



P R A N C I N G

WITH

Daddy

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Prancing With Daddy
(Pet Play by the Lake)

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Potential triggers

Off-page humiliation from a previous partner, bullying, off-page homophobia. This story contains safe, sane and consensual kink between two adults.

Dedication

I'd like to give my heartfelt thanks to the wonderful authors who jumped in head-first with me on this series. I appreciate the extra time and care you took to create new stories in my world.

Authors Note

Pet Play by the Lake originated in *Pretty Puppy* (Command & Care 6). The books in this series take place the following year at the next event, but each book can be read as a standalone and without reading *Pretty Puppy*. However, characters make small appearances in all the books and there are different event activities and types of pets in each story. So, if you want to

truly immerse yourself in the world, then be sure to grab them all!

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Can a younger Daddy filled with sunshine encourage a grouchy boy to let his inner pony fly free?

A year has passed since the annual Pet Play by the Lake LGBTQ charity event in Tahoe. It's time for another exciting weekend as pets from around the world arrive in search of a new Master or to show off their skills with their dream Daddy. As always, the no-nonsense Shane is tasked with overseeing the festivities.

Cody has dreamed of attending the pet play event for years. However, his duties as a ranch owner in Montana make it difficult to take time off for himself. One of his side hustles is making leather harnesses, collars and leashes for the kink community. What better excuse to attend than by renting a booth for the long weekend?

Once Cody spots the stern, older Shane, he recognizes in him a boy who needs to let go, to prance and romp. He also hopes Shane will give himself over to a firm, but loving handler. Cody would happily apply for the job, but his advances are consistently rebuffed.

Will Shane's scars from a humiliating relationship prevent him from finding the happiness he secretly craves with the carefree Cody? And will a long-distance relationship prove impossible for them to sustain?

Chapter One

Shane checked another to-do item off his clipboard then tapped his pen against his chin. He'd meticulously retyped his daily list the night before to account for the last-minute registrations. Every year the Pet Play by the Lake charity event expanded with more attendees, activities and demonstrations.

While Shane wasn't prone to outward displays of emotion, the fact that the LGBTQ advocacy group was receiving more help each year certainly made him happy on the inside.

"Shane? I need your help with a few things."

Micki, the head receptionist for the Mountain Lake Resort where the event was held, waved him over. Even though registration wasn't taking place until Friday morning, plenty of attendees had already arrived. Here it was, Thursday afternoon, and in some ways, it felt as if the festivities had already begun. The pet play gathering had received so much attention in recent years, that non-event resort guests didn't bother trying to book a room at the popular Lake Tahoe destination while it was being held.

"What can I help you with, Micki?" Shane stood at the ready, clipboard clutched to his chest, always available to help wherever he could. Everything coming off without a hitch was something he took pride in, a skill that Lee, the Mountain Lake

Resort owner and founder of the event, had explicitly hired him for.

Micki brushed her bangs back from her forehead. “Well, I need the list of last-minute attendees to input before—”

Shane whipped the paper he’d been working on from the clipboard then handed it to her. “I had to verify that all the online applications were updated before I provided you with the latest information.”

Micki chuckled. “Thanks, Shane. I had a feeling that was the case.”

The website for the Pet Play event and registration remained separate from the resort, since the hotel operated as a business and the event was a non-profit.

Shane nodded. “I apologize for not getting the list to you sooner, but there was a flurry of last-minute applications when I arrived this morning.” He sucked in a deep breath through his nostrils. “I’ve learned my lesson for next year, so I assure you it won’t happen again.”

Micki’s eyebrows shot up. “Lesson?”

“I assumed getting to my office by six a.m. would be sufficient time, as it’s Thursday and so close to the beginning of the event. I made the rash determination that there would be little to no new applicants. But clearly, I underestimated how popular pet play has become. I stand corrected.”

As it was, Lee had needed to build another banquet hall the year before to accommodate the increased crowds. This year, he’d also constructed a new stage for the Best of Show

competition. At this rate, Lee would have to build a new resort altogether.

Micki patted his arm and he tensed. Random touches weren't his favorite. "You're doing a magnificent job, hon. Lee wouldn't be able to do this without you."

Shane coughed into his fist then fixed his gaze on the clipboard. "I...er... I'm sure he... He has Ash..." He shifted his balance to the other foot. "Let me see if there's anything else..."

Micki snapped her fingers. "Ooh, yes. Thanks for reminding me. Two of the vendors have arrived already and were wondering if it would be possible to drop off their things in the seller room. They don't need to set up, they only want to unload their vehicles."

Shane ground his teeth. Not following the rules was unacceptable, made him uncomfortable in his own skin. On the other hand, Lee had counseled him the year before to adopt a more flexible attitude when it came to making everything perfect. A shudder ran through Shane's body.

Rules were in place for a *reason*.

He sighed. But this was Lee's resort, his event and Lee was his boss. Which meant if he didn't follow *Lee's* rules, he was behaving just as badly.

"All right." Shane drew his eyebrows together. "Where are the offenders—" He shook his head. "Vendors?"

Micki pressed her lips together before speaking. "Waiting by the door to the seller room. I told them I'd need to discuss it with you first."

Shane gave a sharp nod then checked his watch. Ash, Lee's pup, was supposed to have met up with him exactly four minutes ago. Nothing irked him more than lateness. Actually, plenty of things irked him. But his viewpoint was justified. For most of his forty-two years, he'd strived to be responsible, forthright, and reliable. As an army brat, his father had taught him well.

Shane glanced around the sizable, open-air lobby of the resort, scanning the area to see if Ash had become distracted by someone, and was busily chatting away rather than performing his duties as Shane's assistant. He narrowed his eyes at a large group of young men who were gathered around the enormous river rock fireplace, talking and laughing excitedly. They seemed like Ash's type of crowd.

He rubbed his forehead. Perhaps he was being too judgmental. Ash was more personable than he was by leaps and bounds, and everyone who had traveled from the far reaches of the world to enjoy themselves at a pet play event, needed someone less...regimented.

Shane continued to peruse the lobby to see if Ash was nearby. Handling the vendor situation was scratching under his skin, his heart rate increasing a tad as the seconds ticked by without a resolution.

A row of planters filled with a variety of Ficus and palms lined one section of the lobby. The indoor foliage and trees separated the gathering space from the bank of elevators and halls leading to the café on one side, and the fine dining room on the other. The containers were composed of rough

river rock, the same material that made up the massive stone fireplace wall on the opposite side of the lobby.

As Shane's frustration grew, his gaze landed on a small, dark-haired man darting behind a voluminous Ficus at the end of the row. Shane frowned. Why was he hiding?

He marched in the man's direction. He wasn't about to put up with anyone being sneaky, or who was up to no good. One of the hallmarks of the event was that it was a safe space, and Shane intended to keep it that way.

As he neared the plant concealing the young man, two other young guys strolled past. They snickered behind their hands then pointed in the plant-hider's direction. Shane's stomach clenched, anger gripping his heart. He paused to take a few calming breaths. Even if he had good reason to bristle when someone was mocked by others, he needed to gather more intel before making assumptions about the situation.

Remaining professional was vital.

Forcing himself not to respond to the bullies for the moment, he continued to make his way toward the huge plant. When he reached his target, the dark-haired man shrank in on himself. Something about him seemed familiar.

"Mason? Is that you?"

Shane remembered the shy pup from the training sessions he'd taken before the previous year's event. He could've sworn Mason had found a partner, someone who should be taking care of his scared boy. But perhaps he was getting Mason mixed up with someone else. There were so

many attendees to keep track of, and he was more of a logistics guy rather than the social one.

The young man peered from behind a leafy stalk. “Yes, sir. I’m Mason. Umm...”

Mason disappeared behind the plant again. Shane glanced around the lobby some more. Where the hell *was* Ash? He and Mason had built up a great rapport back when Ash was pretending to be a puppy play trainer. If ever he needed Ash’s help, it was now. Calming shy, frightened subs wasn’t his area of expertise.

“Hey!” Ash’s breathless voice sounded behind him. “Sorry I’m late.”

Shane whirled around, almost fainting from relief. “I was becoming concerned.”

Ash swiped the back of his hand across his forehead. “I can only run so fast on these short legs.” He frowned. “And anyway, I’m what. Like, five minutes late? I had to make sure the caterers for Friday’s welcome party didn’t forget to have Kosher options. Remember how they goofed up last year, but Lee gave them another chance?” Ash snorted. “Good thing I checked.” He rolled his eyes. “Sure enough, they didn’t have any selections on their final list.”

Shane frowned and he yanked his phone from the pocket of his khakis. “This is unacceptable. Should I make a call? Inform Lee?”

Ash held up his hands. “Take a breath, big guy. I handled it.”

Shane clenched his jaw, fighting the urge to take over or to comment on Ash's effectiveness. This was his fifth year as event manager—and while he loved Lee and appreciated the opportunity to live vicariously through the people attending the event—sometimes the responsibility of it all was overwhelming.

Shane gave Ash a curt nod. “That should be fine.”

Ash smirked. “It's okay, Shane. You can disagree with me. Daddy Lee said it was good that I don't get my way all the time.” He grinned. “Even when I'm right.”

Shane rubbed his forehead with thumb and forefinger. The day had barely begun and already a headache was forming. He didn't have time to banter with Ash. Not when he had the vendor issue to contend with.

Ash peered past his shoulder. “Is there someone hiding in that plant?”

A small voice from behind the Ficus responded. “Hi, Ash. It's Mason.”

Ash gasped. “Oh my God! What are you doing hiding behind there?”

Mason glanced between Shane and Ash. “It's...I...there was...”

Ash joined Mason behind the plant. “Hey, it's all right. Whatever it is, we'll figure it out. You should've texted me.”

Mason stepped closer to Ash. “I did, but you didn't answer.”

Shane checked his watch. He hated that poor Mason was having trouble, but there was still so much to do.

“I didn’t?” Ash plucked his phone from his jeans pocket. “Oh crap. I forgot to turn my notifications back on. Lee and I were...” He cleared his throat. “Err...anyway. What can I do to help?” He glanced at Shane then back at Mason. “I sort of need to meet with Shane right now...”

While Shane *did* need to sit down with Ash for an event update meeting, he also had to deal with the pushy vendors. Why couldn’t people follow simple instructions? It would make everything so much easier.

“Ash!” They all turned in the direction of reception where Micki was waving wildly. “I’ve got a situation with a group of pups! Can you help me, please?”

Ash bit his lip then regarded Shane with pleading eyes. “Don’t be mad. But I don’t think I can meet with you right now.” He turned to Mason, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Will you be okay for a few minutes while I go take care of this? I’ll be back as quick as I can.”

Mason paled a bit then nodded. “I can do that. I hate that I’m being such a bother.”

Ash gave him a quick hug. “No, you’re not, hon. I promise.” Ash shrugged at Shane. “Sorry. But at least I’m not goofing off, right?”

Shane sighed. “I have to handle something else anyway. And once you’ve handled everything on your plate, we’ll meet up and grab that coffee.” Shane pointed a finger at him. “Make sure your text notifications are on.”

“Yes, boss.” Ash gave him a mini salute then scurried off to reception. Shane said goodbye to Mason, relieved that Ash was handling whatever crisis was happening with the pup group.

Now on to the next one.

* * * *

Cody leaned against the wall next to the closed door of the vendor room. He’d been waiting close to thirty minutes for the event manager to tell him yay or nay about unloading his truck. He wasn’t too fond of leaving his rather pricey, hand-tooled leather creations outside—locked vehicle or not.

Standing next to him was another vendor, a tall, very thin guy with shaggy hair. He’d already enthusiastically introduced himself as the owner of the Mollycoddled Mutt, also an early arrival who was equally anxious to haul his wares inside.

Cody dragged his palm across the top of his head, sighing, then plucked his phone from his denim jacket. He needed to check his messages in case Bert, his ranch foreman, had any issues or questions. In general, Cody was a pretty laid-back guy, but the ranch was a huge business. When his father died the year before, the entire operation had fallen under his control. Even if he’d been working the ranch during his father’s declining years, he’d always relied on him for advice.

Now, the final decisions were his and his alone.

Which made traveling to kink events much more difficult, but he hadn't chosen the lifestyle. In a sense, the lifestyle had chosen him. He was a Daddy through and through.

His side hustle was more of a hobby. Working with leather, creating new designs for collars, harnesses, leashes and other pet play accessories, was a way to wind down from the rigors of running a ranch. It didn't hurt that on occasion he got to use them on a boy.

Cody chuckled to himself. He'd been itching to attend the Pet Play by the Lake event for the past three years. The timing had never been right, but he'd been determined to show up this year. Now that he'd settled into the routine of running Valley High Cattle, it was his chance to enjoy a part of his life that was severely lacking.

He needed a pony. One he could train and care for. A newbie might be good, or a man who required a lot of guidance. But more than anything, he yearned for a man who held the potential to be his whole world. Someone he could picture himself growing old with on the ranch, same as his dad had done with his mom.

After checking his email and texts, he was reassured that everything was under control, so he could focus on having fun and absorbing the atmosphere. Cody scrubbed his face with one hand. What he'd really like to focus on was a long nap.

He'd left home the night before at midnight and driven straight through. His plan had been to settle in at the resort before the event was in full swing. There wouldn't be much of

a chance to socialize if he was taken up with selling the entire time.

Fortunately, the event manager's assistant had given him the names of a few local guys in the lifestyle he could hire for a couple of days. The sales room was only open Saturday and Sunday, so he'd really only needed one person's help for the weekend. That way he could take in a couple panels or demonstrations, do some socializing outside of the planned parties.

Right as he tucked away his phone, he heard someone approaching. Cody glanced up and caught sight of a tall, square-jawed, drill sergeant looking dude. Handsome as fuck, muscles for days and at least a decade older than Cody. The man walked with a clear purpose, irritation decorating his features.

The corner of Cody's mouth twitched. This could only be Shane, the event organizer. He had a reputation for being a hard ass. Some of the vendors he'd come across while attending other events had mentioned Shane when Cody inquired what Pet Play by the Lake was like.

They locked eyes and Cody's heart skipped a beat. He never messed around with Tops. But for Shane, he'd make an exception. The other vendor straightened his gangly body the moment he noticed the frowning man, as if he'd been caught slacking off at guard duty.

"Hello, gentleman. I'm in charge of overseeing everything," the frowner said gruffly. "Micki told me you'd both like to set up your booths. I assume you realize that the schedule clearly indicates set-up is Friday morning."

Cody shot out his hand, smiling wide as he waited for Shane to accept the unspoken offer. “Cody Fisk. I take it you’re Shane?”

Shane appeared startled. The other vendor, whose name had slipped Cody’s mind, stood with his jaw slack, as if Shane might devour him in a single bite. Cody tilted his head. Now that he’d had a moment to observe Shane, he wondered if he truly was a Top after all. Looks were deceiving, and his manner screamed that he was playing at being tough and in charge.

Cody chuckled to himself. Oh my, no. Even if he wasn’t aware of it yet, Shane didn’t want to be in charge. He wanted someone else to take the reins.

At last, Shane shook Cody’s hand, the grip too firm, his eyes averted. “Yes, I’m Shane Dawson, event manager.”

A jolt of electricity ran through Cody’s body as Shane’s hand lingered on his for a moment longer than necessary. He had to wonder if Shane felt the zing, too.

If only he would look at me.

Cody imagined that if their eyes locked, that thrum of electricity would still be there.

The other vendor interrupted their moment, introducing himself as Adam. Cody barely registered his name, his attention still focused solely on Shane. He couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something more to the intense man, something worth pursuing.

As if the tension between them was non-existent, Shane cleared his throat then launched into a speech outlining the

rules of the event. Cody had looked over the rules before he ever filled out his application. That conversation was of zero interest to him. Instead, his eyes wandered back to Shane's form. He found himself fixated on the way the muscles in his arms flexed as he gestured, the way his jaw clenched when he emphasized a particular point.

Then there were his eyes. Gray, flashing eyes, serious. Almost brooding. This was someone Cody was *very* interested in getting to know.

Cody was pulled out of his reverie when Shane addressed him. "Do you have any questions about what I just said?"

Cody placed his hands on his hips, not accustomed to being caught off-guard. Someone as demanding and masculine as Shane would be hard to say no to. The man was an enigma. Most people would assume Shane was a brusque Dom, someone who commanded all those around him. Yet, Cody still wasn't convinced. If he were a betting man, he'd place all his dollars on Shane hiding behind his position to avoid... something.

But what?

"I have to confess, Shane. My mind wandered there for a bit. Couldn't help it. The views in Tahoe are so distracting." He winked.

A delightful blush filled Shane's cheeks, and Cody was more certain than ever that he'd called it when he deduced Shane was a sub. Or at least, someone who would *make* an excellent sub. Getting Shane alone long enough to figure out his story would be the true challenge. If Shane was merely

doing his job at the resort, then went home every night to a vanilla boyfriend, Cody would be all kinds of bummed out.

“What sights?” Adam scrunched up his nose. “You can’t even see the lake on this side of the hotel, and anyway, the banquet rooms don’t have windows.”

Cody let out an inelegant snort. “Just making conversation, buddy.”

He returned his attention to a clearly rattled Shane. He was in the process of retrieving the pen he’d dropped on the floor while juggling the clipboard and his cell phone. Cody caught the clipboard right as it was slipping from Shane’s grasp.

“I’ve got you, Shane.” Cody gave him back his board. “You can count on it.”

Shane shot him a glare. It seemed as if he’d recovered from his initial shock of their chemical reaction to each other and was back to pretending he was all about the rules and proper behavior. That glimpse of a needy sub Cody has witnessed had been shoved back into his cage.

“I’d like to request we keep the subject to the topic at hand.”

Cody gave Shane a nod. “I apologize. Sometimes I’m like a kid in a candy store when I get excited about something. But I’m a professional, I assure you. And I certainly don’t want to disrupt your schedule or cause any trouble. You see, I wasn’t interested in setting up my booth as much as I was concerned about how secure my items would be if left in the parking lot.”

He gave Shane a wide smile. “I’m sure you can understand my predicament.”

Adam raised a finger as if he were in a classroom. “I have the same predicament.”

Shane pressed his lips together, and Cody could almost see the cogs and wheels of his mind whirring away. “In order to make sure your items are safe inside the hotel, this door needs to remain locked at all times. If I allow you to bring everything inside, they stay in there until Friday morning. No going in and out to retrieve this or that, understood?”

Cody held up his hands as if in surrender. “Understood, boss.”

The corner of Shane’s mouth twitched, and for a second, Cody could’ve sworn he was going to get a smile in response. But Shane turned and the moment was lost.

As Shane strode away, he called out over his shoulder. “I’ll send someone to unlock the door who can wait until you’re done. I’ve got a busy schedule.”

Cody chuckled. He was sure Shane was genuinely busy, and the poor thing was probably burning the candle at both ends to make the event go off without a hitch. He got the impression that Shane was all about perfection.

But in that moment, he believed the thing that Shane was busiest at was getting away from Cody as quickly as he could.

Chapter Two

Who the hell does that guy think he is?

Shane observed as Cody set up his booth in the noisy, crowded vendor room. Sure, Cody's creations were top-notch and his booth very professional. If he was still interested in pursuing pet play—which he most certainly was *not*—he'd be drooling over one lead in particular. The craftsmanship was supreme, with designs of whimsical butterflies and hummingbirds burned into the leather, then accented with rhinestones. Brushes of color helped make the designs stand out.

He'd never seen anything so magical.

And only one existed. According to the tabletop banner, all of Cody's items were one of a kind. A few times while Shane was lurking on the perimeter of the room, one of the other vendors had picked up or pointed to the lead and Shane's heart would skip a beat. Such a reaction was ridiculous, of course. Sure, the lead was gorgeous. But what the hell would he do with something like that when he never played anymore?

Still, did Cody's sign need to be so loud and over the top? The table coverings so colorful, lights so twinkly, business name so outrageous?

Cody's Pet Play Extravaganza.

Shane hmphed. He had other more important things to worry about.

Friday had arrived, registration was underway with a vengeance, and the resort was filled to the brim with attendees.

People were showing up earlier and earlier every year. Add in the increased attendance, and Shane had to wonder how long it would be before they'd have to expand the event to encompass a full week. Even the early training sessions had filled up so quickly, they'd had to turn several hopefuls away.

“Excuse me, sir?”

Shane tore his eyes away from Cody's obnoxious set-up and turned his attention to the young man gazing up at him.

“Yes?”

“Ash told me I should see you about my booth.” He gave Shane an excited smile, almost bouncing as he spoke. “My Dom and I publish our own pet play graphic novels.”

Shane raised a brow. “Okay...”

The kid seemed very excited, so he should probably say something nice. Social pleasantries were lost on him for the most part, and he typically erred on the side of caution when responding. He never knew whether a response would be inappropriate and hurt someone's feelings. He'd certainly made that mistake more than once.

Shane had always believed that having a Master or—even better—a Daddy, would be helpful. Someone who could guide him when he fumbled and reassure him when he fell. Shane grunted to himself.

Yeah. That hadn't worked out so well when he'd tried before.

The kid wrung his hands, his gaze darting around the room. Shane wondered what he'd said to upset the softly-spoken sub.

Nothing.

Shane gave himself a mental shake. "That's very interesting."

The young man peered up at him hopefully. "It is?"

"Sure." Shane shrugged. "We've never had anyone here with graphic novels for sale. And since you produce them yourselves, that's a bonus. They should be a success."

The man's smile lit up his face. "You think so? Sir said we should give it a try, that it would be unique. We're signing them, too."

The room was getting louder as more and more vendors arrived with their crates and dollies and bundles of items filling their arms. The familiar tug to get back to business rose in his chest.

"Is there something I can help you with? I have to take care of several matters."

If he was being perfectly blunt, an *overload* of matters.

The sub palm-slapped his forehead. "Right, sorry. Sir wanted me to ask if there are any extension cords we can use? We brought one, but it's not long enough to reach the plug at the end of our row."

Shane gestured for the sub to follow. “Yes, I’ll show you.”

Unfortunately, in order to fulfill the sub’s request, he’d have to walk by Cody’s booth. Of *course* Cody would buy a double space right at the entrance to the room. He seemed like a big show-off.

As Shane passed the danger zone, he ducked his head, clutching his clipboard to his chest as if it were a lifeline. In his peripheral vision, he caught Cody waving at him with a smile. Shane ignored the man, not interested in inviting any more interaction between them.

The exit to the room was within reach, so he kept his gaze fixed on safety, his heart thudding. It wasn’t as if he found the guy attractive, or interesting, or anything like that—he merely wanted to make sure Cody didn’t get the wrong idea.

In one instant, he was rounding the end of the table, in the next, he was face down on the carpet, his clipboard skittering across the floor. He was dazed for a moment, trying to figure out what happened. Then he realized that he’d tripped over something, and that the something in question was Cody’s foot.

Heat flooded his cheeks as he scrambled to his feet, fumbling to retrieve his clipboard. A sharp pain shot through his knee once he was upright, and he hissed through his teeth. Cody was at his side in an instant, apologizing profusely.

“Oh no, I’m so sorry, Shane. I didn’t mean to trip you.”

Shane couldn’t find the words to respond, staring at the man who had just caused him to fall. Although, something

about Cody was different now that he was up close, his eyes full of concern, his brow furrowed as he held onto Shane's arm as if to keep him from falling again.

Shane swallowed hard, fear gripping his heart. Longing was something he thought he'd freed himself of, something that was no longer of concern. However, the spark of attraction between them was real, even if he'd been denying it since he and Cody met the day before.

He had no idea what to do with that knowledge. It wasn't like him to allow his emotions to take hold.

As if sensing his thoughts, Cody leaned in closer, his breath hot on Shane's neck. "I really am sorry, Shane."

Shane shrank away from Cody's touch, his mind racing as he tried to process what was happening.

"I-I'm fine," Shane stammered, avoiding Cody's gaze as he tried to steady his racing heart. "It was just a little accident."

Apparently, Cody wasn't so easily deterred. He took a step closer to Shane, his eyes searching his face.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked, worry evident in his voice. "You took quite a fall there."

"I'm fine," Shane said, his voice barely above a whisper. "Thank you for asking."

Cody nodded, a smile gracing his kissable mouth. Shane screwed his eyes shut, willing the image to go away. *No*. Strangers attending the event were off-limits. Especially ones who made Shane feel something he thought had died a long time ago.

“I think you should sit down for a second, Shane. You seem as if you’re in pain.”

Shane held in a groan. He had to quit sending the wrong signals to Cody before he got in over his head.

“I appreciate your concern, Cody. But I really do have to get back to work.” Shane waved his hand around. “As you can see, there’s a lot going on.”

Cody narrowed his eyes a bit, regarding him with an expression Shane couldn’t interpret. “All right, Shane. I won’t push it.” Cody gave him a quick tap on his nose and Shane almost hit the carpet again. The gesture made his groin tighten, which seriously pissed him off. “But promise me you’ll get help if you need it.”

Shane grew more uncomfortable by the second beneath Cody’s gaze.

“Sure. Whatever you say.”

Cody nodded slowly. “I’ll be keeping an eye on you.” He pointed at him. “Whether you like it or not. Even if you don’t want my assistance, I’ll make sure to find someone who can help, got it?”

Once again, Cody’s voice made his groin tighten. He needed to get the fuck out of there.

“Sure. Uh, I gotta go.”

He turned to the sub he’d been trying to help. The kid had remained silent throughout the whole exchange and had the nerve to be regarding Shane with a shit-eating grin. Shane whirled back around to face Cody, pointing at the sub.

“He needs *my* help.”

The sub tensed, his eyes going wide. “I can wait or find someone else if you’re hurt.”

Shane balled his fists around his clipboard. “I said I’m *fine!*”

The people in the immediate vicinity went silent and were now staring at them. Shane let out a low growl. Great. He was making a scene on top of everything else. Why did Cody make him feel so unhinged?

Shane quickly made his escape, gesturing for the sub to follow, his heart pounding as he scurried away from Cody’s booth. He needed to work harder than ever to keep his distance from the man who he was now certain was a Dom. He couldn’t afford to get involved with a stranger, especially one who made him feel so vulnerable.

“What’s your name?” he said to the sub.

If he focused on his job, he’d be fine. Definitely fine. Probably fine. He growled under his breath again.

Fine enough.

“I’m Danny and my Sir is Ted. He’s my Teddy bear.”
Danny laughed.

“Hi Danny.” He shoved the teddy bear remark to the side. “Listen, I’m going to introduce you to one of the volunteers. They can help you with the electrical set-up, okay?”

“That would be awesome, thanks.”

Once he found the volunteer who’d been assigned to the vendor room, he handed Danny off to him. Technically, he

should be overseeing everything to verify the process was going smoothly, but he needed a minute to regain his composure. And besides, it couldn't hurt to head to the lobby and make sure there weren't any issues at registration.

As he rounded the corner that led to the hallway toward the lobby, he found himself face-to-face with Lee. Lee's eyebrows shot up and he came to an abrupt stop in Shane's path.

"Is there a problem, Shane?" he asked. "You're white as a sheet." Lee tilted his head. "And sweating." His brow furrowed. "Were you limping?"

Shane quickly composed himself, straightening his back, tucking his event T-shirt into his khakis despite not needing to while also clearing his throat. "No, no problem at all. Just had a little accident, that's all."

Lee tensed and let out a gasp. "Accident? What happened?" Lee reached for him, despite being one of the few people who understood his lack of interest in being touchy-feely. "Come with me to my office. I was headed there anyway."

Shane groaned. He couldn't seem to stop being a nuisance to everyone, and *he* was the one who was supposed to make sure everything was in order.

"Lee, I'm okay. I keep telling everyone I'm fine, it was no big deal. But they won't believe me." Shane moved from under Lee's grasp, "I have a job to do."

Lee pressed his lips in a thin line, crossing his arms. "I'm going to have to insist you tell me what happened first."

Shane wasn't an eye-roller since snarkiness irritated him. But he was about to make an exception.

"I stumbled, nothing more. I also verified that nothing was damaged or broken."

Lee rubbed his chin. "I didn't think your leg was broken, but I thought maybe you'd sprained something, or banged up your knee."

"My le—?" It struck Shane what Lee meant. "Oh, no. I was talking about the vendor items and displays. I didn't break or damage anything."

Lee scrubbed his face with one hand. Shane noted that Lee did that a lot around him.

"Shane, I don't care about *stuff*. If there was an issue, I'd cover the cost. My only concern is *you*." He lifted his eyebrows again. "We clear?"

"Of course." Why did he feel like a naughty child?

The corner of Lee's mouth quirked into a smile. "I'm glad. Now come with me to my office. If it makes you feel any better, you can fill me in on how everything's shaping up *after* we discuss what happened to you."

Lee headed in the direction of the elevators and Shane followed him like a puppy. Lee paused and glanced over his shoulder as if to verify that Shane was obeying his orders before climbing into the elevator. They remained silent on the ride up to Lee's office. Now that he'd given in to Lee's demands, Shane discovered that the tension was easing in his body. Perhaps getting away from the noise and chaos was the best course after all.

As an added bonus, he wouldn't run into Cody, either.

“Why don't you have a seat, Shane. Give yourself a rest.”

Lee made his way behind the mahogany executive desk then slid onto his leather chair, leaning back and crossing his legs. Typically, when Shane was in Lee's office, he would remain standing. The only time he sat down was when he and Lee had a work meeting. Resting had never been a part of his office experience with his boss before.

Lee picked up the receiver of the landline phone, punched a button then glanced up as he waited. “Is it your knee or ankle that you hurt?”

Shane's jaw went slack. Lee the Dom had emerged and clearly wasn't interested in arguing with him over whether he was okay or not.

“My knee.”

Lee chuckled. “See? That wasn't so hard.”

Lee communicated with someone at reception that he needed an ice pack and a wrap. After hanging up, he regarded Shane, his brow wrinkled as if in deep thought. Shane folded his hands on his lap and tried to get comfortable. Now that he had calmed down somewhat, his knee was throbbing quite a bit.

“Shane, can we speak openly? I think of you as a friend, and hopefully, you feel the same way about me.” Lee smiled. “Was I being insensitive just now? Inferring that expressing your needs wasn't that hard?”

A knot formed in Shane's stomach. Not because Lee had hurt his feelings, but because he knew Lee was right.

However, admitting he found it near impossible to express his needs would be just as hard.

“No, you weren’t being insensitive. It’s more that I’m not used to people caring all that much. Especially about me...”

Shane’s voice trailed off as a lump formed in his throat. He’d spent so much of his life trying to be strong and self-sufficient that he’d forgotten what it felt like to have someone care for him. The one time he’d allowed himself to open up in that way had been a spectacular fail.

Lee’s expression softened. “You don’t have to do everything on your own, Shane. It’s okay to ask for help.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “And it’s okay to admit when you’re hurting—physically *or* emotionally.”

A tear fell down Shane’s cheek before he could stop it. Ash was so damn lucky to have Lee. To be seen and understood by such a compassionate man.

He cleared his throat, a terrible habit, but sometimes he couldn’t stop himself. “As long as we’re speaking openly...” He shifted in his chair. “How do you know for sure that it’s okay to let someone take care of you?”

Shane gripped his fingers tighter, groaning inwardly. Lee was a Daddy. How the hell would he know the answer to such a subby question?

“That was a dumb thing to say, being as you’re a Dom.”

Lee gave him a wistful smile. “Not dumb at all, Shane. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable to another person is incredibly difficult. Moreso for some than others but challenging all the same.” Lee sighed, fussing with one of the

pens next to his laptop. “You weren’t here when Ash left me all those years ago, so you didn’t witness what others saw in the aftermath of our breakup.

He lifted his gaze. “I was devastated, felt like an idiot for allowing him into my heart. For believing his promises of forever.” Lee gave a slight shrug. “I’m extremely fortunate that he matured, and things worked out between us. But there was a very real chance that when he left, that was it. I’d never see him again. Did I want to say fuck it, allowing someone to be close to me is bullshit, I’m done with all that? Of course I did. But if I’d closed myself off forever, I never would’ve taken him back.” Lee locked eyes with Shane. “I wouldn’t be so happy, so content. My life would be empty.”

Shane’s gut clenched. He wasn’t sure what was scarier. Being alone forever or taking a chance on a stranger who might crush his heart.

“I...I haven’t had much luck.” No way was he giving Lee the gruesome details of his relationship with his ex-Dom, but he ached to find an answer to improve his dreary existence. For someone who understood the kink world to give him advice. “I came to the conclusion a while ago that it’s better to be safe than sorry, as the saying goes.”

Lee’s features softened as he regarded him. “Or better safe than loved?”

Now it felt as if he’d been punched in the gut. “I don’t want that.”

Shane sucked in a sharp breath. The words hadn’t been true until he spoke them out loud.

Lee rubbed his finger across his upper lip, his eyes glimmering. “I’m sorry, Shane. I feel as though I can’t call myself a friend to you when I never noticed how much you’ve been hurting this whole time.”

Shane straightened. “No, don’t apologize.” He gripped the chair arm. “You’re my boss. I wouldn’t presume to expect you to pay attention to my personal life.”

Lee sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Boundaries in our situation are always fuzzy. But I can’t help it if I feel concern for you, or that I want you to find happiness.”

Shane sniffed, lowering his head. “Maybe it’s just one of those things that isn’t meant to be.”

“I strongly disagree.”

Shane’s eyes darted up. “How could you possibly know one way or another?”

Lee shook his head. “I can’t, not about something so personal. But what I *do* know? It sounds as if you gave up a long time ago. I’ve never seen you with anyone, you’ve never asked if you could leave early to go on a date... But more significantly, the gossip queen—also known as Ash—has never blabbed to me about your personal life.”

Shane chewed his lip. No. Lee, or Ash, or anyone else at the resort wouldn’t have seen him with a date for the simple reason that he hadn’t been in a relationship since he was employed over five years ago.

“I guess...it’s been so long I wouldn’t even know how to go about...” He shrugged. “Finding someone.”

Lee folded his hands on his lap. “Is there anyone you’re interested in already?”

Shane’s eyes went wide, his mouth filling with dust. Cody was too young. Too brash. Too...

Amazing.

“P-possibly.”

“Do you think they might be interested in you?”

“I think...” Every interaction with Cody flashed through his mind. “Yes.”

The corner of Lee’s mouth pulled up in a smile. “Then don’t give up. Even if it doesn’t work out, give this person a chance to prove themselves. Don’t condemn them as being the same as those who’ve hurt you. Would you want someone to make unfair assumptions about you?”

Shane tensed. Lee was right again. What if Cody turned out to be the Daddy Dom he’d dreamed of? He rubbed his forehead. He didn’t know enough about the man. He might not be a Daddy, might not want a pony.

“No, I wouldn’t like that.”

The door flew open, and Ash burst into the office. “Oh, my freakin’ God. I need a spanking, *stat.*” He stopped so abruptly when he locked eyes with Shane, he almost tripped over his feet. “Oops. Didn’t know you guys were having a meeting.” He cringed. “Uh... Anything I should know about?”

Lee snort-laughed. “Not if you need a spanking. But is what upset you something *Shane* should know about?”

Ash rubbed the back of his neck, then turned to Shane. “I would’ve come to you first, but I heard you broke your leg, and an ambulance took you to the hospital. Glad that’s not the case, big fella. But I was afraid I’d have to take care of all those different pets going to the pupnic.” He wrung his hands. “I haven’t been around so much variety before. Do you know there’s a sloth and a ferret? And the dragon...” Ash threw his hands in the air. “What the heck kind of toys do *they* play with? Is there anything here on site for them?” His lip trembled. “There’s even a dove. I’m at a complete loss on that one.”

Shane started to rise, but Lee gestured for him to sit back down.

“The pupnic isn’t until later, so we have a minute to find out whether anything else is needed beyond what’s already planned.” He then waved Ash over, patting his lap. Ash climbed onto Lee’s thighs, immediately wrapping his arms around his neck, and resting his head on Lee’s shoulders. “Did you just now find out about the new pets this year at registration? Is that why you got upset?”

Ash nodded. “Yeah. I guess I freaked.”

Lee jostled him. “I thought you loved the different kinds? You were so crazy about the hedgehog last year.”

He sighed. “I know. It’s just that I wasn’t so in *charge* last year. Watching pets play and interacting with them is much more relaxing when they aren’t looking to you for help.”

Shane couldn’t help but interject, “I thought you did a fine job helping with Best in Show and the adoptions last year. Even your pup training wasn’t all that bad.”

Lee snorted and Ash frowned. “Hey! That wasn’t very nice.”

Shane ran through what he’d said in his mind. “What I meant, was that even though you’re not a trainer, you helped out and encouraged some of the more self-conscious pets, like Mason.”

Once again, Shane was reminded how badly he needed similar encouragement.

Ash gave him a shy smile. “Thanks. Even though I’m not a trainer, I think I’m getting better at handling stuff at the event. I’m enjoying being a part of the behind-the-scenes action.”

Shane managed a smile of his own. “I can definitely see an improvement.”

Lee chuckled, patting Ash’s hip. “I can, too. But a thumbs up from Shane is gold.”

Ash rolled his eyes. “That’s for sure. His standards are epic.”

They all shared an easy laugh. Right as Ash launched into a story about a guy he’d spotted doing somersaults on the grounds that morning, a knock sounded at the door. Lee called out for them to enter, and it was someone from reception with the items for his knee.

To his mortification, Lee insisted on tending to him, ordering him to elevate his leg and holding the ice pack to his knee.

“Lee, you don’t have to—”

He snapped his mouth shut at Lee's look of reproach. "Have you ever known me to do something I don't want to do?"

Shane's cheeks heated. "Of course not, sir."

Lee smirked. "Good." He narrowed his eyes. "Isn't this something you could see yourself getting used to, having someone look out for your needs above all else?"

"Ahem!" Ash was perched on the edge of Lee's desk, and he didn't appear amused. "Do I need to be concerned about anything here?"

Shane gasped. "I'd never poach a Daddy. That's unacceptable."

Ash guffawed. "But would you poach a pooch?" He kept laughing, slapping his knee. "Just kidding, big guy. I trust Lee."

Lee arched his eyebrows at Ash. "I appreciate your faith in me, sweetheart. But isn't there something you should be doing right now?"

Ash shot to his feet. "Shit." His eyes went wide. "I mean, aww shucks. I sure as heck do." After giving Lee a quick kiss, he leaned down and whispered next to Shane's ear. "Lee's right. You should totally have someone taking care of you all the time. I can testify that it's the only way to fly."

With that, Ash hopped up then headed to the door, pausing once he opened it. "Oh, and wait 'til you hear. Apparently, Walt's here as a *pup*. I can't believe how well Micki's taking the whole thing."

Lee furrowed his brow. "Remind me?"

“You *know*. Walt. Micki’s ex-boyfriend?”

Lee shook his head. “Right. I forgot. It’s so difficult to keep up with all your news bulletins.”

As soon as Ash closed the door behind him, Lee chuckled. “See? My little gossip queen knows all.” Lee rose. “Hold this pack to your knee for another ten minutes then I’ll get it wrapped up.” He pointed his finger at Shane. “But I’m serious. If it starts to bother you, I want you off your feet.”

“I’m sure it’ll be—”

“Fine?” Lee sighed. “So I’ve heard.” He gave him a sly look. “Just keep in mind that I’m not above assigning a Daddy to watch over you if you can’t do it yourself.”

Shane’s jaw dropped. Something told him Lee was *not* joking.

Chapter Three

Cody entered the large room that had housed the welcome party the night before but was now the location of the Saturday night festivities. Before the evening was through, there would be a drag show, dancing to music spun by a famous DJ flown in from Europe, and a buffet of gourmet foods prepared by a world-renowned chef.

He had to admit, this was one of the grander kink events he'd ever attended.

As his gaze roamed around the room, he spotted a few Doms he'd struck up a conversation with the previous evening. He also saw Dale, the resort masseuse, with a handsome older man. They seemed as though they were in their own world, so he didn't want to interrupt them. It did, however, remind him that he wanted to book an appointment for a much-needed massage.

Right as he began to make his way to the table of Doms, he noticed the delectable Shane, and he was all alone. As usual, his features were tense and guarded. Cody shook his head to himself. What had happened to this man for him to be wound up so tight? He honestly couldn't reconcile how it was that Shane was managing such a fun and playful event.

Despite how Shane had run from him earlier, he couldn't allow the poor boy to be the evening's wallflower.

Cody sauntered over to Shane, more determined than ever to discover why he was managing an event he seemed to have little interest in. Now, if Shane was on the job, he wouldn't bother him. But so far, Shane had been quite adept at avoiding him. The party seemed like a natural time to learn more about the handsome man he couldn't stop thinking about.

For once, Shane wasn't clutching a clipboard. Instead, it was a drink he was gripping to his chest. While he still carried himself as if he were in the military, in his own way, Shane seemed relaxed.

What saddened Cody was that Shane stood near the entrance to the banquet room, apart from all the others. With the hint of a wistful smile on his lips, he watched the festivities surrounding him with seemingly no intention of participating.

Cody approached Shane, who appeared startled to see him. His jaw went slack and he regarded Cody with frightened eyes.

"I'm happy you're at the party rather than running around as if the hounds of hell were nipping at your heels." Cody smiled. "You deserve a moment to enjoy yourself."

Shane snapped his jaw shut. "Oh, I..." He took a sip of his drink, hand shaking.

For the life of him, Cody couldn't figure out why Shane was so flustered around him all the time. Their attraction had been immediate, the spark clear. Why wouldn't Shane want to at least speak with him before running away? He'd already discovered through Shane's very forthcoming assistant, Ash, that Shane wasn't seeing anyone. So what was really going on?

Cody sidled closer to Shane. The taller man took a step back, the way he always did when Cody got close. However, now he was backed up against the wall with nowhere else to go.

“Do I upset you somehow, Shane?” Cody resisted the urge to touch him. He’d already picked up on Shane’s aversion to touch, so he wouldn’t insist until he had consent. “Because my only interest is to get to know you a bit better, maybe spend some time together.” Cody tilted his head. “Would that be so terrible?”

Shane took another hasty drink of his soda. The fact that the entire event was held without alcohol helped Cody to feel at ease. If he was fortunate enough to convince Shane to hang out during his off-hours, he would know it was Shane’s heart rather than the liquor that was giving in to him.

Shane’s eyes darted around the room as if searching for someone who might charge to his rescue. After a moment, he sighed, his shoulders dropping.

“No...” Shane looked down, shaking his head. “Not terrible.” He lifted his gaze. “Closer to terrifying.”

Cody shoved his hands in his pockets to keep from tugging Shane into his arms.

“Oh, baby. I’m not dangerous, I promise. Is it that you’re not in the lifestyle?” Cody shrugged. “I mean, a job is a job. And clearly, you’re excellent at this one. But I have to wonder why you’d put yourself in this environment if it makes you feel so uncomfortable?”

Shane rubbed his forehead, something Cody had seen him do a lot. “That’s not what it is at all.” He snorted. “Oh, I’m uncomfortable all right, but not for the reason you think.”

Cody’s heart ached for Shane. He yearned to uncover the mystery of why Shane was so closed off.

“Hey, I tell you what. Are you needed here right now? *Truly* needed, not merely an excuse to avoid interacting with me?”

Shane’s head jerked up. “I apologize, Cody. I know I’ve been behaving oddly.” His brow furrowed as if he couldn’t make up his mind about something. “I suppose…” He bit his lip. “Okay.”

Cody broke into a grin. “How long do I have you for?”

Shane fiddled with his now empty cup. “Lee insists we enjoy ourselves at the parties, but I’m technically still on the job. You never know when something’s needed, or there’s an emergency.”

“How would someone get hold of you if they weren’t sure where you were?”

Shane brightened, the tension in his body easing even more.

This is what he needs. Someone to be there for him when he shuts down, doesn’t know what to do.

“We’ve been texting.”

“Good. No walkies to disrupt the atmosphere. Do you have notifications turned on?”

Shane nodded. “Yes. I insist on it with everyone.”

Cody smiled. “Then let’s go take a walk, Shane. We can keep an eye on your phone, and if something comes up, you’ll be available. But for now, let’s get you out of this room and into some fresh air. I haven’t seen the patio with all the lights yet. I heard some of the couples talking about how nicely decorated it is.”

Shane hesitated for a moment before nodding. “Okay. A walk sounds good.”

Cody paused to offer his hand, the gesture a silent request. Shane stared at Cody’s palm, his jaw ticking. At last, he accepted, and Cody took Shane’s hand into his own, reveling in the way their hands fit so perfectly together. They slipped out of the banquet room and into the quiet hallway.

Walking in silence, the only sounds were their steps on the floor and the murmur of laughter and music that drifted down the hall from the party. Cody couldn’t help but glance at Shane out of the corner of his eye, wanting to know more about the man who had stolen his heart so quickly.

“What do you like to do for fun, Shane?”

Shane’s lips quirked up slightly, but it was a sad smile. “I don’t really have much time for fun.”

Cody squeezed Shane’s hand. “We definitely need to do something about *that*. Do you work at the resort year-round? Is that how you got involved in working at a pet play event?”

They reached the glass door leading outside and Cody held the door open for them. Small, industrial-style bulbs wrapped around carefully manicured pines, creating a magical enclosure for the outdoor space.

Cody led Shane onto the patio, which was made up of cream-colored stones arranged in neat circles. Several rock firepits blazed, providing a warm orange glow and casting shadows on the corners. Wrought iron chairs with overstuffed cushions were placed around the pits, but Cody spied the spot he wanted. A matching loveseat that was removed from the other people who were also enjoying the fresh night air.

Shane still hadn't responded to Cody's earlier question, so Cody directed him to the more private seating. He hoped that once they were out of earshot, Shane would feel more comfortable speaking.

Shane paused when they reached the little sofa, so Cody took the lead by sitting first. To his delight, Shane didn't release Cody's hand, but followed him down onto the cushion. Once they were settled, however, Shane drew his hand away. The action wasn't abrupt or hostile. Cody guessed it might be related to Shane's sense of duty, of not wanting to appear unprofessional.

Shane cleared his throat. "To answer your question, no. I'm a hair..." He shifted on the cushion. "...stylist the rest of the year."

Cody arched his eyebrows. He could tell he was going to have to pull the bits and pieces that made up the mysterious Shane from him one at a time.

"And pet play? How does that figure in?"

"Umm...about five years ago I met Lee, my boss and the resort owner, at the Blue Underground."

"The kink club? So you *are* in the lifestyle?"

Well, well. Cody's evening was getting better all the time.

Shane couldn't seem to get comfortable on the seat, he kept changing positions. "In a sense. At this point, I'm more of an observer than anything else."

"Okay, expanding from that—if you weren't an observer, what would you be doing as a participant?"

Shane let out a mournful sigh. "I'd be a pony." He lowered his head. "But I'm terrible at it, so it's better that I just remain on the sidelines."

A wave of sadness washed over Cody. Something had happened to Shane. Something awful enough that he'd been stuffing down his true self for a long time.

Too long.

Determination gripped Cody. He'd do whatever he could to help Shane release the inner demons holding him down.

"What makes you think you're so terrible at being a pony, baby? I can tell how much it hurts you not to be a part of the action. I think you'd make a magnificent pony." He grinned. "I bet you're proud and majestic as you strut around. And so strong when it comes to pulling the carts."

Shane shot him a glare and Cody tensed. He'd stepped in it all right. But what had he said to anger Shane so much?

"Yeah," Shane huffed. "That's why I suck. Pony trainers and Masters look at me and immediately think, oh look. A regal stallion. He'll be pawing at the dirt, galloping, a top cart racer, showing all the ponies and other handlers who the champion is. That's *not* me." He shook his head angrily. "Never mind. I should get back to the party."

Cody grabbed Shane's wrist. "Wait. I apologize. I shouldn't have made any assumptions about who you are or what you enjoy. Please stay?" Cody angled his head to encourage Shane's eyes to meet his. "I really wish you would. I'll even shut up and let you tell Daddy all about it."

Shane tensed again, and Cody wanted to kick his own ass. Just because he was feeling all Daddy-ish toward Shane, didn't mean he had to blurt it out to the skittish man.

"Don't...just don't." Shane appeared as if he was going to be sick. "I don't like being teased like that."

Cody lowered his voice. "I didn't mean to hit you over the head by letting that fly out of my big mouth. But just so we're clear, I wasn't teasing."

Shane's eyes flitted back up to his. "Can you be more specific?"

"Absolutely." He breathed an inner sigh of relief that Shane hadn't bolted. "Let me tell you a bit about myself, which will hopefully make me seem less scary."

Shane averted his gaze. "I didn't say I was scared."

Cody was itching to touch him with affection. To rub his back, caress his shoulder, soothe Shane with his hands, his lips.

Hopefully soon.

"Okay, but I do remember you saying something about being terrified. The last thing I want is for me to be the cause of making such a wonderful boy feel terrified."

Shane's head dropped in his hands and Cody couldn't stand it anymore. "Shane, will you please let me put my arm around you?"

Shane wouldn't look at him, but he sniffed and nodded. "I hope no one sees me like this, it's so embarrassing."

Cody's stomach clenched. He draped his arm across Shane's shoulders, not gripping him, but resting it there in reassurance.

"Look, I'm a simple, down-to-earth guy. I own a ranch in Montana and make pet play accessories on the side for fun. Then I sell them at these events so I have an excuse to leave my herd with the ranch foreman and have some playtime." Cody chuckled. "The only thing missing for me is a boy to take care of." He gave Shane's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "A ponyboy if the stars are on my side."

Shane's head jerked up. "My pony name is Starshine." His cheeks turned bright red. "Starshine's a circus pony. He wears more..." Shane licked his lips. "Glitzy stuff. You know, ribbons, feathers, rhinestones..." The red in his cheeks deepened. "That sort of thing."

Cory's jaw dropped then he broke into a grin. "That's *fantastic*. I love it. I'd have so much fun making beautiful and whimsical gear for Starshine." He rubbed his chin. "Actually, I have a lead at my booth that would be perfect for Starshine. It has butterflies and—"

"Hummingbirds?"

Cody's grin was so wide it made his cheeks hurt. "You saw it." He squeezed Shane's shoulder again. "I bet you fell in

love and thought how amazing it would be for Starshine.”

Shane’s features fell and Cody wanted to kick himself yet again. He kept forgetting how sensitive Shane was.

“Who hurt you, baby? What happened to make you shove Starshine to the side, to turn away from being who you are?”

Shane stared at his hands, picking at his dressy slacks, his jaw ticking. Cody whispered, “I won’t tease you. I promise.”

Finally, Shane turned to him. “You honestly don’t think it’s silly that a man...built like me...how I am...” He clenched one of his fists into a ball. “That I’m older. Especially since I’m older than you. You wouldn’t be embarrassed being with me dressed in my glitter and rhinestones at an event like this?”

All the pieces fell into place. Some asshole had teased or made fun of Shane for what he loved, and he’d been shut down ever since. Cody pressed his lips together. Some people thought it was okay to mock a guy who appeared tough on the outside, thinking they could ‘take it’. He’d witnessed that sort of shitty behavior more than once.

Shane was a sensitive, and likely, very compassionate man. He needed a true Daddy, a loving trainer who could help him set Starshine free.

“I’d be thrilled to be at an event like this—or anywhere at all—with you by my side.”

Shane leaned a bit closer to Cody. He couldn’t tell whether it was a conscious action, but it was definitely a reassuring sign.

“He wasn’t thrilled.” Shane went back to picking at the fabric of his pants. “My ex, I mean. I’d just discovered pet

play. Before that, I was primarily a service sub. I like doing a good job, it makes me feel good to know I'm helping. But it wasn't enough. The Doms I serviced always treated me like I was beneath them. Then I went to a fetish convention and there were these ponies...

Shane finally lifted his head, locking eyes with Cody. "It just all clicked into place, you know?"

Cody nodded. "I know. Same with me on my end. Then what happened?"

Shane's features clouded. "I told my Dom I'd like to give it a try. He wasn't so sure about the whole thing, he liked having a service sub. Somehow, I thought our relationship, what we meant to each other, was the driving factor." Shane huffed. "Turns out I was a trophy sub. He got off on having a sub who looks like me bow down to him in front of his buddies. It was all about the kink and nothing else. Turned out he was fucking guys on the side as well."

Cody's stomach dropped. No wonder Shane had run from the kink life. "Oh God, Shane. I'm so sorry. Please tell me you left after that."

"I didn't actually find out about the cheating until he tossed me out."

Cody gritted his teeth in anger before responding. "He tossed *you* out when he was the one cheating?"

Shane shook his head. "No. After he laughed his ass off at me when I told him what kind of pony I dreamed of being. Then he got rid of me. He made the laughingstock of our club. Told all his friends what a joke I was."

“This all happened at the Blue Underground?” Cody had heard such good things about the place.

This time, Shane shook his head vehemently. “Oh no, not there. Not even close. This was back when I lived in San Francisco. No, I came up here to start over, went to Blue Underground then met Lee.” His shoulders slumped. “That part was great. Lee’s an incredible man and Dom. But I’ve never been able to stomach looking for one of my own. Not even there.”

Cody gathered Shane’s hands in to his own. “I’m so sorry you’ve had such horrible experiences. That club in San Francisco should honestly be shut down. But despite the fact that your own interactions with Doms have been negative, you don’t seem to have an aversion to the lifestyle, or to Doms in general. Is it because you inherently know there’s more good out there than bad? Or are you trying to punish yourself by assigning the blame to yourself instead of them? That maybe if you were a better sub, they would’ve treated you better.”

Shane stared straight ahead, the glow of the firepit highlighting the planes of his face, the light furrows on his brow and the lines at the corners of his eyes.

“I’m...not sure.” He let out a heavy sigh. “Maybe all of that. But I can tell you one thing for sure—Lee is nothing like the men I dealt with, and I’ve never told him what I went through.” Shane grunted. “He would’ve tried to intervene, and I didn’t want that. But like I said, this was all when I was living in San Francisco. It’s better in a smaller town, the bad apples can’t hide as well.”

“You left your family behind there?”

“No. Right now they’re in eastern Oregon, in a very small, conservative town. I’m an army brat, so I’ve lived all over. Texas, California, Virginia. Everywhere, it seems.” He chuckled. “The first time I mentioned to my parents that I wanted to go to cosmetology school, I knew it was time to make a hasty retreat. My mother fainted and my father threatened to get the preacher to cast the devils out of me.”

Cody arched his eyebrows. “Damn. Rather dramatic of them.”

“Maybe that’s where Starshine gets it from.”

Shane’s lips were pulled into a crooked smile, and whoa, Cody wanted to kiss that mouth, explore it with his tongue for hours.

Cody bumped shoulders with him. “When do I get to meet Starshine?”

And there it was. The wall shot right back up, Shane’s body going tense, his eyes wide with fear. A jingly tone sounded, and Shane straightened, plucking his cell from his pocket.

“Uh-oh.” He frowned at the screen of his phone. “Someone had an allergic reaction to something they ate at the party, so an ambulance has been called.”

He shot to his feet and Cody followed suit. “Can I help with anything?”

Shane shook his head. “I have to go, Cody.” The sadness in Shane’s voice was almost more than Cody could bear. He gave Cody a broken smile. “For what it’s worth, the boy who gets you for a trainer and Daddy will hit the jackpot.”

No Shane. The jackpot would be you.

They both rose from the settee and Cody cupped Shane's cheek with his palm. "Don't deny yourself, Shane. You deserve to get what you want."

Shane chuckled but the sadness didn't leave his eyes. "Funny. That's almost exactly what someone said to me earlier." He covered Cody's hand with his own. "I wish I could believe it."

"Try," whispered Cody.

Shane drew away from Cody's touch. "I have to go. Thanks for..." He ran a hand across the top of his head. "Thanks for being such a nice guy. The world could use more kindness."

"Shane—"

"Bye, Cody."

Before Cody could utter another word, Shane was already halfway across the patio. Cody sank onto the sofa, a heaviness in his chest.

He should give up. Let Shane go his way and he would go his own way. Accept that Shane wasn't ready to risk his heart again. Cody clenched his jaw.

No. Not yet. There was still another day of the event, and he wasn't leaving until the day after that. If Shane was still bent on pushing him away by the time Tuesday morning came along, then he'd walk away.

But not one minute sooner.

Chapter Four

“Holy shit.”

Cody looked over at the young man who had appeared next to him. It took him a second, but then he recognized the man as being Ash, Lee’s pup, and Shane’s assistant.

“What’s holy about it?”

“Huh?” Ash’s head jerked up and he yanked the thumbnail out of his mouth he’d been chewing. He blinked a few times then barked out a laugh. “Hey, aren’t you the Extravaganza guy?”

Cody chuckled then stuck out his hand. “That’s me. Name’s Cody.”

“Hey, Cody. I’m Ash.” He gestured to the pet performing on stage. “Can you believe this snake? I mean, he’s got that wiggle *down*, baby. He’ll totally win.”

Cody shrugged, still laughing. “I dunno. That pup who just got off stage was a hoot. He was going around getting belly scratches from everyone. The crowd loved him.”

“Nathan? He was signed up at the last minute. But I’m so happy for him, you have no idea.”

Cody rubbed his chin. “Maybe. He was introduced as his pup, Zeus.”

Ash grinned and bounced. “That’s him! And you thought he was really good? He didn’t seem nervous?”

Cody imagined there was a story behind Ash’s concern, but it wasn’t any of his business. “Honestly, I think he stands a good chance.”

Ash gestured toward the stage again. “Even against Basil, the snake? And wow, did you see what the parrot was wearing? So colorful and gorgeous.”

Cody swallowed past a lump in his throat. Ash’s words brought up the memory of his discussion with Shane the night before. Starshine would be so beautiful decked out in his full gear. Cody would not only have the butterfly lead, but he’d make him a bridle with jeweled O rings and an elaborate, glittery feather plume on top.

Cody would also make sure that when Starshine took the stage, his bare ass would be decorated with the red marks from Cody’s crop. A rhinestone-encrusted cock sleeve would also make an excellent accessory...

Ash elbowed him. “*I said*, it looks like that cute new pup, Sammy, might’ve found someone, too. I was wondering if you saw him around this weekend.” Ash batted his lashes. “If you don’t act soon, you might not have a pet of your own to take home with you, they’re all getting snapped up.”

Cody had no idea what Ash was talking about. His brain was too filled with beautiful and perverse images of Shane as Starshine. *The event isn’t over yet*. He’d promised himself he had until Tuesday morning, so he wasn’t about to give up on his pretty ponyboy.

“Well, Ash. I tell you what. I think I still have a chance to find the perfect pet while I’m here.” As if on cue, he spotted Shane at the back of the audience. “And with that, if you’ll excuse me...”

As he drew closer, Cody noticed Shane’s features brighten as he watched a playfully energetic puppy take the stage. Cody ached to know what he was thinking.

If only he could figure out a way to finally get Shane to agree to spend some extended time together before Cody had to leave. He had to make a stronger play for Shane before it was too late.

Cody caught Shane’s eye, and for once, he smiled. Cody grinned as he made his way to Shane’s side.

Oh yeah, there was hope in that gaze.

“Hey,” he said. “Great show. I have to say, I’m impressed by how well this event turned out.” Cody winked at a visibly startled Shane. “That’s no easy task, keeping all these critters in line.”

Shane fiddled with his ever-present clipboard. “Thank you for the compliment, but I’m sure you realize by now, I’m not someone who keeps *anyone* in line.” He cleared his throat. “I should get going.” He waved his hand around as if hoping to pluck words out of the air. “There’s still the final party to oversee, and...stuff.”

Cody smirked. “You need to quit avoiding me.”

Shane huffed. “I do, huh? Who says?”

Cody sidled up to him, moving close enough to whisper next to Shane’s ear. “Your Daddy.”

Shane's eyebrows shot up, and he let out a small gasp. "Da...?" He swallowed hard. "Don't play with me, Cody. I'm not saying a hook-up is out of the question, but we both know you're leaving soon. I'll probably never see you again."

Cody shook his head, his heart aching at how emotionally bruised Shane was. He trailed a finger down Shane's arm, not missing how the man's breath hitched in response. "Never say never, baby." He tilted his head, a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. "But I won't say no to a hook-up, either. Especially if it's with my favorite pony."

Shane frowned. "Stop with the pony talk already."

Cody held up his hands. "I'll behave. For the most part." He winked again. "What do you say? Share a virgin cocktail with me at the afterparty then see how it goes?"

"Well, I'm not sure..." Shane glanced around the room, rubbing the back of his neck as he seemed to ponder Cody's offer. "I guess that would be fine. But I still have some wrap-up to do, so don't be disappointed if I show up late."

Cody's grin grew wider. "Just as long as you show up."

Shane nodded, but his eyes held the sadness and longing Cody had spotted in them more than once in the past few days.

"I will. I never break a promise."

Cody walked away feeling like he was walking on clouds. He had never felt so confident about anything in his life. He grinned, hope filling his chest. Perhaps there was still a chance that Shane would see something in him too.

* * * *

Cody stood at the edge of the party, virgin strawberry margarita in hand, waiting for Shane. He was a bit nervous and edgy, completely unsure of how Shane was going to react to him. After their less-than-successful interlude the night before, didn't know where they stood with each other. He had no idea if Shane could be convinced to explore a relationship with him.

Cody shook his head, trying to clear his mind. Staying positive was key. He was *sure* that Shane felt the same way about him. All they needed was to spend some quality time together so they could talk everything out.

Cody's heart fluttered when he spotted Shane making his way down the hall from the lobby. With a keen eye, he noted the way Shane's jaw ticked, his fists clenched as if he were either scared or ready for a fight. Cody imagined both assessments were accurate. It would be his job to make Shane feel safe, to understand that he wasn't setting himself up to be hurt.

Cody would never hurt him. He only wanted to hold and protect Shane, to help him discover the happiness he'd never experienced with his previous asshole of a Dom. The powerful surge of protectiveness he felt toward Shane was something he couldn't deny. He'd never been able to ignore a person in need, and he was determined to do whatever it took to reassure Shane he had nothing to fear.

Without hesitation, he moved toward Shane, standing directly in front of him. "Hey," he said softly. It was almost a

whisper, but Cody didn't care. He focused on Shane's intense, gray eyes, so expressive and alive. They were like windows to Shane's soul, and Cody wanted to see everything he had to offer.

Shane's gaze dropped down to Cody's mouth briefly, then flicked back up again. "Hey," he replied. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Cody smiled in reassurance. "Don't apologize. You warned me, right?"

Shane chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I did. I just..." He cleared his throat. "It's ingrained in me."

"Ingrained?"

Shane ran a hand across the top of his head. "It's imperative to me that I don't disappoint anyone, that I do a good job."

Cody arched his eyebrows. "That you're perfect?"

Shane's shoulders dropped, the defeat in his stance tugging at Cody's heart. Oh, how he wished *he'd* been the one with Shane when Shane had first gotten interested in pet play. Things would've turned out so much differently.

Shane lowered his head, shaking it slightly. "I know I can't be perfect." He lifted his gaze. "But sometimes I think if I could be, then I'd finally be satisfied with myself."

"Oh, baby." Cody drew a startled Shane into a hug. "You're such a wonderful man, I wish you could see that." He drew away, locking eyes with Shane. "Your past relationship was traumatic, and you have every right to be hurt and angered

by that. But I'm different than he was. I want to be there for you, I'd give anything if you'll let me help you."

Shane sighed. "I'm not looking for help, Cody. I appreciate your sincere attempts, I do." He rubbed the back of his neck, averting his gaze again. "Look. I know I've been kind of an ass this week. It's nothing against you. You seem like a great guy." He turned back to Cody. "But I get so stressed out when I do this event for Lee, and in this case, I do need everything to be perfect. I just couldn't..." He shook his head again. "I couldn't focus on you, or what being with you might mean. Not in the midst of all that."

Cody nodded, trying not to be distracted by the way Shane's mouth moved. All he wanted to do was kiss him. "And now that the event is over?" He lightly stroked Shane's arm. "Can we spend some time together before I leave Tuesday morning?"

Right as it seemed Shane was about the answer, Ash charged up, "Hey, Shane. Do you know where Mason is? I want to make sure and say goodbye in case he's leaving tomorrow. I'm legit not setting foot in this place again for at least a week."

Shane straightened, his professional demeanor back. Cody now recognized it for the defense mechanism it was. "Let me look into that for you, Ash. I'm not sure, but I can certainly check around."

Cody grabbed Shane's wrist before he could bolt. Ash regarded Shane as if he had three heads.

"What? No, dude. I was just wondering if you'd happened to see him around." He snorted. "I'm not expecting

you to organize a search party.”

Shane appeared trapped, as if he didn't know what to do. He turned to Cody with frightened eyes. It seemed as though he was finally giving Cody permission to take charge, to accept the help he'd offered.

Cody regarded Ash. “Are you sure you don't need Shane's help looking for Mason?”

Ash glanced between them both. “Uh, I'm not a hundred percent sure what's going on here, but I'm cool.” He gestured to Shane with a flutter of his hand. “Carry on.”

Shane's mouth opened and closed a couple of times as if he'd forgotten how to speak, but Ash had already left and was making his way through the crowd. Cody loosened his grip on Shane's wrist.

“Don't run from me, Shane. I'm only asking for some time, for a chance.” Cody stroked Shane's cheek with his knuckles, not missing the slight flinch when his hand drew close.

“Please?”

Shane let out a shuddering breath then wrapped his arms around Cody, holding him close. Cody could feel the rapid pulse in Shane's neck, the shallow breaths. He turned his head, seeking out Shane's lips.

“I'm sorry,” Shane whispered before Cody could kiss him. He pulled away, looking down. Cody moved his hands to Shane's face, wiping away the tears.

“It's okay, baby. It's going to be okay.” He brushed away another tear. “I'm not going anywhere, and you don't have to

figure it all out right now.”

Shane groaned. “I’ve been such a mess lately. I’m just...” His shoulders slumped. “I’m just so tired of feeling this way.”

“I know it’s scary,” said Cody, keeping them connected through light touches. “But you’re strong. And remember what I said? You deserve to get what you want, to have your needs fulfilled.”

“Yeah?” Shane’s mouth lifted into a sad smile. “I gave up hope for that a long time ago.”

Cody leaned in. “Why don’t we go to my room where it’s quiet, continue this conversation there?”

Shane stared at Cody for a moment then nodded. “Okay, but I’m not sure how much talking I’m interested in right now.” He gripped Cody’s hand. “I only want to feel another man’s touch, to not feel so alone.” He locked gazes with Cody. “Even if it’s only for one night.”

That’s how Cody knew that Shane was his. The man made it sound like one night would be sufficient because that’s what he was accustomed to. All he thought he was worth.

“Then come with me.”

Cody led Shane by the hand through the crowd, elation filling him. Not because he’d have Shane in his bed for the night, although that was its own thrill. No, his excitement was from finally having the chance to be completely alone with Shane, to show him how much tenderness he had to offer.

Maybe, just maybe, he’d convince Shane it was safe to trust a Daddy again.

Chapter Five

Confusion gripped Shane. He felt relieved, hopeful, and terrified all at once. The longer he looked at Cody, with his dark brown hair and warm, hazel eyes, the more he wanted to run.

The more he wanted to stay.

Never had he felt so totally out of control, so rash. Ever since he'd been humiliated by Jack, he'd never allowed himself to long for a Dom again, to chance that his submission would be used to hurt him. It wasn't fair to compare Cody to Jack, he knew that.

But why couldn't he stop shaking at the thought of giving himself to the younger man? Had he screwed up his life so much that the only thing he deserved was a night of sex?

What the actual hell? He was a respected professional. He got up in the morning, went to work and made sure the pet play event was a success every year for Lee and the charity.

Deep inside, he knew was worth more than one night of sex. He couldn't deny the temptation to run to Cody, to let the younger man make all the decisions. To allow Cody to take charge. Because that was what Shane had always dreamed of.

He wanted, *needed*, to feel all his worries and fears go away for one night. To get permission that it was okay not to

perfectly please everyone. Even when he did well, even when he had Lee's approval, it never seemed to be enough to chase away the nagging thoughts screaming at him that he wasn't good enough.

And now he'd met Cody. Patient, handsome, confident, easy-going, Cody. What would one night of pleasure, of recklessness and total submission, be like with such a man? Was he genuine when he said he was offering Shane more?

They walked in silence until they reached the elevators. Cody gave him a soft smile.

"I've got you, Shane."

Shane's throat closed up. He couldn't respond, the terror of being so open with a man for the first time in ages chipping away at his resolve to give Cody a chance.

The ride up to Cody's floor seemed to take hours rather than a few minutes. Cody never broke their physical connection, but he didn't paw at him either. His touch was gentle, almost like a physical whisper.

The elevator door opened, and he obediently followed Cody down the hallway.

"Here we are." Cody gestured to the closed door then he turned to Shane, his brow furrowing. "Are you sure?"

Shane sucked in a breath, holding it, knowing the line he was about to cross would change everything. Whether it was for the better remained to be discovered.

"Yes."

A slow smile spread across Cody's lips. "I'm sure, too."

He gathered up Shane's hand again, his eyes bright as he led them both inside, closing the door behind them with a click. Cody's room was on the side of the resort facing the lake, and the view was breathtaking now that the sun was setting.

Shane turned his attention to Cody, the reason he was taking a step toward finding happiness again. He traced Cody's beautiful face with his finger, and gazed into his striking hazel eyes. How did this man have such a powerful effect on him? He could finally admit to himself that he'd been attracted to him from that first moment, from the moment Cody had smiled at him. An intense, raw attraction.

Cody's voice cut into his thoughts. "Shane, tell me what you need. I want to discover the real you that's kept hidden from everyone else."

Shane averted his gaze, his resolve faltering. He crossed the room to the window and stared out at the lake. "I've never been able to figure out exactly what it is I need, you know? The one time I took a chance, truly let my guard down with that Dom, he shamed me. Or..." He shrugged. "It was me who allowed myself to be shamed."

He dared to check Cody's reaction, worried he might see pity in his eyes. That was the last thing he wanted from Cody. But instead of pity, Cody's expression radiated pain. He drew closer, ran his knuckles along Shane's cheek. "How long, baby? How long have you been denying yourself what you need?"

Shane swallowed hard. "Too long."

Cody cupped Shane's jaw. "I'm not going to pressure you, but can you tell me, tell me what you're feeling?"

Shane's heart swelled a little at the thought of opening up to Cody, to this young man who already seemed to understand him so well. Laughter in the hallway reminded Shane of the party in the lounge, but he didn't care about that anymore. This night was for him and Cody.

Shane nodded. "I will, Cody. I promise. But first...this."

Craving connection, desperate to be touched after denying himself for so long, he grasped Cody's shirt and tugged him closer. He pressed his lips to Cody's, his mouth parting as he did. Cody's tongue brushed along his bottom lip, then plunged inside. Shane moaned as Cody's arm snaked around his waist, bringing their bodies flush to each other.

Cody pushed Shane against the wall, his hands roaming over Shane's torso, his mouth hot and demanding as Cody kissed him senseless. Cody nibbled his way to Shane's jaw, his neck, then sucked up a mark at the base of his throat. Shane moaned, his body relaxing into Cody's care.

Cody's grazed Shane's earlobe with his teeth, the hot breath against his skin sending a shiver skittering down Shane's spine. He gasped as Cody's palms landed on his ass, squeezing the cheeks as if claiming ownership.

. "Damn, you feel good." Cody's voice rumbled deep in his chest.

Shane ran his hands down Cody's back and cupped his ass as well. "So do you."

Cody groaned, grinding against Shane's hard cock. "I know you think I'm too young for you, but I don't give a damn. I'm not letting you go."

"Why?" Shane whispered, nuzzling Cody's neck. "Why do you care?"

"Because you need this. Because I want you. Let me show you how much I ache for you."

Shane kissed Cody then, a deep, consuming, kiss. He couldn't think anymore, had to let go and simply *feel*.

They fumbled at each other's clothing, tugging shirts free, undoing pants, kicking off their shoes.

Once they were both naked, they crashed their mouths together again, Shane unable to tell who moved first. The kiss deepened as they used their hands to map each others' bodies, grinding, kneading, caressing. A subtle shift in their dynamic entered the exchange and Shane found himself giving up control to Cody's hands strong and calloused hands, his frantic, heated kisses.

"How much do you want to give me tonight?" Cody growled next to Shane's ear. "I need to hear it out loud."

"Everything." Shane could barely catch his breath. "I want to give you all of it."

"Mmm, my wanton boy." Cody placed a quick kiss to Shane's mouth, almost as if he were sealing the deal between them. "Then sit on the couch. Spread eagle."

Shane shuddered. The image in his mind of sitting naked, legs wide, available to Cody was so erotic, he wasn't sure he'd last.

He sank to the couch, opening his legs and resting his arms at his side. He waited for Shane to tell him what to do, his natural instincts as a sub taking over.

Cody approached him with darkened eyes, his breathing ragged. “I’m going to make you feel so good, baby. So free.”

His movements were smooth and languid, and at last, Shane had a moment to appreciate Cody’s lean muscles that made up his beautiful form. His cock was thick, and it curved up to his belly, the slit glistening with a drop of precum. Shane couldn’t stop staring.

Cody leaned down, his gaze roaming Shane’s body as he brushed his roughened palms over Shane’s lightly furred chest. Shane gasped as Cody tweaked first one then the other nipple, as if testing their responsiveness.

Cody chuckled as Shane arched his back. “Can you imagine how spectacular your nipples would feel with rings pierced through that sensitive flesh? I could attach small, silver chains, link them to Starshine’s harness. I bet you’d love it.”

Shane whimpered. Back when he’d first started playing, he’d thought about getting them pierced. But everything had fallen apart so abruptly, he’d never gotten that far.

Cody’s hands traveled lower, down Shane’s abs, his fingers feathering over the tip of Shane’s dick, causing it to jump against his stomach, leaving a sticky kiss on his skin. Cody’s hand slid further down. He cupped Shane’s his cock balls, Shane arching his back again, the warm sensation almost too much for him to take.

Cody massaged his balls, then fisted the base of his cock before giving it a small, but firm, tug. Shane groaned.

“This is mine, tonight.” Cody’s sharp tone reminded Shane who was in charge. “Bend your knees then rest your heels on the edge of the cushions and hold your legs open for me. Mmm...that’s it, good boy. Scoot down a bit so I can see that pretty hole.”

Shane closed his eyes as Cody’s hands roamed over his ass. Cody took his time, teasing his crease, circling Shane’s rim with the tip of his finger, but not pushing in. Shane groaned as Cody continued to explore his ass, teasing him with the promise of what was next.

“Open your mouth and suck on my finger. Make sure you get it nice and wet.”

Shane did as he was told, rasping his tongue around Cody’s finger. His cock throbbed and leaked in anticipation.

Once Cody seemed satisfied that Shane had completed his task, he pulled the digit free. Cody massaged Shane’s hole, pushing in a little, then sliding back out. He did it again and again, each thrust sending electricity through Shane’s body. His balls tightened and he wasn’t sure how much more he could stand.

Cody’s breathing turned heavier, quicker. When Cody pushed in this time, Shane’s body accepted the intrusion and Shane’s head fell back, a low groan rumbling in his chest.

“Damn. You’re like fucking heaven,” Cody whispered.

He pushed in farther, his finger sliding in and out of Shane’s ass. “I’m going to get your hole nice and ready for

me, but I need a little help.” He removed his finger from Shane’s passage and Shane whimpered at the loss. “Don’t worry, baby. I’ll be right back.”

Cody quickly returned from the bedside table, a small bottle of lube in one hand, condom in the other. Shane licked his too dry lips.

Yes...

After snicking open the bottle of lube, Cody dribbled a generous amount on his fingers, then resumed fucking Shane’s hole. Shane slowly thrust his hips, matching the rhythm of Cody’s finger sliding in and out of his ass. Cody was driving him crazy—it was that simple.

“Ready for more, baby?” Cody whispered.

A strangled sound escaped Shane’s mouth in response. He wondered if Cody’s question had been more rhetorical than anything, so didn’t try to form more intelligible words.

Cody scraped his teeth down the side of Shane’s neck over his late day stubble. Then his lips were on Shane’s skin, latching on and sucking up another mark. Shane couldn’t wait to see the evidence of their encounter, to carry Cody with him, even if the marks only lasted a short time.

“I want to tie you down, Shane. Spread you open like this and use you. I want to fuck you until you scream.”

“Oh god,” Shane moaned, his skin tingling with anticipation. “Yes.”

Cody pulled out of him, then put a hand on the back of Shane’s neck, pulling him in for a kiss. It was deep and

claiming, possessive, just like everything else they'd shared so far.

“Then give me a chance to show you how good it can be between us. To show what it's like to be cherished in my arms.”

Shane moaned and nodded, unable to find the words.

“That's my baby.” Cody kissed him again, but this time it was softer, more tender. Then I'll need your safeword, so I can help you feel free tonight, free to fly.” Cody stroked Shane's cock, coaxing more drops of pre-cum from the slit. “And I promise you'll fly so high.”

Shane bit his lip, his heart thundering. “Showtime. Showtime's my safeword.”

Cody smiled, placing a kiss on Shane's shoulder. “Good boy. Do you have a word to slow things down, or do you use the color system?”

“Color.” Shane's voice kept getting caught in his throat.

Cody was sexy as fuck. Every word, every touch, every kiss made him tremble with need. But the talk of safewords made his dick start to lag. The last time he'd used a safeword had been when...

“Hmm.” Cody's brow wrinkled in the slightest. “Talk to me, baby. What's come up for you?”

Fuck. He was ruining things. If they were only going to have this one night, he wanted it to be perfect.

Shane finally managed to push out the words. “Memories. Stupid useless memories.” His lip trembled. “Spank me, Cody.

Take me out of my head.”

Cody’s lips brushed his ear, his hot breath sending a shiver up Shane’s spine. “I’d love to do that for you, baby. I want to spank you until you cry, then fuck those thoughts into oblivion, pound your ass until all you can think about is me and how much I want and cherish you.”

Shane shuddered, his nerves alive and sparking. “Yes. Please.”

Cody helped him to straighten out his legs, massaging them lightly as he did. “Better?”

Shane nodded. “Yes, thank you.”

Cody sat on the couch next to him, setting the lube and condom within reach on his other side. He patted his thighs.

“Over my lap then palms on the floor to support you.”

Shane did as he was told, Cody opening his legs a tad to allow Shane’s cock to hang between them.

“Good job, baby. I’m going to start now, and I want you to count each strike. By the time you hit twenty, you’re going to come for Daddy, understand?”

Daddy. He swallowed hard. He could do this, he could come for Daddy, make him proud.

“Yes, Daddy.”

Cody rubbed his ass. “Good boy.” He dipped a finger into Shane’s crease as if he couldn’t help playing with his hole once more before they began. “First strike.”

Cody’s palm landed on his taut rear, and he jerked from the hearty slap. The force hadn’t been anywhere close to what

he'd happily taken in the past, but it had been a while. He breathed in through his nose as he free-fell into the sensation he hadn't realized he missed so much.

“Count for me, baby. I want you to say the numbers.”

“One.” Shane pressed his face against his arm as Cody continued to spank him. The pain built with each stinging smack, his ass blazing with heat.

“...Ten.”

The next strike made him jump, the harsher slap catching him by surprise. Cody increased the pressure of his palm at the small of Shane's back to steady him.

“Are you ready to come?”

Shane nodded, his whole body on fire.

“Give me your words so I know how much you like getting spanked. You crave it, don't you?”

“Y-yes,” Shane whispered. “Eleven.”

His hips began to move as if they had a mind of their own. He thrust his aching cock between Cody's strong thighs, sawing back and forth, seeking more friction.

“You're doing great, baby boy. I'm so proud.” Cody's hand landed on Shane's ass.

“Twelve.” Another spank. “Thirteen.” Another. “Fourteen.” Flames licked his skin where Cody's hand met his ass, his whole being focused on the pain and pleasure. “Oh, God, I'm going to come,” Shane keened, the buried his nose in his pit.

“Hold onto it. We're almost there.”

Shane groaned. “Yes, Daddy.”

“I didn’t hear you, baby.” Cody’s voice was firm, but the tenderness was there as well.

“I will. I’ll save it for you.”

“Such a very good boy.”

Another slap stung his flesh. “Fifteen.” Again. “Sixteen, oh fuck!” He couldn’t fail, couldn’t disappoint Daddy.

“Seventeen,” he gritted through his teeth, “Eighteen, oh please, Daddy, please.”

“So close, baby boy. You can do it.”

Cody’s hand came down *hard*, then he paused, dragging those roughened palms over Shane’s sore ass, spreading the pain as his cock twitched and throbbed. Cody trailed a finger in the valley between Shane’s cheeks. He dipped his finger inside his crease and circled the pad of his finger around Shane’s rim.

Cody was trying to kill him with pleasure—he was sure of it.

The next strike came out of nowhere and Shane yelped. “Nineteen.” He sucked in a sharp breath as electricity shot up his spine. “Twenty!”

“Come for Daddy now, baby.”

After two jerky strokes, he froze, cum shooting from his cock, his body shaking through the power of his orgasm. His mind went fuzzy, and he went limp on Cody’s lap. His Daddy softly caressed Shane’s aching ass, a low pulse of pain thumping beneath his skin.

“I want you inside me, Daddy.”

“My beautiful baby.” Cody’s fingers teased his ass, sliding his slickened fingers against Shane’s hole. “Don’t worry, I’ve got you. Gonna pound that pretty ass until you can hardly walk.”

Shane whimpered as Cody’s fingers slid into his ass again, probing and stretching. He was back to taking his time, even though Cody’s cock was like steel, radiating heat against Shane’s body.

After a few moments more, Cody helped him off his lap, once again lightly massaging the kinks out of his muscles. He positioned Shane so he was kneeling on the rug and resting his head on the sofa cushions, his ass open and available for Cody to use.

More slick was dribbled on his crease, then there was the sound of the condom package tearing behind him. Shane screwed his eyes shut, imagining Cody viewing his exposed body, readying himself to bury his cock into Shane’s ass.

Cody nudged his dick against Shane’s opening, pressing down until he breached the tight muscle guarding Shane’s hole. Shane hissed through the burn—it had been a while. Cody slid in all the way then fucked him slowly, his thick length sliding in and out of Shane’s passage. With every deep plunge into Shane’s passage, Cody forced the air from Shane’s lungs until he was fucking him so hard, he could barely catch his breath.

Shane’s fingers scrabbled on the fabric of the cushion, seeking purchase, but finding none against the onslaught of Cody’s punishing thrusts. He’d long passed the age where he

could recover quickly, but his cock made a valiant attempt. Cody had a fantastic dick, and he fucking knew how to use it.

With an abrupt shout, Cody froze, his fingers digging into Shane's hips with a bruising grip as he growled through his release. The pulsing in Shane's ass soothed him, was like another claim on him. If only they didn't have the condom between them.

"What a good baby," Cody whispered. "You were so good for Daddy. You did so well."

Cody draped his body over Shane's back, still balls deep in Shane's ass. He reached up, Cody, lacing their fingers together above Shane's head.

"Let's getting in the bed so I can hold you."

Tears burned Shane's eyes. Yes. He wanted that more than anything.

Cody nipped at Shane's earlobe. "Someday, I'm going to breed your hot ass. But for now, snuggles."

Someday? The idea that they might be together beyond the one night both excited and terrified him. He shoved the thought aside.

Cody helped Shane to his feet, his gaze dropping to Shane's knee. His eyes widened. "Fuck. I'm such an ass. I didn't even think about your knee." He dropped to his haunches then peppered his knee with tiny kisses. "You should've said something, baby."

Shane ran his fingers through Cody's hair, loving the feel of the soft, short strands. "It's not that bad. I didn't even wear the wrap today."

Cody peered up at him. “And now? After I drilled you while you were on your knees?”

Shane’s face heated. “Well...there’s a little twinge.” He cleared his throat. “But honestly, my ass hurts a whole lot more.”

Cody snorted then regained his composure. He shook a finger up at Shane.

“Okay, first rule. Always tell Daddy if you’re hurt or experiencing pain that’s not the kind you’re looking for.”

Shane’s throat closed up. Why did Cody keep acting like they were going to somehow be together? The whole idea was ludicrous. His eyes filled with tears. Wasn’t it?

“Hey,” Cody slid up Shane’s body until he was upright again. “I know what’s going through that pretty head of yours. But for tonight, there’s no thinking.” Cody brushed his palm over Shane’s ass, and he hissed at the touch. “It’s too soon to spank you again.”

“Got it.”

Shane didn’t want to think about anything either. For once, he was going to allow himself to *feel*.

Cody kissed him, the exchange languid. “You’re wonderful, Shane. Beautiful. That’s the way I see you, the way you deserve to be seen.”

He gathered Shane’s hand in his then led him the short distance to the bed. After pulling back the covers, they both climbed on the mattress, with Cody tucking the blanket and comforter around them. Shane rolled over and snuggled against Cody, his eyes drifting closed.

He found himself dwelling on what Cody had said about breeding him. That sort of promise meant scary things. Long term. Exclusivity. *A relationship.*

Damn. He was back to thinking again. He supposed it would take a while to adjust to—

He scrunched his eyes closed tighter. *Still thinking.*

“How are you doing?” Cody’s voice was soft, his hand caressing Shane’s arm.

Shane nuzzled Cody’s neck. “Amazing. Overwhelmed, but amazing.”

Cody gave him a gentle squeeze. “Tell me if you start to struggle. And I’m going to be a bit bossy and insist you stay here with me tonight so I can keep an eye on you.” He pressed a kiss to Shane’s temple. “I gather it’s been a while since you’ve been with a Dom or been spanked. Am I right?”

Shane sighed. “Yeah...” He peered up at Cody. “I’m sure it’s rather obvious I’ve been hiding.”

Cody brushed his fingers along Shane’s arm. “That’s all right, baby. It hurts me to think you were mistreated by anyone in the community, but I applaud your bravery.”

“Bravery?” As far as Shane was concerned, he was the biggest coward ever. Cody had to be seriously confused. “I just confessed that I’ve been hiding, that I haven’t let anyone near me after what happened. That’s a coward if I ever heard of one.”

Cody growled. “Don’t put yourself down. Daddy doesn’t like that.”

Tears threatened again, but Shane fought them off. “How can you talk like that?”

“Like what, baby boy? Tell your Daddy.”

“But that’s just it, you’re *not* my Daddy. Not for real. You’re leaving Tuesday morning, going back to Montana and that will be it. We’ll never see each other again. Why bother?” Shane struggled to pull free of Cody’s embrace. “I should leave. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Even as he spit out the words, he recognized his childish behavior for what it was. He was manipulating Cody, testing him. It didn’t mean his anguish wasn’t real, though.

“Okay, how about if I say I’m not sure how long I can wait to be with you again? That I want more than a scene or the occasional hook-up if I’m ever in town?”

Shane’s stomach clenched, his heart thudding so hard he could hear it in his ears. The entire situation was such a tease due to their circumstances. Even without all his fears getting in the way, there were plenty of practicalities to be considered.

He was a prudent man. And he was way too old to give in to impulse or fevered passion. What they shared had been an incredible sexual interlude. That was all.

Shane’s lip quivered. Then why did he wish what they’d shared was so much more than that? Why did he want to believe that Cody genuinely wanted him, that he would care for him and be his Daddy Dom?

Maybe the truth was that he truly *was* a coward. He wiped his eyes and swallowed hard, his breath hitching when Cody pulled him into his arms more tightly.

Cody rubbed Shane's back, quiet and steady. He kissed Shane on the head, whispering soothing words as Shane slowly calmed, his breathing evening out.

Shane sighed. "The fact that you're leaving and have a completely different life than mine hasn't changed. You're a young man, Cody. You'll find someone else who can fit in to your world."

"Stop that shit, boy. Right now."

Shane blinked several times. Okay, so Cody had what it took to be a strong Dom, the type Shane needed. His shoulders slumped. *In Montana*. Shane swallowed, desperate to get the cotton out of his mouth.

He raised his head to look into Cody's eyes. "I'm being realistic, Cody, and you know it. It's not only your ranch that's a concern. I have a job too, you know."

Cody arched his eyebrows and Shane cleared his throat. He hadn't sounded convincing to even his own ears. He used to love styling hair. Who said he couldn't love it again?

Cody shook his head. "Look, I don't want to make our short time together be about me pressuring you or trying to talk you into something you're genuinely not interested in." Cody rubbed his thumb across Shane's cheek. "I'll let go of this topic so we can enjoy our time before I leave for Montana. But you're always welcome at the ranch, my door is open to you whenever. Promise me you'll at least consider coming to visit, seeing if we click the way I'm sure we will?"

Shane nodded shakily. "I'll consider it." Never had a thought been so terrifying. "But for now, I'll stay." He cleared

his throat again. “In your room.”

Cody leaned in for a soft kiss, his embrace strong and reassuring. He broke the connection but kept his gaze locked on Shane.

“Then let me take care of my sweet boy while I have the honor of doing so.”

Chapter Six

Shane licked his dry lips, barely able to muster up enough spit to swallow.

He'd lost his mind. Had probably been taken over by the pod people.

The sun hadn't risen yet, but here he was at the Mountain Lake Resort, large duffle at his feet, waiting for Cody to come down from his room so they could leave for his Montana ranch.

Shane's legs began to shake so he sidled his way to one of the lobby chairs by the fireplace. His impulsive decision only a few hours before had made perfect sense while wrapped in Cody's arms in a post-orgasmic state.

One of many, many orgasms over the course of three days.

After their first night together—one that Shane would always treasure no matter what the outcome of his and Cody's relationship was—he'd come to realize that he'd never forgive himself if he didn't at least give it a try.

“Ah, there's the best boy in the world.”

Shane's head whipped around at the sound of Cody's voice. The moment he locked eyes with him, the fear melted away. He'd made the right decision.

And besides, one week wasn't forever. This would be a relaxing vacation if nothing else. A relaxing, lusty, porny vacation. How could he argue with that?

Shane rose and Cody yanked him close with an arm around his waist. He gave him a brief, but claiming, kiss then set Shane free.

"Gotta hit the road. It's three a.m. now, so if we keep it to one piss stop, we should get there by early afternoon." Cody's features softened. "Thank you, Shane. I want you to know how much I appreciate your trust in me. It's an honor."

Shane nodded jerkily, trying hard to keep his composure. Given his lack of sleep, it wouldn't take much to set him off.

"I haven't meant anyone worthy of it since I can remember."

Cody smiled returned. "Then I think we're off to an excellent start. Ready?"

Shane grinned. An honest to God grin. "Completely ready."

Cody slung his duffle over his shoulder with a chuckle. "Then let's get the hell out of Dodge."

Shane awoke with a start, the truck shaking as they turned onto a dirt road. He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, embarrassed that he'd drifted off while Cody was stuck with driving through the early morning hours. They'd only made one stop along the way, and that had been a few hours ago

when they grabbed some coffee and took a bathroom break somewhere in Idaho.

But now, the sun was high in the sky, and he figured it was well into the afternoon.

Cody's hand landed on his thigh. "There's my sleepyhead. Feeling a bit more rested?"

"Sorry for falling asleep on you like that. I was supposed to keep you company."

Cody chuckled. "You can fall asleep on me anytime."

Shane didn't know what to say, so he covered Cody's hand with his own, giving his fingers a light squeeze. What was it about Cody that made life seem brighter, newer? That there was possibility and hope in every moment they shared?

Shane straightened as the fuzziness of leftover sleep drifted away. His jaw went slack as he absorbed the beauty of the expansive terrain. The rolling hills extended across the landscape, interspersed with small patches of bright yellow buttercups. The fluffy white clouds against the cobalt blue of the sky were as striking as when they reflected in the deep waters of Lake Tahoe. Long grasses swayed in the breeze like a million waving hands as though they were welcoming Shane to the place Cody called home.

"This is gorgeous." Shane leaned against the passenger window, gazing at the open landscape. "Peaceful."

He felt as if he could finally exhale.

Shane was about to ask if they were getting close to Cody's ranch, when he spotted the wood post pillars rising proudly into the sky, standing like two loyal guards at the

entrance to Valley High Cattle Ranch. Another post beam connected the two side ones at the top, and from it hung a metal sign. The engraved bold lettering proclaimed the ownership of the ranch Cody had told him had been in their family since the turn of the Twentieth Century.

“Once we crest this hill, you’ll be able to see the house and outbuildings.”

Shane leaned forward in his seat. “I see a bunch of cows.”

Cody laughed. “Be prepared to smell them, too. Mostly in the summer, it’s not a constant thing. But I’ve been around this my whole life, so I don’t give it a second thought.” Cody glanced at him before returning his eyes to the road. “You’ll get used to it.”

Shane nodded, swallowing hard. Cody had already made it clear that he was interested in making them a regular thing, but Shane still hadn’t wrapped his head around the logistics. Not to mention whether finally letting his splashy pony out in front of someone after all these years was something he could handle. He might not have it in him anymore.

The sad truth of that made his gut clench.

“There you go, home sweet home.”

Cody’s home stood tall, its unique wooden structure surrounded by smatterings of wildflowers. The two-story home looked to have been added to over the years, the extended sections making the structure unbalanced, but also giving it a rustic charm. To one side of the double front doors and the paned picture window was a tall river rock chimney. Overall, the house radiated the vibe of the wild frontier.

Cody pulled up to the edge of a small lawn with a short stone walkway dissecting it in the center. He threw his truck into park then angled his body toward Shane, draping an arm across the bench seat.

“I need to get everything unloaded, but I’ll give you a quick tour of the inside first and get you settled. Not sure where Bert and the guys are right now, but I’ll give him a text. They might be on the other side of the hill behind the stables. He mentioned that a section of fence had gone down around there.”

Mind blown.

This was such a foreign way of life for him. Even though he’d been around some 4H kids growing when his dad was stationed in Texas, that hadn’t been a part of his own experience. Then another part of Cody’s statement filtered through his mind.

“I don’t want you to do all the work of unloading. You must be bone tired. I’ll help.”

Cody gave him a warm smile. “I tell you what. This time, you’re my guest. When you come back, I’ll put you to work.”

Shane sighed. “Cody...you know I can’t promise anything.”

“That’s okay.” He brushed his thumb along Shane’s bottom lip. “You can still be my guest. Remember, as Daddy, I get to make the rules.”

Cody winked then was out of the truck in a flash. Oh, how he wished he could be as confident as Cody, as sure of

himself as a worthwhile pony and sub the way Cody believed he was.

Once Shane had dropped from the truck, he noted the difference in the air. Tahoe had incredibly clean and crisp air, so it wasn't that. Yes, there was definitely a tinge of manure. But there was also a mixture of other smells. The rich soil, the grasses—perhaps even the flowers. He didn't know enough about flowering plants to recognize if they were a part of the mix.

As if in answer to his question, Shane let out a big sneeze. Whatever he'd sniffed contained pollen, so there was that.

Cody unlocked the door then swung it wide open. He reached out his hand and Shane placed his own in Cody's palm. Shane had noticed right away how much Cody loved holding hands. Despite being someone who never did that, Shane had found the gesture comforting. He hadn't even minded his friends and associates spotting him walking around the resort like that with Cody.

But it was Lee's delighted smile when he saw them together on Tuesday afternoon, strolling along the pathway that led to the lake overview, that it resonated with him so deeply. He could tell how happy Lee was for him.

The Tuesday was a bonus. Cody had extended his stay so they could spend more time together before he left, since Shane still had a lot of follow-up from the event to handle on Monday. In truth, Shane suspected Cody had wanted the extra time to do more convincing for Shane to come with him.

Clearly, it had worked.

Cody had needed to wake Shane from another nap, but he was glad his boy had gotten more rest. He imagined Shane's exhaustion was a combination of things. All the work for the event, his anxiety, a multitude of orgasms then the long drive on no sleep.

Cody chuckled to himself as he opened the box containing the frozen pizza. He was too tired to do anything fancy for dinner. Even firing up the grill and throwing on a couple steaks seemed like too much effort.

No, tonight was going to be chowing down in front of the fire, snuggling and sharing some conversation for as long as they could keep their eyes open.

Shane passed through the doorway of the kitchen, glancing around in seeming interest. "The yellow is very cheery, and I love the vintage tile. This is a great space. Nice and large."

He smiled at Cody, Shane's expression calmer than usual. He liked to think that his influence had something to do with that.

"Sorry I can't introduce you to my premium, grass fed beef tonight. But definitely tomorrow."

Shane held up his hand, palm out. "Don't apologize. I can't imagine you doing any cooking right now." He chuckled. "I imagine you don't run through fast food joints that often or get pizzas delivered."

Cody burst out laughing. "Not unless the coyotes have a new side hustle I'm not aware of." He set the over timer.

“Nope. We’re on our own out here.”

Shane gave him that same easy smile. “I think it’s wonderful.”

They locked eyes, sharing a silent moment of understanding before Cody returned his attention to preparing their simple meal.

He had a feeling Shane was coming around. Maybe this time next year, he’d have his very own ponyboy living with him on the ranch.

Chapter Seven

Cody parked the ranch work truck on a patch of dirt next to the path leading to the creek. Depending on the time of year and what section of his property he was on, it could appear like anything from a babbling brook to a raging river. The snow melt was in full force, but there hadn't been any rain lately, so it was somewhere in-between.

“Come on, Shane. Let's get all this chow out of the truck that we made last night. I'm starving.”

A picnic at one of his favorite spots seemed like a great way for them to spend more time getting to know each other. He also wanted to share the special place with Shane. He'd never brought a man there before. It had always been his private respite.

Shane grabbed the large basket from the bed of the truck while Cody slung the cooler pack over his shoulder and draped a blanket over his arm. “Follow me.” Cody gestured to Shane. “It's just down the path through those bushes. Then we'll have some trees near the creek we can sit under for shade.”

Shane followed closely behind him as they made their way down the path with the sun beaming down on their backs. The sound of the gurgling creek grew louder as they approached, the air cooling a tad.

Cody led them to a clearing with a tall oak tree providing plenty of shade. He hoped the tranquil atmosphere would help Shane to relax around him even more, maybe even picture himself living at the ranch with him someday.

Yeah. He'd fallen pretty hard for Shane. However, he didn't want to scare him off.

"This is beautiful," Shane remarked as he set the basket down.

Cody smiled. "I'm glad. I come here to clear my head sometimes, but it's even better to share it with someone."

Cody held Shane's gaze, Shane being the first to glance away.

They unpacked the basket, revealing a variety of small sandwiches with smoked ham, roast beef, turkey and cheeses. Fresh fruit and some homemade cookies that Bert's wife sent over that morning completed their meal.

As they ate, they chatted about everything from their favorite movies to their best childhood memories. The conversation flowed easily between them, and the more they talked, the more Cody discovered how much he and Shane had in common.

Eventually, they finished their food and relaxed together against the tree, their fingers laced together, their joined hands resting on Cody's thigh. He could imagine this very scene with Shane happening again and again throughout the years ahead. But the only way to get to that point was to encourage Shane to take a risk.

“Have you had a chance to think about what we discussed last night?”

Shane’s grip tightened a fraction, and Cody wasn’t sure if it had been conscious or not.

“You mean about getting tested while I’m here?”

Cody chuckled. His boy was bent on avoiding the much more important subject.

“Well, that too. But what I was actually referring to was you coming to the ranch one week per month.”

Shane stared out at the water, his jaw ticking the way Cody had seen it do so many times. The sun sparkling off the flowing water was hypnotic, soothing. One of several reasons Cody had brought Shane to this particular spot. He hoped Shane found it as relaxing as he did.

“Well...I suppose I could book my clients only three weeks out of the month,” Shane still didn’t look Cody’s way. “Although, I have a few regulars who come once a week, so that would cause them an issue. I hate to let people down.”

Cody couldn’t stand it. He didn’t want to be pushy, or coax Shane into something he honestly didn’t want, but he didn’t believe that was the problem. His guess was that Shane had been denying himself for so long, putting everyone else’s needs first, that he didn’t know how to climb out of that trap.

Even if they didn’t stay together, Cody silently vowed to himself he’d help guide Shane toward living his best life.

Cody patted his thighs. “On my lap, boy. Now.”

That got Shane's attention. He gaped at Cody, his brow furrowing. "I'll squash you."

Cody laughed. "No you won't." He patted his thighs again. "Don't make me ask twice." He tapped Shane's nose. "Daddy knows best."

The high flush that bloomed in Shane's cheeks told Cody he was on the right track. Shane complied, and they took a moment to get settled. He could tell Shane wasn't putting his full weight on Cody, that he was bracing himself with one hand on the ground, but baby steps. They'd get there. Cody was sure of it.

"Eyes on me, baby." He waited for Shane to do as he was told. "Good boy. You know what I think the real issue is? It's you putting everyone else's desires before your own. So let's talk this through. How do you handle your weekly clients when you're running the pet play event every year? Do you still see them?"

Shane shook his head, his eyes still fixed on Cody's. "No, I usually take a break for the month before it begins. That's when the training starts in earnest, and I need to focus on prepping for the event itself."

Cody nodded. "And do your clients understand? Do they still come back when you're available again?"

"They do, but I always feel guilty for having to cancel on them. Like I said, I hate the idea of letting anyone down." Shane lowered his head.

Cody took a deep breath, trying to form the right words. "Understandable, Shane. But sometimes, putting yourself first

is necessary. It's not selfish, it's self-care. And I want you to take care of yourself because you deserve it and because you matter to me."

Shane's bottom lip trembled, and he buried his face in Cody's neck. Cody wrapped his arms around Shane, holding him close as he continued to speak.

"I want you to commit to coming here one week out of every month for six months. If after that, you decide this isn't working out, that I'm not the Daddy for you, then we walk away as friends." He pulled back, grasping Shane's chin and encouraging him to look up. "There's my beautiful boy. Is that something you'd like to try?"

Shane's eyes shone with unshed tears, and he nodded. "Yes, Daddy. I want to try."

Cody leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Shane's lips, feeling the tremble in his boy's breath. "Good answer, baby. And in return, I promise to take care of you, guide you, and make sure you're never alone again."

Shane's arms tightened around Cody's neck, and he buried his face in the crook of Cody's shoulder. Cody held him close, feeling a deep sense of satisfaction spread through him. He knew it wouldn't be easy, but he was ready to put in the work to help Shane. Together, they had the chance to build something real, something that would last.

"Lie down with me, baby. I want to hold you proper."

As they snuggled in each other's arms, they were enveloped by the tranquility of the surroundings. The sound of the water flowing in the creek, the chirping of songbirds and

the rustling of the leaves in the trees above added to the peace of the moment. Cody could sense Shane's apprehension slowly melting away. He knew that this was just the beginning, but he wouldn't push. It was okay to take things one step at a time.

Cody glanced down at Shane, who was now resting his head on Cody's chest. He stroked his hair, enjoying the feel of Shane's closely-cropped soft strands. Contentment washed over him as they basked in the warmth of the day and the shared embrace.

After a few moments, Shane lifted his head and looked up at Cody. "Can we talk about something fun now?" he asked, his eyes wide like a child's.

Cody raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "What do you have in mind, baby?"

He wanted so badly to refer to Shane as his pony, but he was willing to wait for the signal that it was okay. The humiliation Shane's ex had doled out must've been brutal.

Shane offered him a shy smile. "I want to go horseback riding."

Cody grinned. "You want to ride or be ridden?"

Shane blushed. "I want to ride." He cleared his throat. "This time."

Cody chuckled, pressing a quick kiss to Shane's forehead. Maybe they'd get to play with Shane's pony sooner than he'd thought.

"Then ride you shall, baby." He patted Shane's butt. "When's the last time you got on a horse? Or have you?"

Shane traced his finger idly along Cody's chest. "Honestly, it's been years. I rode a lot when I was a kid. One of my good friends had horses. Since then, only one other time when I went on a trail ride with a group. I could barely walk the week afterward."

Cody snorted. "We'll take it slow then. If anything is going to make you walk funny, it better be my cock."

Shane laughed, a hearty sound that told him his boy was getting more and more at ease being around him.

As the sun began to set behind the trees, casting an orange glow over the clearing, Cody pulled Shane close once more. This was where he belonged. With Shane in his arms, surrounded by the land that had been a part of his family for well over a hundred years. If everything went the way he hoped it would, then maybe Shane would become a part of his family, too.

Cody nuzzled behind Shane's ear. "Tell me more about Starshine. What are his favorite things to wear?"

Despite Shane's insistence that Cody sell the butterfly lead, that he shouldn't save it for him, Cody had pulled it from sale anyway. Once he found out Shane loved it, that it would be perfect for Starshine, he couldn't imagine anyone else using it.

They were on their sides, Cody spooning Shane from behind, their joined hands pressed to Shane's chest. After a moment, Shane gripped Cody's hand tighter, as if using him as a lifeline.

“Starshine isn’t always glitzy. Only when doing a performance.” Shane cleared his throat, then spoke with the slightest tremble in his voice. “The rest of the time, he likes the feel of the bit in his mouth, his trainer on his back...” Shane’s grip grew tighter. “The crack of the whip.”

“Mmm... So, Starshine is a circus show pony who also needs a firm trainer. Is that right?”

“Yes, that’s perfect.” Shane’s voice came out soft, almost breathless.

“No racing, no cart pulling?”

“None of that. That’s another reason why they all made fun of me.”

Cody kissed the back of Shane’s neck over and over, hugging him, holding his most wonderful boy.

“Awful, awful people. They didn’t have the right to do that to you.” Cody inhaled the warm, musky scent of Shane’s sweat-covered skin. “Your Daddy won’t ever allow that to happen again, got it?”

Shane turned his head until their lips met, opening his mouth for a kiss with Cody gladly obliging. They took their time, let the sounds of nature around them create the perfect backdrop to the lazy exploration.

Shane turned in Cody’s arms, staring into his eyes as twilight approached. “I wish we could stay out here all night. It feels as though we’re the only two people in the world.”

Cody stroked Shane’s cheek with his thumb. “Next time, we can. Just have to plan for it.”

“Can next time be tomorrow, after the horses?”

Cody’s heart beat faster. He and Shane were going to work out really well together, he could feel it. “Sure can.”

Shane’s eyebrows pinched together. “Wait. Am I interfering with your work schedule? I keep forgetting this isn’t a vacation for you.”

Cody chuckled. “You’re such a sweetheart. *I* might be interfering with my work schedule.”

The worry radiating from Shane’s features made Cody wish he’d kept his commentary to himself. Not one person truly saw how sensitive a man Shane was. Cody was committed to be the one who protected and nurtured that emotion in Shane, who made him feel safe.

Shane’s brow furrowed deeper. “Look, we don’t have to do any of that. I’ll be fine at the house while you take care of whatever it is you need to do. This property must be a huge responsibility.”

Cody stole a quick kiss from Shane. “It is. But Bert’s been with our family for years, and two of his sons work for me as well. The whole team is quite capable. Also, they can reach me the same way everyone contacted you at the resort. We text back and forth all the time. There’s always a cow wandering off where they aren’t supposed to.”

“Okay.” Shane still didn’t seem a hundred percent convinced. “I don’t know anything about running a ranch, so I’ll defer to your judgment.”

“You’d better, boy. Daddy’s in charge.”

The corner of Shane's mouth tugged into a smile.
"Sounds good to me."

Cody would take that as a win. A *huge* win.

Chapter Eight

The week at the ranch with Cody was coming to an end, and moments of panic had been tearing through Shane all morning. Even though he'd been the one resisting Cody's offer of staying with him at the ranch, the thought of leaving Cody behind to go back to his old life was devastating.

But he had to remain realistic. They'd known each other for less than two weeks. Even if they'd been living together for one of those weeks, they were in that dangerous honeymoon phase. Everyone knew how unreliable that state of emotion could be.

Cody emerged from the bathroom that was attached to the large upstairs primary bedroom, a towel still around his waist from his shower. He winked at Shane with a smile, the way he so often did.

The first time Cody had winked at Shane, the action had angered him. The twenty-eight-year-old Cody had seemed way too immature compared to his own supposed forty-two-year-old maturity.

But Cody was the one who had his shit together, not Shane.

Cody shook a finger at him. "Oh no you don't. No sad faces today. We're going to have the best time ever. Like I told

you last night, Daddy has a big surprise for you.” He grabbed Shane’s groin through the towel. “And this ain’t it.”

Shane barked out a laugh. No one could pull that sort response out of him. No one except Cody.

He was back to fearing the imminent end of their week together.

Cody approached him where he sat at the end of the bed, wrapping his arms around Shane’s shoulders and holding him to his frame.

“Do you want to tell Daddy what’s bothering you?”

Shane grabbed Cody in return, clutching him around his waist. “No. Not now.” He lifted his head, peering up at his Daddy. “I just want to enjoy the day with you. Don’t want to think about anything else for now.”

Cody nodded, caressing his cheek. “Then that’s what we’ll do, baby.”

Cody had been very secretive about where he was taking him and what they’d be doing. Shane followed the tight-lipped Cody to his work truck, noting how Cody had grabbed the cooler bag off the entryway floor.

He didn’t have a clue what Cody was up to. They’d ridden the horses, and camped by the creek. There had been the picnic too, of course. Then they’d taken a day trip up to Butte, grabbed some lunch and checked out some of the historic sites. Since it was the end of the week, whatever the big surprise was that Cody had planned would have to be closer by.

Shane climbed into the pickup and Cody brought the engine to life. He headed to the main ranch road that edged the property. When he'd given Shane the full tour, that's how they'd gotten around. Other than when they rode the horses, of course. They'd been able to explore the ranch freely then.

Once they made it about halfway around the acreage and beyond the main house and barn, Cody turned onto a much smaller road Shane hadn't noticed originally. They bumped along, Cody grinning as if he were the Cheshire Cat.

“Can I have a hint?”

Cody laughed. “We're almost there.”

Shane noted something on the horizon, a structure of some sort. He leaned forward as they drew closer. It looked like...

“Why do you have a horse training pen all the way out here?”

Shane thought Cody's cheek muscles must be worn out with all the maniacal smiling he was doing.

Cody brought the truck to a stop about ten feet away from the enclosed space. “Oh, you'll see. Go on. Take a peek.”

Shane dropped from the truck, mesmerized by the sight before him. There weren't any horses nearby and they were all alone, far from the part of the property where Cody's herd of Angus cows grazed on the grass. No. This was something unrelated to Cody's ranching business.

This was personal. Intimate.

Shane entered the round pen. The walls were solid and sturdy, made from thick wood that were reinforced with metal bars. In the center was a tall metal pole with a hook where a lead could be attached. The height of the wood panels meant that anyone inside the enclosure would have complete privacy.

He tentatively stepped through the door at one end that was made of metal and reinforced with additional wooden planks. He tapped one foot on the even and smooth ground, noting that the dirt was packed down to create an arena-like atmosphere. Sweat built at his neckline.

He'd never seen anything more incredible in his life.

Cody had created a private area where he could train ponies, to train *him*.

Cody came up behind him, placing his palm at the small of Shane's back.

"How do you like it, baby?"

Shane sniffed. "It's...it's beautiful. I've dreamed of being able to play in a place like this for years. It was a complete fantasy, didn't seem as though it could ever be possible." He turned to face Cody, resting his forehead on his Daddy's shoulder. "I know you didn't do this just for me but thank you. It means so much that you would bring me here."

Cody embraced Shane. "I've only ever brought one pony here and that was about a year ago. We met through a kink app, and he only came back a few times. He was still in the exploration stage and decided pony play wasn't really his thing." Cody shrugged. "That was fine. You know, I didn't build anything of this nature until my dad passed. My folks

knew I was gay, but never wanted to discuss it. I wouldn't have dared to even bring a date home." He chuckled. "Never mind a ponyboy."

Shane smiled. Since meeting Cody, he'd been filled with the urge to smile and laugh so much more than he ever had.

"And... you'll train me while I'm here?"

Cody let out a light laugh, pulling back a little. "Look at me, Shane."

Shane lifted his head, taking in the beauty of the man he was falling for. God, but the man was stunning. His gaze traveled over Cody's face, taking in every detail. From his high cheekbones to his deep-set hazel eyes with flecks of green and to his full lips, there was something so captivating about him.

Cody caressed Shane's cheek with his thumb. "Of course. That's why I wanted to show it to you. And I want to enhance it, make it more to your style. This is for you now, Shane."

Shane swallowed hard, not sure how to respond. Sure, he'd committed to one week a month for a while, but what if he couldn't swing it? Not only that, but what if things didn't work out at all? The past week had been fantastic, they clicked well, had so much in common...

But it was too soon for Cody to count on them being long-term.

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable with that." Shane bit his lip. That didn't mean he wasn't aching in his soul to have a pen to prance around in that was fit for a true circus pony.

"I'm afraid you'll go to all that trouble and expense for me, then be stuck with it if we..."

He couldn't even say it. Not when he was already so attached to Cody, to the promise of what a life with him could be. Yet, he still had responsibilities in Tahoe. Hadn't he always taken his obligations seriously? Wasn't that a big part of who he was?

So is this.

Cody pressed a soft kiss to Shane's forehead. "If the unthinkable happened, I'd still be glad I'd fixed up the pen for your Starshine. What's the point of having it at all if my ponyboy and I can't enjoy our time here together?" Cody tugged him back into his arms. "Wait until you see the stable."

Shane gasped, lifting his head again. "Stable? You mean that little building we passed?"

Cody slipped his hand into Shane's. "That's a very unique building that's meant for a trainer and his ponyboy only. Whaddya say we take a peek?"

Shane's cock hardened in his khakis, the anticipation of what special features Cody had included too exciting for words.

He licked his too dry lips. "S-sure."

Cody broke into a grin, yanking Shane's hand. "Come on, baby. I can't wait for you to see it."

Cody's enthusiasm was infectious and Shane trotted after him, laughing. Shane hadn't paid much attention to the structure, only noting that the small, all plank wood building was there. He'd assumed it held tack, or other supplies needed

for the ranch. The fact that the six or seven hundred square foot, windowless shed was so far removed from the rest of the outbuildings didn't hit him until now.

Cody paused at the door, tugging on the retractable cord attached to the ring of keys on his belt. He chose one then undid the padlock. Once the door was open, Cody flipped a switch, the room lit up and Shane's knees almost buckled.

Yeah. Being responsible was becoming less interesting all the time.

"Explore, baby. Take your time," said Cody softly.

All Shane could do was nod. The building was shoebox shaped, and about one-third of it was comprised of a stall that included a gate that would be about chest high to Shane.

Everything else in the room fell away as he rushed to see what was beyond the wooden panel that was held in place with iron strap hinges, the pull on it a large iron ring.

Shane's jaw dropped when he opened the gate. On the wooden floor was a mat that took up most of the surface. He crouched down, running his palm over the bamboo surface. At the far end, there was a large, purple velvet body pillow, the vibrant color standing in contrast to the light tones of the mat. Tiny glimmering beads edged the cushion, and he crawled on all fours to get to the luxurious item.

Shane sunk his fingers into the soft, decadent fabric covering the squishy down pillow. A throaty groan was the only comment he could manage.

"The stall is still pretty basic, but I did order the pillow for you especially."

Shane peered up at Cody. “You did? When?”

Cody chuckled. “As soon as you agreed to come to the ranch, I placed the order. That’s part of the reason why I’ve been waiting to bring you out here. I wanted there to be something that was only for you, that had been chosen with you in mind.” Cody’s features softened. “I’d like to do that with everything. Not just the pillow or the pen.”

Shane rose to his feet, rubbing his forehead. “I’m still worried you’ll regret putting all this time and money into us being together if things don’t pan out.”

Cody snapped his fingers, pointing to the spot directly in front of him.. “Come here, boy. Right now.”

Shane rushed forward, only two long steps separating them. His cock firmed up again at of Cody’s demanding tone. How Cody could make him weak with desire with a simple order was beyond him.

Cody framed Shane’s face with his palms. “We’ve been focusing on your pony all day, and that’s a wonderful thing. But besides being your trainer, what else am I?”

Shane averted his gaze. “My Daddy.”

“Look at me now, Shane. What do Daddies do for their boys?”

Tears burned eyes. He knew where Cody was going with this, and he yearned to have a Daddy take the reins, but could he really let go so completely? Allow another man to own him, to trust that his heart would be safe in their hands?

Lee’s words echoed in his mind, about taking a chance.

“Daddies take care of their boys, take charge of their worries so their boys don’t have to.”

“That’s exactly it, baby.” Cody pressed their lips together for a quick kiss. “Now, can you express that to me on a personal level, equate it to us?”

Shane finally allowed their eyes to meet, blinking away the tears making his vision fuzzy.

“You. You’re my Daddy, you’re in charge of taking care of me.”

Cody broke into a grin before yanking Shane close and kissing him forcefully. The world fell away, his mind soothed by Cody’s scent, the gentle hand that caressed his back. Their lips parted, their breathing heavy as Cody leaned back and stared into Shane’s eyes.

“Just like that, baby. Just like that.” Cody pressed their foreheads together. “I want to be in charge of you, of protecting your heart and hopes. I want to cherish you, make sure you’re as happy as you can possibly be. Will you let me do that for you?”

Shane swallowed around a lump in his throat as he held Cody’s gaze. “Yes, Daddy. I’m still scared, though. I’m afraid I’ll disappoint you, that I’ll never be able to completely let go of my past.”

“Oh, my sweet boy.” Cody kissed the tip of Shane’s nose. “I’d like to wrangle that Dom who cut you down, tell him to his face what a disgrace he is. But instead, I’ll prove that you’re safe with me by my actions.” He enfolded Shane in an

embrace. “Anytime you become scared or worried, tell me. That’s all I ask of you for now. Deal?”

Shane nuzzled the crook of Cody’s shoulder. “Deal.”

Cody patted Shane’s behind. “Let’s say we take a peek around at what else I have for you.” He winked. “I was kind of hoping that if you’re up for it, we could spend the evening here. Maybe even the night?”

For the first time since they’d entered the little building, Shane took a visual inventory of the room apart from the stall. The space had all the amenities to make it feel like a home away from home. A bed with a fluffy down comforter was opposite the stall, plus a wall-mounted flat screen TV and a minifridge that made the shed perfect for them during aftercare, or if they merely wanted to get away from the main house.

His gaze travelled the area until it landed on the wall next to the stable, where a selection of pony gear was hung . His eyes were immediately drawn to a luxurious pony tail flowing from where it was attached to a glass plug. The thick, wavy chestnut-colored hair of the tail would drag on the plug when he played while it was inside him, the weight never letting him forget it was there, that the tail was part of him, an extension of his body.

Shane’s hand drifted to his now-throbbing cock, but Cody grasped his wrist, stopping him from reaching his target.

He turned to Cody. “May I please try on the tail, Daddy?”

Cody tilted his head, the corner of his mouth quirking. “You’re not going to try it on until we go through the whole

list of items, right?”

Shane glanced away, his cheeks warming. “Well, it’s just that I’ve never worn such a magnificent tail before. I’ve only had cheap gear, whatever I could afford at the time.” He gave a one-shouldered shrug. “And you know the rest of the story. I gave up after that.”

Cody ran his hand over Shane’s ass. “Then you should wear it.” He leaned close, brushing his lips over the shell of Shane’s ear. “For now, let’s see what else I have. Maybe you’d like to try on the rest of the gear as well. I know the pony hood and bridle aren’t quite your style, but we’ll have something much more glamorous made.”

Shane resisted the urge to complain about Cody spending money on getting him outfitted. He’d promised to try and quit worrying only minutes before.

Shane explored the multitude of items dangling from decorative, horse head wall hooks. Leads, halters, bits, hooves and more that were fit for the most willing pony abounded. He passed the items to his right before he noticed half-inch golden rings on the hooks. A closer inspection revealed that the rings were sturdy, strong enough to connect two sets of poles together.

“Are these...?” They’d never discussed the possibility of playing with anyone else. Shane turned to face Cody. “You’re not planning on getting me a friend, are you?”

Cody shook his head, his eyebrows pinched together. “No, I’m a solo pony owner. I’d love to put you in a show someday, though. Maybe at next year’s Pet Play by the Lake event?”

“I-I’m speechless.” Shane turned to stare at the equipment again. “But what if I don’t want to do that?”

“Then I won’t force you. I’ll never make you do anything you don’t want to do.” Cody moved closer, the heat building where their bodies touched, their hips, shoulders, thighs. “But when I have you strapped in, you’ll be appreciated. Everyone’s eyes will be on you, watching, admiring. Wishing they could have such a beautiful pony, but they can’t, because you’re all *mine*.”

Cody’s words ramped up his excitement, the inflection of Cody’s voice like silk on the inside of his mind. He’d never given it that much thought, but the idea of being adored by the crowd, having their eyes on him as he strutted or preened both thrilled and terrified him.

Cody laced their fingers together. “I know, this talk is making me hot, too. Why don’t we start with the plug for tonight, then see how it goes from there?”

Shane was quite certain what would go off—his cock like a rocket.

His mouth watered at the thought of being filled with his Daddy’s thick cock. He nodded, his fingers tightening around Cody’s.

“Good boy.” Cody leaned into him, sharing a chaste kiss. “Let’s get you prepped.”

He led Shane back to the stall after grabbing a packet of lube from a small table next the bed, with plug in hand. The bulbous end was a little larger than the plugs he’d used in the

past, the neck thinner, narrower where it widened again before meeting the flared base.

He couldn't wait for Cody to work the toy into his body.

Cody directed him to the empty space at the left of the pillow. "Shoes and shirt off too. If you're cold, leave your socks on. I have the heat turned up, but the floor might still be cold."

Shane did as he was told, his shivers caused by the anticipation rather than being cold.

"Okay, now face the wall, legs apart. Then brace yourself against the surface with your palms."

Shane turned around, bending slightly at the waist and putting his hands on the wall as instructed. Cody undid his belt then tugged down Shane's pants and underwear, encouraging him to lift each leg until they were all the way off. Cody caressed Shane's ass with rough hands.

"After you've tested out your tail, you can decide how much farther you want to go tonight. Safeword?"

"Showtime."

"That's my good pony." Cody traced the crack of Shane's ass, his finger slipping into the valley to stroke his crease. "You're so smooth, so soft. Will you let me wax your hole again?"

Shane sucked in a deep breath through his nose. So many new experiences in only a week. Cody had opened up the world to him.

He exhaled. "Yes, Daddy. I'd like that."

“Mmm... I can't wait. But let's focus on my obedient pony's new tail. I can add ribbons to it if you like.”

Shane's breath hitched as he nodded. He wondered if the ribbons had been ordered at the same time as the pillow.

Cody massaged his hole with a thick finger, then slipped the lubed digit past his tight rim. Shane pushed back against the intrusion, his ass begging for more.

Cody's lips brushed over his shoulder. “My boy is so responsive. Such an eager, sexy pony.”

Shane squirmed, the tease of Cody's touch driving him crazy. His cock was painfully hard, tight against his belly. As Cody added another finger, he continued to impale himself on them, loving the sensation, but needing the large plug to fill him more.

Cody removed his fingers then placed the plug at his entrance. “Hold still, let Daddy do the work.”

He applied pressure, the force gradually increasing until the tip breached Shane's rim. Shane gasped, moving his hips back and forth, fucking the plug, aching for more. Cody placed a steadying palm against Shane's abdomen, the back of Cody's hand brushing against the sensitive tip of Shane's cock. Shane hissed, his slit wet with precum.

“That's my beautiful boy, Daddy's good pony.” Cody growled the words out, kissing Shane's shoulders then his neck. His teeth grazed Shane's skin and he arched his back.

“Oh, God, Daddy,” he panted.

“That's the first half in. I'll take it slow so you can adjust.” Cody's hands caressed Shane's ass, soothing his skin

with soft touches as he sank the rest of the toy into his passage.

Shane let out a satisfied groan, the tail heavy, but the fullness so satisfying. Now that the plug was fully seated in his ass, his pony headspace teased at the edges of his mind. It had been so long since the joy of being a pony was real to him.

Cody was the best owner, the perfect trainer. Instead of forcing him to be that powerful stallion his previous Dom had wanted, he'd embraced Shane's circus pony, wanted to give him what he needed so he could sink all the way into being Starshine.

"Whinny for me, Starshine. Should we put on your saddle and bit?"

His heart thumped hard in his chest. He couldn't believe how all the pieces were finally fitting together. He nodded his head with vigor, letting out a series of high-pitched neighs.

Cody stroked his sides with small, quick touches. "You stay put while I get your gear." He smacked Shane's rear as if reinforcing his command.

Starshine's slit leaked more, his swollen length bobbing, balls hanging low and heavy. He needed to be fucked. *Orgasm*. His trainer needed to push him into a mind-blowing orgasm.

Cody returned and smacked Starshine's ass with one hard slap, the plug jiggling inside him, banging against his gland. His toes curled and he clenched his hole to keep from pushing out his tail.

“Starshine, let me slip these hooves on your front legs. That’s a good boy. Now that I get to play with Starshine, you need to stamp the floor three times if you need to safeword. Show me how you do it.”

Starshine obeyed. Such a nice trainer.

“Excellent. Now hold still while I buckle your saddle and attach your bridle. These will be temporary until I can make you something more suitable for such a gorgeous circus pony.”

Starshine stayed perfectly still for his trainer, ass up, tail in the air.

Once the saddle and bridle were in place, his trainer tapped his lips.

“Open your mouth.”

He slipped the bit between Starshine’s teeth, then secured the hinges at the corners of his mouth.

“Such a pretty pony, behaving so well for me.” Cody stroked Starshine’s face and petted his nose as he talked.

Shane clamped his teeth around the girth of the rubber piece. The reins hung loosely from the rings on either side of his mouth, tantalizing him.

Tug. Pull. Ride.

He craved the strong thighs of his trainer wrapped securely around his body, the satisfying weight on his back. Controlling him with the reins, his trainer and caretaker would wordlessly lead him on this journey, pushing him past his limits without needing to say a thing.

The urge to buck was hard to contain, but not due to disobedience. He only wanted to play, wanted his owner to ride him. He'd be the best pony ever, his trainer's to do with as he wished.

With deft fingers, his trainer secured the straps on the black leather saddle, adjusting and tugging until it sat just right. The cool, stiff material encased him perfectly, as if he were being held in the strongest of arms.

His trainer ran his palm up and down Starshine's flank then grabbed the reins. He made a clicking sound with his tongue then gave the reins a gentle tug. Starshine gave a hearty shake of his head, then whinnied, the rings rattling against the ends of the bit.

Ride.

“Be still, Starshine, or I'll have to get the crop.”

He froze, his brain shorting out. Crop or ride, ride or crop.

Starshine bucked, the tail swishing into the air then tugging on the plug when it flopped back down. Too much. He wanted too much, needed it all.

As if in answer to his dilemma, his trainer grabbed the crop off the wall. He gasped, sucking in a copious amount of spit the moment the crop cracked against an ass cheek. A snap on the other cheek brought him back to the place where the only thing that mattered was being a good pony for his trainer.

Starshine allowed himself to be let out of the stable and into the small space that was the living area. He must be a very special pony indeed to be allowed inside where people slept.

His trainer soothed his sore skin, the bite of the crop not too difficult. But he pushed into the touch anyway as if he were truly in pain, seeking the comfort of his trainer's touch.

With a sudden tug, the tail was pulled free from his passage then quickly replaced with his trainer's cock. Strong hands held onto his saddle and one of the reins, as his ass was pounded in harsh thrusts, the bridle rattling as his trainer rammed into him like a jackhammer.

His trainer draped his body across the saddle, then reached around to grasp Starshine's cock in a tight fist, yanking on the rock hard shaft until he spilled cum over his trainer's hand. His trainer stilled, pumping his seed into Starshine, breeding him, marking him from the inside.

They remained joined for several minutes, both of them gasping for air until their breathing finally slowed.

Cody peeled his body off Shane's back, a small squeak of the saddle reminding Shane that only moments before he'd been Starshine. Truly Starshine for the first time ever.

His pony wasn't a fantasy anymore. Starshine was *real*.

Chapter Nine

“That was amazing Daddy. Thank you.”

Cody cuddled Shane close on the small bed in the playroom. At the time he'd built the pen and little house, he'd wondered if he was being a big overly enthusiastic. He had a tendency to do that at times. But now he felt as though it was the best decision he'd ever made.

“For me, too. More than you'll ever know.”

Cody pressed a kiss to Shane's temple, adjusting the blanket around his naked, shivering boy. Before removing the pony gear, he'd wiped him down with a warm cloth, then made him drink half of one of the water bottles in the fridge.

“Can we stay here tonight? I don't want to share you with anyone else.”

“Of course, we can.”

Cody had made sure to tell the guys he might be gone for the night. He'd wanted to leave it open for Shane to decide what it was he needed. Aftercare was always very important to Cody, but more so with someone who hadn't played in a long time along with being traumatized.

Shane beamed at Cody. “I need to tell you something.”

Cody gave Shane a light jostle. They were both reclining against pillows propped against the wall where they reclined

on the mattress.

“I hope it’s a good something.”

Shane’s brow furrowed, as if he’d suddenly lost his nerve. “I hope you don’t think it’s a bit abrupt. Especially because of the way I’ve been acting.”

Cody wasn’t sure what to make of Shane’s words. He wasn’t fond of cryptic statements or hesitation. But he’d been cutting Shane a lot of slack, since he knew that in general, the man was quite straightforward. Dealing with emotions, however, were another thing entirely. For that reason, Cody was fine being more patient than he normally would be with a sub.

“Remember, you can tell Daddy anything. I want to hear all about your worries, your joys, your sadness, your excitement. Everything about you matters to me.”

Shane nodded. “That’s why I think I can say this to you, that I can trust you with my feelings.” He glanced down, plucking at a few stray hairs on Cody’s chest. “This week has been such a wonderful gift to me, Cody. And today... just now...” He lifted his gaze. “I’ll never be able to thank you enough for bringing my fantasies alive.”

“Hey.” Cody dropped a kiss on Shane’s nose. “Same goes for me. I’ve never had a partner who made this real for me, either. Not like this.”

Shane’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down a few times. “Well...I was thinking... Do you need me to leave right away? I don’t really have that many clients next week. I usually keep my appointments light after the event.”

Cody grinned. “As far as I’m concerned, you never have to leave at all.”

Shane chuckled. “I kind of guessed that, but I know we always need to communicate, not assume.”

“Then we’ll always get along just fine.”

Shane’s eyes glimmered. “Always?”

Cody’s heart had never been so full, his life so bright. The answer to Shane’s question was crystal clear.

“Always, baby.”

Epilogue

A year later...

Shane took a visual survey of the lobby with a tinge of nostalgia, clutching Cody's hand as if he might float away at any minute, as if the life he now shared with the man he loved more than anything in the world was completely imaginary. Ever since he'd fulfilled his final one week a month commitment to his Daddy, he'd never returned to Tahoe.

At least, not until the weekend he'd spent packing up all his things and saying goodbye to his friends.

This year, he and Cody had arrived at the annual Pet Play by the Lake event together as attendees, and the significance of that wasn't lost on him. His heart beat faster in a combination of fear and excitement. Shane turned to Cody with a smile, giving his hand a gentle squeeze to remind himself that he wasn't alone anymore.

His Daddy protected him. Kept him safe.

Being back at the event was surreal, yet at the same time, felt incredibly natural. With Cody's help, he'd embraced his pony, Starshine, and begun to fully explore his potential. And despite his fear, he couldn't wait to perform at the Best in Show on Sunday.

Cody jostled their joined hands. “Look, baby. It’s Lee and Ash.”

Lee.

He’d forever be in the man’s debt for his encouragement. If he hadn’t asked for Lee’s advice a year ago, he probably would’ve pushed Cody away forever, never given him a chance.

Shane tracked Cody’s was wave. Unsurprisingly, Lee and Ash were surrounded by people, but were in conversation with two in particular. He narrowed his eyes. If he wasn’t mistaken, Ash was talking to Mason and an older man who seemed familiar.

“I don’t know. They seem pretty busy. I hate to bother them right now, Daddy.”

Shane knew all about *that* situation. Especially since from the time he was event manager to when he left, the gathering had only gotten larger and more involved. In Lee’s last email, he’d hinted that construction on a new building might be happening in a few weeks, but there wouldn’t be an official announcement until the party Saturday night. Pet Play by the Lake had truly outgrown the resort.

Cody tugged on his hand. “I doubt very seriously if they’d mind. I’m sure they’ve been anxious to see you again. Plus, they’re here to enjoy themselves, too. Not just run the event.” Cody pulled on him again. “Come on, baby. Let’s go say hello.”

Shane hesitated, but Cody’s insistence won out. As they approached the group, Shane’s reservations melted away and

his chest tightened. They truly were his friends.

“Shane!”

Ash threw his arms in the air as if he were about to pounce on Shane, then stilled, poking out his bottom lip. Lee was chuckling behind his hand as Ash pouted. Shane glanced between them then his gaze landed on Mason, who was leaning against an older man, the one Shane had recognized.

Shane tilted his head. “Did I miss something?”

Ash crossed his arms. “I keep forgetting I’m not supposed to pounce on subs without asking permission from their Masters first.”

He rolled his eyes and Lee tapped him on the butt. “Watch it, pup. I’m not above taking over your event assistant duties so you can have a time out.”

Shane turned to Mason with a smile. That explained it. Mason must’ve been with this man the year before and now they were together.

Cody grinned. “I wouldn’t dream of keeping you two boys apart.”

Ash arched his eyebrows at Lee, and he nodded. Ash surged forward and gave Shane a big hug. He briefly tensed, then relaxed into the embrace, wrapping his arms around Ash as well.

An interesting thing had resulted from his year with Cody. He’d decided being touchy-feely wasn’t so horrible after all.

Ash released him. “Great to see you again, big guy.”

Shane chuckled. “Same. Missed you guys.” He regarded Mason. “You too.” His gaze darted up to the man Mason was with. “And it looks like things have been working out for you as well.

Brief introductions were shared, and they all fell into easy conversation, catching up, discussing plans to meet for dinner later. While a small part of him missed Tahoe, he recognized the feeling for what it was. He loved his friends, didn’t regret any of the time he’d spent there.

However, when he’d been alone in Tahoe, he hadn’t been truly alive. Coming back was nice, but also a reminder of why it had never been home. He turned to his Daddy, his heart filling.

Cody was his home now, and always would be. He caught Shane staring and broke into a smile. The others were lost in their conversation, while he and Cody were lost in each other.

“I love you, Daddy.”

Cody wrapped his hand around Shane’s nape then brought him in for a kiss.

“Hot damn. Love you too, baby boy.”

The sudden silence in the immediate vicinity caught their attention. They realized they were putting on a bit of a show for their friends. Ash’s eyes were so wide, Shane thought they might pop out.

Shane smirked. “What? Never seen a sub kiss his Daddy in public before?”

Ash let out an inelegant snort. “Uh, yeah. But I gotta say, big guy. Didn’t think you had it in you.” He leaned in close. “I

know you don't like it when people curse around the resort, but fuck. I am so motherfucking happy for you I could pee myself."

Lee loudly cleared his throat. "I'd like to request you refrain from that."

Ash straightened. "You could hear that?"

Lee rubbed his hands together. "I certainly did. And your ass will be hearing all about it later when I get you across my lap."

Shane rubbed his own butt. He wondered if it was too soon to misbehave. After all, Starshine should definitely have a bright red ass when he performed on Sunday.

"Daddy?" Shane whispered. "I think we should head up to our room now. You know, get settled."

Cody took a nip of Shane's earlobe. "Read my mind, baby. Read my mind."

* * * *

Thank you so much for reading Shane and Cody's smokin' hot romance! Are you ready for more pets searching for their forever Daddies and Masters? Enjoy more snuggles, frolicking and puppy piles with all the Pet Play by the Lake books!

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Have you read *Pretty Puppy* yet?

Breaking Daddy Lee's heart wasn't intentional, but Ash has paid the price in misery ever since. Surely, a teensy little lie and a bit of scheming to get Lee back won't backfire...

Ash first met Daddy Lee when he was a young pup and just beginning his kink journey. If only he hadn't been so flighty and full of himself, he could've seen what a rare treasure he had in the handsome older Dom. But now that Ash is back in town, he's determined to make Lee's heart go pitter-patter again by being the best doggone boy ever.

Five years ago, luxury resort owner, Lee Petrovsky, fell too hard and fast for the pretty Asher Griffin. Ever since then, he's resolved to seek out only older, more mature boys. There's only one problem—no one has ever crushed the walls of steel around his heart the way Ash did. That doesn't mean he'd ever take him back, though. No one makes a fool out of him and gets a second chance.

Can Ash prove to Lee that this time it isn't just a case of puppy love?

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About the Author:

USA Today Bestselling and award-winning author Morticia Knight spends most of her nights writing about men loving men forever after. If there happens to be some friendly bondage or floggings involved, she doesn't begrudge her characters whatever their filthy little heart's desire. Even though she's been crafting her naughty tales for more years than she'd like to share—her adventures as a published author began in 2011. With over 60 gay/bisexual romance books and stories published through Knight Ever After Publishing and Pride Publishing, Morticia is bound to have something for your sexy HEA reading pleasure!

Morticia resides on the North Oregon coast where the fierce winter storms, gray skies and ocean views all conspire to spark her endless imagination.

Morticia's Social links:

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