you to come out and monitor things.  Will you?

She took a breath.  "Dad, I haven't sat a horse in four years."

"I'm not asking you to ride him."

"Won't Myra be there?  Isn't that what you hired her for?"

"She will be.  She's never been on her own with a horse this difficult.  She doesn't think she can handle him."

"Sink or swim, Dad.  It's only a week"

There was silence for a while.  Finally, her father answered.  "I'd really appreciate it if you'd do this for me, Lauren.  Myra would appreciate the support, too."

Lauren sighed.  "I'll think about it, Dad.  You're getting soft in your old age."

He chuckled, and she hung up the phone.  Emma's head popped around the corner almost right away.  "What did he want?"

"He wants me to go out and provide moral support to Myra while he's away lecturing,"  Lauren answered, turning back to her arrangement.

Emma leaned against the doorway.  "Will you?"

Lauren shrugged.  "Not sure.  Dad says he's a difficult horse.  I don't see what I can do to help, really.  It's been years, you know?"

"It's like riding a bike,"  Emma shrugged.  "I think you should go."

Lauren peered over the top of the flowers.  "Of course you do."