

Chapter 3: Boots and Burgers

Jade showed up early the next day at the therapy centre. Her heart was strangely excited by the prospect of learning from Simon. Since her early years she had been engaged in learning to be a better rider, to achieve the best mark, and win rosettes at any equestrian event which she participated in. Secretly she was a little afraid, as she was now heading into uncharted territory.

The early morning light had set the dew-laced grass aglitter and she stood staring in mesmerized wonder at nature's display which stretched as far as the eye could see in the paddocks. The brightly coloured barn was deserted of humans and she stood shivering in the chill of the morning while her breath steamed. Inside the building horses nickered and neighed as they waited for their breakfasts.

As she headed into the barn where it was a bit warmer, she heard a truck drive up. Turning, she watched Simon park while rubbing her hands together to warm them. He stepped out, a phone pressed against his ear as he headed over. The person on the other end of the line abruptly hung up and Simon grit his teeth angrily. Taking a deep breath to calm himself he noticed Jade and smiled apologetically.

"Hi," she greeted.

"Hey, sorry to keep you waiting." He walked into the barn and gestured to her to follow.

"What's up?" she asked trying to keep the shiver from her voice.

"Oh, just difficult people." He shrugged and began scooping feed from a feed-bin into different containers. "Do you mind feeding the horses? The kids are still at school and usually I've fed the horses by now."

"No, I don't mind." Jade took some containers and looked at him questioningly. "Do they all get the same?"

"Pretty much, except for Samson. He gets an extra scoop. We're still trying to put some more weight on him," Simon explained and also picked up some containers. "This one is his. When you give it to him, just watch out, he can be a bit of a vicious eater."

"Okay. I'll be careful."

Jade finished feeding and when she came back to the tack area, Simon had made a cup of steaming coffee which he stuck into her cold hands.

"You looked like you could use this." He smiled, and Jade suddenly noticed the sad lines which edged his eyes. She was curious and wondered if the phone call had had anything to do with his sorrow, but she didn't know him well enough to ask. The warm coffee was welcome and she sighed happily as the warmth spread through her hands. She nodded saying, "Thanks."

For a few minutes they drank the warm liquid in quiet peacefulness.

“So what’s the plan for today?” she asked then, still warming her hands on the lukewarm, but now empty cup.

“We’re going to do some basics with a few of the retired horses and this afternoon when the kids come off from school we’ll take them all riding. Hope you’ve got lots of energy?” Simon took the empty cup and headed towards the stables. It took them a couple of minutes to lead the horses to their respective camps and throw in a ration of hay for each. Afterwards Jade was covered in fine grass cuttings. Without complaining she helped Simon with the basics of leading and mobility work with the horses. She felt assured by his quiet manner, and the way in which he led the horses had an authoritative element which reminded her of a general who simply expected his instructions to be followed and then they were.

By the end of the day, Jade was exhausted and upon returning to her hotel, she simply walked to her bed and fell down, asleep within a few winks.

The next morning when she arrived at the barn, the horses were already in their camps and Simon’s truck was idling in the yard. As she stepped from her taxi he opened the door of his truck and beckoned her over.

“Come on,” he called. “We’re going into the city today.”

“Oh?” She rushed over and pulled herself into the cab of the truck by the grab straps. Ignoring the sharp pain of grass splints in her hands she settled in as he drove off.

“Yup. If you want to continue working with the horses here, you’re going to need some better footwear and gloves. I need to get some medicines for the horses, and there’s a supply store near the vets. Thought we’d kill two birds with one stone.” Jade wondered at the sudden burst of conversation which Simon just launched her way. The previous day he had barely spoken, and she had come to see him as the strong but silent type.

“Okay, that’s wise, I suppose.” Jade tilted her head slightly and with a wicked light gleaming in her eyes asked, “But what if I don’t want to kill any birds?”

Simon turned to look at her, not sure whether she was unfamiliar with the expression or if she was pulling his leg and teasing. Seeing a smile hide in the curve of her lips he chuckled and shook his head gently.

“I had a mare like you once,” he said. “A lovely chestnut who just loved to challenge me.”

“What happened to her?”

“She ran off with a wild stallion.” He shrugged.

“Why didn’t you go and catch her?” Jade asked turning her head to look at the traffic which streamed off on the freeway which they had just joined.

“She was happy,” Simon said quietly. “I had no right to take that from her.”

“Not many people would let go of something that belonged to them.” Jade’s tone of voice had dropped and she was distracted by a lingering memory of James Li and the way in which he had gripped her wrist on the night before her flight to America.

“No one owns another living being. We are all of us free.” Simon’s reply made her shake off her memory and look at him closely. “As the saying goes: If you love something, set it free...”

The supply store was really a large farmers’ shop with an array of hunting goods, boots, gloves, and other miscellany of items which farmers and hunters might need. Jade looked about with interest as there were no such stores in Hong Kong which was a city driven by technology and the new age of improvements.

“Over here.” Simon took her by the hand to lead her to the ladies boots section. Jade was surprised at the gentle, but firm quality of his hand. Despite the work which he did with horses his hands were quite soft. Jade had to remind herself that he was also a surgeon, and he needed to have sure, but delicate hands to save lives.

The boots were in a variety of styles, all embossed with embroidery, and some even featured colourful patterns. The heels were wide, unlike her customary stiletto heels, and were definitely more practical for walking around the horse camps. Back home, she had a set of designer riding boots, and she never moved among the camps, as her groom would saddle her horse, warm him up, and bring him straight to the mounting block before she had a lesson.

Jade selected a pair of rather plain black boots and quickly fitted them, as the sizes in America were different to back home, before parading slightly for Simon’s approval.

“Well, what do you think?” she asked laughing at herself.

“Much better,” he agreed and walking over to a nearby stand he selected a pair of soft leather gloves and a baseball cap. He handed them to her and Jade obediently pulled them on, setting the cap low over her eyes. Smiling she struck a pose with her gloved hands resting on her hips as she looked up at him seductively from beneath the cap. Simon seemed to pause as the breath caught in his throat. Then clearing his throat he said, “That should protect you from the sun. Wouldn’t want you to be burnt to a crisp. You are quite fair skinned.”

Jade smiled demurely at his compliment, her heart skipping a beat. For some reason his approval meant more to her than it logically should.

After they had stopped at the vet, to buy a supply of assorted medicines and bandages for the horses, time had flown and it was already lunch time.

“You hungry?” Simon asked as he packed the box of medicines in the back of his truck.

“Starving!” Jade admitted, surprised by the sudden lurch of her stomach. She had neglected to eat breakfast this morning, as she had overslept and had rushed to catch a cab out to the barn.

“Well, a visit to America wouldn’t be complete without a good old fashion burger.” He drove to a local shopping area and Jade looked out the window at the giant M which triumphed above a large fast-food place. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that she knew what burgers were, as that food chain was also in Hong Kong. Never a fan of their cuisine she suppressed a little sigh. Simon followed her gaze and laughed then.

“Nope. Not there.” He drove past until they reached a small deli in an out of the way car park which overlooked the city.

“What makes this place different?” Jade asked.

“It’s not a shop. It’s family. On my mom’s side.” He led the way to the store where delicious aromas assaulted her and set her mouth to watering. Simon bantered with the serving staff and shook hands, while the chef, a large brute of a man, came out and picked him up in a huge bear hug. Eventually, Simon ordered them burgers, chips, and root beers.

Moving back outside Simon helped her climb onto the bonnet of his truck before settling in next to her. For a moment they looked out over the city which stretched from horizon to horizon below the bluff where they were parked. Taking the huge burger in her small hand she looked at it with some concern. Jade didn’t have any idea how she was going to fit it into her tiny mouth.

Simon laughed when he saw her perturbed expression and taking a pocket knife from his jeans, he held out his hand for her burger. She handed it to him and he swiftly quartered it, mumbling all the while, “This is a sin, I’m sure.” She looked at him quizzically and he explained, “Cutting a burger. Definitely a sin. Sure I’m going to make it to at least level six of hell!”

“I’m sure Dante will forgive you.” She laughed, took a juicy bite from the burger and, groaning with appreciation, she couldn’t help exclaiming around a mouthful of food, “It’s good!”

They enjoyed the magnificent view for several peaceful minutes. It was a clear day and Jade could see to the furthest horizons, it took her breath away and gave her a sense of hope. This was something which she had not recently enjoyed, as her future had seemed to be out of her hands.

“Gosh, it certainly is beautiful!” she said sighing happily. She was so enraptured with the view that she had not noticed that Simon was looking at her with watery eyes. He did not bother looking out at the view, it had been empty for too long where he was concerned.

“Yes, it is a beautiful sight,” he said softly, never taking his eyes off her.

Jade turned her head at his soft voice and blushed suddenly when she saw him looking at her, his gaze quickened her pulse and strangely drowned all sounds from the outside world. All that mattered in this moment was sitting here next to him, the tall cowboy who had within a few days become the centre of her world.