



Second Chance

Greta Krafsig

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Chapter One

When the car pulled to a stop before the stables and the petite brunette stepped out Jess froze in place with hooks still nestled in the bale of hay he was unloading from his truck. He knew who she was, hell, how could he forget her? Somehow he wasn't surprised to see her, her unpredictability was like a swarm of locusts, occurring once every six to seven years.

Shaking himself from his daze, Jess jumped from his truck, the bale of hay in his arms. If she wanted to talk to him about something she'd have to work for it. Ambling into the stables he pretended as if he'd never even noticed her. Of course, notice her he had, for she was a hard one to miss. The spiral brunette curls tumbling down her back with a set of lovable blue eyes and her perky upturned nose were almost irresistible; at least they had always been for him.

Megan watched as Jess strode away into the barn, feigning he didn't see her. Pushing curls out of her face she went around to the back seat and helped her son out. Dennis was mad at her when she woke him, so rudely interrupting his long nap. Rubbing his eyes with a grubby six-year-old fist he took her hand when she offered it to him and allowed himself to be led into the stable.

At the sound of the horses, Dennis' eyes and ears perked up, forgetting his exhaustion for the moment. When one of the horses reached out to get a closer look at him he giggled and let the horse snuff his hair, messing it into disarray.

Megan noticed nothing at the moment other than the man who was striding towards them. As he stopped in front of them she was surprised at his physique, it was more developed than she remembered. His bare shoulders and chest were littered with bronze muscles and they only accented the attractiveness of his tall and slender frame. Dark strands of his thick, black hair protruded as wisps from under his tan cowboy hat, matching the intensity of his dark eyes.

"I need a place to stay?" she knew the question would throw him off-guard but she had no other choice. When he didn't answer her, she chewed at her bottom lip. "Just for a little while anyways."

He shook his head and muttered to himself. "You always were trouble."

Megan smiled; she did have that effect on men, though she wasn't proud to admit it. "So, can I stay with you for a while or should I go to that motel I saw a few miles back?"

Wiping a hand across his forehead he turned, answering her as he moved away. "The house is unlocked."

Letting out a sigh of relief Megan squeezed Dennis' hand and steered him out of the stables towards the three-story house in front, refusing to listen the boy's protest about staying with the horses.

"When are we going back home momma?" Megan slipped Dennis' backpack on his back and pulled her suitcases from the trunk of the car. She was surprised her son hadn't asked the question sooner.

"You know we can't go back, Dennis. This area is nice. Once I get a job, we'll get a house of our own with a big backyard and maybe even a dog."

"I liked it better back home," he pouted crossing his small arms and glaring at her.

Megan bent to kiss her son's disheveled head as she directed him towards the porch. "I'm sure you'll like it here just as much as you liked it back in Kansas. Nothing will be too much different."

Dennis opened the door to the house. "Wow, this place is big!"

Megan smiled at the pure joy in his voice. Of course the house was bigger than their two bedroom apartment. "Wait until you see the upstairs." She told him.

He grinned and clapped his hands. "There's an upstairs?"

Megan let her suitcases hit the floor; she'd bring them up later.

"Come on, let me show you." Taking her son's hand she made her way through the living room and to the stairwell, racing him to the top. When Dennis was done giggling uncontrollably she grabbed his hand again and took him from room to room.

"Wait momma, there's another staircase." Without warning Dennis sprinted up the stairs to the third and final floor. Rolling her eyes Megan ran up after him, not wanting him to get into any trouble.

The master bedroom was littered with dirty blue jeans and sweat streaked tee shirts. A saddle lay on a wooden rack in one corner of the room gathering dust, the bed was unmade and the sheets lay in a tangle on the floor. Unlike all the other rooms that were untouched, clean, and neat, the master bedroom was a wreck. Megan found Dennis sitting at the room's bay window seat, looking out of the grime covered window to the layout of the ranch below.

"Dennis, we shouldn't be up here. From now on this room is off limits, understood?" Dennis took his face and pressed it to the glass, smearing the dirt with his nose and hands.

"Awe momma, you gotta see this." Megan glanced out the window—there *was* a spectacular view, better than she remembered—then grabbed Dennis by the back of his shirt and dragged him out of the room.

"Off limits, do you understand?" Dennis nodded, jumping down the stairs one by one and grinning each time the impact echoed throughout the second floor.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Which room do you want?"

Thinking for a second Dennis finally decided on a small bedroom that looked out towards the stables. The view was nothing compared to that of the master bedroom. "The blue one with the big fish on the wall."

"Go put your backpack on the bed. Momma's going to take the green room down the hall beside the bathroom." Dennis nodded and ran off towards his new bedroom.

"Where to do you want these?" Megan whirled, finding Jess behind her holding her suitcases.

"You didn't have to do that." Megan tried to take them from him but he only backed away from her.

"That's okay. Now, where do you want these?" He cocked an eyebrow and looked at her quizzically.

"The green room." She followed him as he carried the suitcases into her new room and then set them down on the queen-sized bed. He'd put his shirt on before coming in. The neck and arms of it were soaked in sweat and bits of hay stuck to his jeans but Megan didn't mind. The smell of a hard-working man and horses was a familiar one.

"I'm sorry about all this. I didn't know where else to go."

Jess pulled his hat off to run a hand through his damp hair, sprinkling her lightly with sweat. "I never expected you to come back," he said sadly. His dark hair hung limply in his face and behind his ears, in definite need of a haircut. It had always been unruly, one of the reasons he liked his hat so much.

"If I had anywhere else to go I wouldn't have—" Dennis ran into the room, wrapping his hands around the back of Megan's one leg and startling her.

"Well, are you going to introduce us or should I do it myself?" Jess smiled at the little boy hiding behind his mother. He looked about five or six with dark, curly brown hair and dark blue eyes.

"Jess this is Dennis. Dennis, this is Jess." Dennis looked up at Jess and smiled, one of his front teeth was missing.

"Hey Dennis, nice to meet you." Jess held out a hand. The boy, finding the prospect of a handshake so tempting, forgot his fright and stepped forward to place his little hand in Jess's—huge by comparison.

"Hello. Can I see the horses now?"

Jess eyed Megan until she gave a hesitant nod of approval. "Sure. Your Mom will even make us lunch while we're gone. Won't you Mom?" Jess said with a grin.

Megan glanced at her watch. It was coming on twelve thirty. "All right. I guess that's the least I can do." Megan rolled her eyes and watched Dennis follow Jess down the stairs.

Chapter Two

"Wow! How many horses do you have?" Jess glanced down at the beaming boy skipping to keep up with his long strides.

"Let's see...I have Rusty, Tonka, Bronco, Sunny, Jim, and Dallas. That would make a total of six in all." Jess led Dennis down the double row of stalls, introducing him to each horse by name and lifting him up to see the ones he couldn't look into even while standing on tiptoe.

"I like that one." Dennis said pointing to a small sorrel gelding going into his mid teens just this year. The graying gelding was the oldest in the stables and the smallest, his withers standing at about Jess's chest. To the boy Tonka was most likely the least intimidating.

"This is Tonka. I bet you'd like to brush him." Dennis nodded his head and smiled before answering with an excited yes.

Jess put Tonka's halter on and took him out of his stall, leading him to a pair of cross-ties. After showing Dennis where the brushes were in the tack room and instructing him in the basics of grooming—watch your toes—Jess saddled up his favorite roan Quarter Horse and rode out of the stables to water his stock of cattle in the far pastures on the edge of his property.

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Megan found her son brushing a brown horse, what she considered to be an enormous animal for a small child to be around, and talking to him happily. And as for Jess, he was nowhere in sight. Stopping a few feet away from Dennis and the horse Megan called out, making him turn.

"Dennis, where'd Jess go?" Dennis shrugged and came to Megan, grabbing her hand and trying to tug her closer.

"Come meet Tonka Momma. He's really nice and he likes it when you scratch him behind the ears but I can't really reach him there." Megan gave her son a shaky smile but would come no closer.

"I'm sure he is sweetheart but Momma doesn't want to get dirty." Almost sure Dennis knew she was lying, Megan was relieved when the sound of hooves drew their attention to the far end of the barn.

Jess ducked atop his roan to clear the stable's doorframe, bringing his gelding to a stop a few feet in front of a petrified Megan.

"Good God, what is that thing?"

Jess swung out of the saddle, laughing even as he pulled the saddle from the roan's back. "This is Rusty. You have nothing to worry about, he's nothing but a big baby."

"Please tell me that's the biggest you have here." Jess smiled and traded the roan's bridle for its pale green halter.

"He sure is. He's my biggest boy."

Megan felt her heart calm down a notch as Jess released the roan into a pasture adjoining the stables.

"Promise me right now you won't let my son near any horse other than this one." Megan gestured to Tonka who was sniffing Dennis' hair as the young boy looked on.

"Fine."

Megan sighed, even as she felt the beginnings of a headache brewing. "Good. I came to tell you lunch is ready. I hope you like tuna salad sandwiches. It was all I could do to find a loaf of bread that wasn't moldy or green."

Jess released Tonka from his cross ties and threw the gelding's lead rope over its neck. "Sure, I'll be right there." Reaching down Jess caught Dennis under the arms and lifted him onto Tonka's back. "As soon as I've taken your kid for a short ride. For all that brushing he deserves it." Jess swung up behind Dennis. Seated bareback on the sorrel gelding his movements were fluid and confident.

"Jess!! Are you crazy?" Megan clenched her hands, trying to hide her fear. She couldn't believe she was letting Dennis on a horse.

"Thanks Mommy." Dennis beamed and held on to the horse's mane to steady himself.

"Jess if anything happens to him I'll have your head!" Megan watched Jess turn and smile at her. He tipped his cowboy hat in her direction before urging the horse forwards.

"Can we go faster?" Dennis asked as they started their second loop around the fair sized paddock converted into a near-professional riding ring. Before Jess had a chance to answer Tonka broke into a smooth trot, reading the young boy's mind and responding to his question with no urging.

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Dennis ran into the house excitedly. He waved his arms madly in the air and talked a steady stream of nonsense. Megan had to grab him by the arms and repeat his name several times before he stopped, took a deep breath, and started to talk normally.

"That was so much fun Momma! He says I can ride Tonka again after lunch but by myself this time. You should have seen us, we went really fast!" Jess came in the house then. With his hat in one hand he wiped sweat off his forehead with the other.

"How fast is fast?" Megan couldn't help herself she just had to know. Fear was already climbing from the pit of her stomach and spreading throughout the rest of her body.

Jess chuckled and plopped his hat back on top of his mop of thick hair. "A slow canter, nothing you should be worried about. It's not like I own a whole line of racehorses and plopped him on the fastest one. I run a cattle ranch...."

"If you let him on that horse again today I don't want a single hair missing from his head when he gets back." Megan said moving to set three plates on the table to hide her growing anxiety.

"You worry too much. Tonka knows what he's doing. He won't do anything the boy can't handle." Jess flipped a chair around backwards and took a seat at the kitchen table. Giggling, Dennis turned his chair around backwards and did the same, sitting on his knees to reach the table.

"No sir, that's not how we sit at the table." Megan shook her head and started to pull Dennis from his seat.

"He's doing it momma!" The child protested.

Letting out a sigh, Megan grabbed Jess's sandwich out of his hands before he could take a bite.

"What was that for?" Jess cried out in protest.

"Do you know what kind of an example you're setting?"

Jess shrugged when she motioned to the way he was sitting in his chair. "Yeah, so? This is my house. Or have you forgotten?"

Megan set the sandwich on the place and carried it towards the sink. "And I made this sandwich, or have *you* forgotten? If you want to eat anything you'll sit in your chair like you're supposed to and set a good example for my son." Caught in his own game Jess rolled his eyes and turned his chair around to sit in it properly.

"Thank you." Megan put Jess's plate back on the table.

"Gee kiddo, your Mom doesn't let you do anything fun." Jess directed the remark at Dennis who had reluctantly turned his chair back around.

"Tell me about it," he said before taking a big bite out of his sandwich and getting mayonnaise all over his mouth and cheek.

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"I have to fix some fences in the east pasture, so if you need us that's where we'll be."

Megan set the last dish in the sink and turned the water on to start rinsing them. "I'm serious about watching him Jess. He doesn't have any horse experience. If anything should happen to him..."

There came a heavy silence between the both of them. Dennis looked from one to another as he wondered what was going on that he was too young to understand.

Finally Jess shook his head and stood up. "He'll be fine. Tonka will teach him everything he needs to know." Jess opened the back door for Dennis and he started chattering to him happily.

"Jess!" Megan called before he could duck outside.

"What now?"

"Make sure he has a helmet."

Jess nodded and the screen door made a thwacking sound as it springs bounced back into place.

Finishing up the dishes Megan forced herself to go upstairs and unpack. If things worked out like she hoped they would she'd be back on her feet and in a house of her own in no time. After all her stuff was unpacked and all of Dennis' things put away Megan got herself a glass of cold water and plopped her big butt down on the living room couch.

Surveying the room she concluded it hadn't changed much since she'd last seen and decorated it. It was still masculine looking with a sprinkle of her feminine touch. The furniture was comfortable dark leather, the sofa and matching chairs a deep brown. The carpets were a light beige, the walls all a bright white with sheer white curtains, and the ceiling a dark red. The natural wood of the floor moldings tied it all together. Hints of color were thrown here and there around the room, a red pillow, a red lamp, and a beautiful red and beige throw rug completed the mood of the room. The purpose of the room was to be attractive, yet durable against the unwanted dirt that would track inside from a whole day out on the ranch.

Needing something to calm her nerves Megan jumped up and started to pace. Of course she'd have to tell him why she was really here later tonight. Until then she needed some sort of distraction before she pulled her hair out of her head. Opening a kitchen cabinet Megan was happy to find a bucket full of cleaning supplies as well as a mop and broom. This would provide exactly the type of distraction she needed. She rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

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"This is a saddle." Jess put the saddle on Tonka's back and quickly cinched it. The arrival of Megan and Dennis had set him back a few hours on his daily ranch chores. If he were lucky he'd have them all done before ten tonight.

"I didn't have one of those the last time I was on him." Jess adjusted the stirrups to fit the boy. If it weren't for Lauren he wouldn't even have a saddle small enough for Dennis.

"We'll I'd let you ride that way again but I think your Mom would have a heart attack." Trading Tonka's halter for a bridle Jess patted the friendly gelding on the shoulder before picking Dennis up and putting him on the horse's back.

"You put your feet in here: these are called stirrups. These are the reins. You always hold them with both hands like this." Jess put Dennis' hand on the reins, adjusting them slightly.

"How do I get him to go?"

"You touch him with the heels of your shoes. He'll follow beside Bronco and me. All you need to do is work on staying in that saddle and holding on to those reins, understand?"

Dennis nodded.

"Good." Jess went to Bronco who stood patiently waiting for him and mounted, turning the black horse around to face Dennis.

"Do I ask him to go now?"

Jess nodded and watched as Dennis strained to touch Tonka's sides with his heels.

"Buddy, if you can't reach just ask him to walk with your voice."

Dennis strained to reach again and brushed Tonka with the very tip of his toes. "Tonka, walk." The gelding gave a deep huff in both exasperation and mild annoyance but started forward, placing one foot placidly in front of the other.

"Now give him a pat and tell him he's a good boy."

Dennis leaned forward and rubbed Tonka's neck.

"Watch your reins, you don't wanna to drop 'um." Jess brought Bronco, a patient black gelding, up beside Tonka and matched the older horse's walk. Telling Dennis to sit up and push his feet further forward Jess coached Dennis on the basics of riding. Slowly but surely the boy caught on, riding with more confidence as they neared the east paddock.

"Can I try going a little faster?" Dennis gave Tonka a friendly pat on the neck then rubbed the horse behind the ears.

"Sit back a little and push your feet forward some."

Doing as he was instructed Dennis shifted a bit in his saddle.

Clicking his tongue Jess urged Bronco into a trot. "Ask him to trot now buddy."

"Tonka trot." The older sorrel gelding threw his head up and broke into a rough trot.

"Tonka ho!" Jess pushed Bronco forwards, trying to get to the boy in time. Dennis was so intent on trying to steer the horse he didn't even notice he was slipping until he actually hit the ground. Jess jumped from his horse and came to the little boy.

"What happened?" He asked, looking at his muddy pants and hands. He didn't even seem the least bit shocked after his fall.

"You fell off. Didn't expect that to happen, now did you?" Jess helped Dennis up out of the mud and put him back on the horse. "Keep it at a walk for the rest of the day bud. We'll work on going faster another time."

Dennis nodded and told Tonka to walk as Jess started off again on Bronco.

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"What the *hell* happened?" Megan ran her eyes over Dennis, standing covered in mud in the kitchen.

"He had a little fall. No harm done, he just needs a bath." Jess let his hat drop to the table. For some reason he couldn't find the hat hanger that was usually beside the door.

"Fell, he fell! I *knew* I shouldn't have let him go! What if it happened all over again? I don't want him on that thing ever again! Do you understand me?"

"Oh lighten up Megan. Everyone falls off at some point in time."

"Just because you don't value the safety of a child's life—"

“Screw you! It was your fault just as much as it was mine! After all these years you *still* think I’m the only one to blame?” Jess glared at the petite woman before him then grabbed his hat and was back out the front door.

“Momma, I’m scared.” Dennis squeaked as he wrapped his arms around her leg. “He’s just like daddy,” he whispered shaking in fright.

Megan let out a shaky breath and held back tears. “No baby, he’s nothing like daddy. Jess would never hurt us.” She rubbed at Dennis’s tangled hair and kissed his forehead lightly. “Let’s get you a bath, huh buddy?”

The little boy nodded and took her hand as she led him upstairs to the bathroom. As usual Dennis was thrilled to be in the bathtub. Megan pulled his boats out of his backpack and let him play with them as he splashed and squirted water about. Between his splashing Megan found a way to wash his hair and his back under his protest.

“It’s in my eyes!” He cried shutting his eyes tight as she poured the water down over his head.

Megan laughed at his antics as she took a towel and wiped the water from his face. “Okay bud, you’re all done.”

“Awww, can I play a little longer?”

Megan smiled, “Five more minutes.” Of course five minutes turned into fifteen as Megan sat on the toilet in the bathroom running thoughts through her head. It was Dennis, standing wet and cold in front of her that finally snapped her back into the real world.

“Burr, I’m cold now.” His teeth chattered as he let her wrap him in an oversized towel and dry him off. She led him back to his bedroom and pulled open his backpack to find him clean clothes.

“Okay, I’m gonna go make dinner. Remember, the third floor is off limits.” Megan drilled into the little boy as she pulled on his superman pajamas and saw him settled on the bed surrounded by the rest of his toys.

“Okay Momma,” he said already lost in his imagination as he picked up two of his action figures and started pounding them together in mock battle.

Dinner that night was as hard to whip up as lunch. Megan found herself exasperated at the emptiness of the refrigerator – a pack of beers, some ketchup and mayonnaise, a moldy onion – and the equally well-stocked pantry. It had to have been sheer luck that she’d found the canned tuna, under the sink of all places, and a few pieces of mold free bread. Now she found herself in the same predicament, what to make?

“Ugh,” she said frustrated. At last she found a box of noodles and some canned tomato juice, enough to make some semblance of a dinner. “I guess this means I get to go shopping tomorrow.”

When she called Dennis down to dinner the little boy was already yawning and half asleep. He hadn’t even had half of the pasta in his bowl before he fell asleep on the one elbow he had resting on the tabletop. Megan found herself grinning at the sight before she stood on weary legs and managed to carry him up to bed. The little boy smiled slightly as she kissed him goodnight and tucked him under the covers.

Back downstairs Megan cleaned up what she could, but left a bowl in the microwave for Jess. Once she couldn't find anything else to clean in the kitchen she wandered back into the living room and sat down on the couch, turning on the television to wait.

It was nearly midnight when she heard him come back in. The sound of his heavy boots on the kitchen floor woke her from her light doze and brought her head around to watch him.

"Creatures of habit all right," he said as he eyed the bowl in the microwave. Opening the fridge he took out a beer and kicked off his muddy boots at the same time.

Megan winced as the amount of mud that splattered the kitchen floor that she'd mopped and scrubbed so diligently. It was then that she saw him looking at her.

"You never did like me taking my boots off in the kitchen." He muttered as he came in to take a seat next to her on the couch.

"And now you're getting the couch all dirty," she frowned, wiping some of the dirt from the knee of his worn jeans.

"Is he mine?"

"No," Megan answered softly.

"Good." Jess replied, leaning back into the couch and draining his beer.

"I married Chris after I left." She fidgeted, trying to find the words to explain.

"You don't have to explain." He said breaking the silence and tension between them at the same time. "Just tell me why you're here."

"I—" She stopped, the sadness welling up inside her. "It started out okay between us. He was a lot like you; I guess that's what drew me to him. Dennis was three when the trouble started. Every night he'd come home drunk. When I finally approached him about it he only yelled and screamed at me, waving his arms in the air. But it got worse. I told him if he didn't stop I'd leave him...and he hit me. He threatened to hurt Dennis if I told anyone, if I did anything. I was too scared to go for help. Instead I let him beat me again, and again, and again.

"Dennis turned six three weeks ago. We had a big party and everything. Chris was better then he had been lately. He was actually sober for the party that morning, but he left right after I cut the cake. When he came back home Dennis was still hyper from the earlier excitement. He was doing what all little boys do, running around and playing with his new toys. There was some cake left over and he'd been begging me for another piece ever since the party was over. I guess Chris just had enough. He told Dennis to sit down and shut up. I was in the bedroom straightening up when I heard Dennis scream. I ran out and saw him holding his hand over his bloody nose. Chris was yelling at him and coming for him again when I jumped in the way..."

Her eyes filled with tears as she looked at Jess. "I didn't know where else to go. If I'd gone to a friend he'd have found me and dragged me back home. I didn't tell anyone where I was going, not even my mother. I'm sure he was furious when he came home last week and saw that we were gone."

"Who else knows about me besides your mother?"

“No one.”

“Then you should be safe here.”

“I promise I won’t stay long. I’ll start looking for a job and a place tomorrow—”

Jess sighed and stood. “This house is as much yours as it is mine. You’re welcome to stay as long as you need to.” He held out a hand and pulled Megan to her feet. “I’m going to bed, and so should you.”

She nodded and followed him upstairs. She checked in on Dennis before she returned to her room and changed into a pair of pajamas. As soon as she put her head on her pillow, she was fast asleep.

Chapter Three

Jess awoke to her screams, and for a terrible second he thought he was reliving the past all over again. He thundered down the stairs, nearly killing himself, and came into her room short of breath. Dennis sat crying beside her on the bed trying to wake her up as she continued to scream.

“Megan!” Jess called, taking hold of her shoulders and shaking her.

Her eyes snapped open wild in fright and she hit at his face, nearly taking his eye out. Jess grabbed at her flailing arms and held them while she continued to scream and fight him.

“Megan! Calm down, it’s Jess. Megan!”

Dennis’s small sobs punctured the air as he crawled closer to her and tried to touch her face. “Momma, momma its okay.”

Slowly Megan came around, tears filling her eyes as she realized where she was, and Jess released her. She pushed herself upright in bed and grabbed Dennis, hugging the small boy to her chest and kissing him on the head as she rocked him in her lap and tried to stop his tears.

“Hush baby, its okay. Momma’s okay.” She looked up at Jess and gave him a weak smile as she continued to rock her son back and forth in her arms.

“I take it you wake up like this a lot.” Jess frowned as he watched the two of them. They were truly a pitiful sight.

Megan gave a sudden laugh and wiped the tears from her son’s eyes. “It’s okay Dennis. See, momma’s all right.”

“I thought daddy was hurting you,” the little boy cried and hugged her tightly around the neck. “I don’t want daddy to hurt you.”

“Don’t worry honey. Daddy won’t hurt me – or you – ever again. I promise.”

Silently Jess slipped out of the room. Back upstairs he rummaged through a pile of his dirty jeans and picked out one of the cleanest in the bunch. Pulling them on over his boxers he repeated the same search for a shirt. He could still hear the two of them in her room as he went downstairs to make coffee.

He could still feel the adrenaline rushing though his body as he pulled his muddy boots on and waited for the coffee to finish brewing. The pot wasn’t even half done when he poured himself a cup and then was out the front door.

The horses looked up at him with groggy eyes as he appeared and made his way to the feed room. "I know I'm early guys, but I doubt you'll mind much." After feeding each of the six horses Jess finished his coffee before he let the horses out to pasture for the morning. They'd remain out until early afternoon when it was too chilly for them to comfortably stay outside. Then he'd pull them out one at a time as he worked around the ranch.

The patter of small feet came to his ears as he threw hay down from the loft. Looking down he saw little Dennis peering up at him. "Watch out." Jess called before he pushed another bale overboard. Climbing down the loft ladder he found the little boy sitting on one of the overturned bales.

"Momma said I'm supposed to stay with you while she goes to the store."

Jess smiled at the red-eyed boy and picked up one of the hay bales he'd tossed down. "You wanna help?"

"Yeah!" The boy jumped up and grabbed hold of the hay Jess was carrying. "Where do we put it?" He asked curiously.

"Right over here by the wall." Jess watched in amusement as the boy held on to the hay bale as he carried it over to the wall.

"I'll get the next one!" Dennis called, dropping hold of the hay and going for another bale in the aisle. "Hmm, its kinda heavy," he called as he strained to lift the weight but couldn't.

"Let me give you a hand." Jess smiled as he picked up the hay and carried it again to the wall with the boy's help.

"This is fun!" Dennis said as he raced to get another hay bale.

When all the hay was stacked along the wall Dennis wiped his hands on his jeans and looked up at Jess with expectant eyes. "Now what do we do next?"

"Now," Jess replied moving to get a wheelbarrow and shovel, "I get to clean out the stalls." He handed the boy a shovel that nearly toppled him over. "Let me show you."

Jess pulled the wheelbarrow before the first stall and showed Dennis how to pick up the poop and put it inside.

"It stinks!" Dennis said wrinkling up his nose.

"Well your poop stinks also." Jess said with a laugh and ruffled the boy's hair.

He giggled. "I guess so."

Once the stalls were done for the morning Jess showed Dennis how to put a flake of hay in each stall and refill the water bucket for each horse.

"Now what do we do?" Dennis asked.

"Now we get to clean tack."

"What's tack?"

“It’s the horse’s saddle and bridle.”

“Oh.”

Dennis skipped along behind Jess’s longer strides into the tack room where Jess showed him how to pour solution into a cloth and then wipe off the saddle.

“You do a lot of work!” Dennis said as he yawned and wiped at his eyes with the back of a hand.

“Why don’t you go lay down over there on the couch?” Jess pointed to the old leather couch on other end of the tack room. Of course it was one of the ones Megan had hated and wanted him to get rid of that he’d never found the heart to. And so it had ended up in here. “You know, just to rest for a while.”

The little boy nodded and scrambled up onto one big cushion. Within moments he lie fast asleep. Jess chuckled and finished cleaning the saddles and bridles he’d used the day before.

“I knew he’d fall asleep for you.” Megan said startling Jess who hadn’t heard her approach. “He never gets up this early.”

She watched the little boy as he lie sleeping and a sad expression crossed her face, one that he’d seen before. Slowly she sat down on the couch beside the boy and smoothed his hair back with her hand. “We were so young, the two of us.” She gave him a sad smile as he stood up to trade one saddle for another. “Maybe if we’d tried harder—”

“You left me. Remember?” Jess attacked the saddle with a harsh rubbing of the cloth along the dirty areas. “I *was* trying.”

Megan sighed and stood, scooping the little boy into her arms. “I’m going to go make breakfast. I’ll come get you when it’s ready.” She waited a second for a reply but when she didn’t receive one she left as silently as she’d come.

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Back inside Dennis awoke to the smell of breakfast being placed on the kitchen table. He stretched his little arms and legs before he jumped off the living room couch and took a seat at the kitchen table.

“Yum,” he whispered as he picked up his toast and took a bite.

“Dennis Norman, you put that down right now!”

“But I’m hungry!”

“No excuses. Go run out to the stables and tell Jess that breakfast is ready. Once he comes in then you can eat.”

Dennis grumbled as he left the kitchen and ran for the stables. “Jess!” he called as he patted one of the horses on the nose through a pasture fence. “Jess, are you in there?” When there was no reply Dennis turned to run back for the house only he collided right into a little girl.

“Ouch! That hurt!” The little girl snapped at him as she ran a hand over her sore forehead.

“Well you ran into me.” Dennis said rubbing his forehead as well.

“Is Uncle Jess in there?” The little girl asked peering past his shoulder and trying to make out the shadows in the barn.

“He didn’t answer when I called for him.”

“Ooh, then I know where he is. Come on!” The little girl grabbed Dennis’s hand and tugged him along. Because he was curious, and because he was only six years old, Dennis followed.

Together the two ducked under one of the pasture fences and raced along side by side. It was the girl who was the first to spot the horse and the figure stooped over the wire fence.

“There he is!” She called to Dennis as she sprinted past him. “Uncle Jesse!!” She called running up to him and throwing herself arms his neck.

“Oh my goodness!” Jess laughed, pulling the girl into a bear hug. “You’re getting way, way too big for that.” He pattered her nose with kisses until he caught sight of Dennis and winked at him.

“Where’s your mom Lauren?” The little girl held on to Jess as he stood and shifted her to his hip.

“She’s at the house. She brought you breakfast! Blueberry muffins just like you like them. They’re still hot from the oven even.”

“You guys got back early then. When did you get home?”

“No, we still got back last night. Mom got up extra early to make you muffins. She said you’d be sad if you didn’t get them.”

Jess chuckled as he sat the girl on the saddle of his horse.

“Did you two meet each other yet?” Jess’s eyes wandered from one child to the other.

“Nope. We were too busy looking for you.” Lauren said gathering the horse’s reins and then leaning down to pet it on the shoulder.

“Lauren, this is Dennis. Dennis, this is Lauren.”

Dennis gave a shy smile as he edged closer.

“How about I give you two a ride back to the house huh? Then we’ll see about those blueberry muffins.”

~*~

“Oh, hello.”

Megan spun at the sound of a woman’s voice. She was a large woman, not obese, but big boned. Her hair was as thick and curly as Megan’s own hair, but an auburn reddish color. A few faint freckles speckled her cheeks, and only enhanced the color of her large green eyes and long dark lashes. Although she was thick waisted, she was quite curvaceous and in no way unattractive.

“Hi,” Megan responded uncertainly.

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