

# BAREBACK

*by*

D.Jackson Leigh



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## CHAPTER ONE

Skyler Reese poured some glistening oil into her palm and rubbed her hands together to warm the lubricant. She smiled as she began a loving massage.

Her long fingers danced softly over the gentle curves of the shoulders and stroked the perfect arch of the backbone. She was mesmerized by her sure, strong hands as she watched them in the dim light, dipping into the cup of oil at her side, then moving over the supple, tanned surface. They were the hands of a sculptor, smoothing and shaping a classic form.

Dip, stroke.

Her fingertips moved quickly to catch the excess liquid as it dripped down smooth flanks, gently spreading the droplets until they were absorbed.

Dip, stroke, stroke.

The object of her attentions yielded and grew warmer, more pliant under each brush of her fingers. The musky aroma coaxed forth by her touch filled the small room. The rhythm of her movements and the rich scent filling her senses brought calm to her restless soul. Skyler sighed and closed her eyes, reveling in the elusive peace that settled over her.

“I sure wish that was me you were rubbing oil all over.”

The low, silky voice came from the doorway behind her, but Skyler didn't pause in her task. She'd heard the scuff of boots

against the hard-packed clay of the Creek Barn's hallway before the curvaceous redhead appeared in the tack room. She could feel Alexandra Rourke's cool, hazel eyes moving over her, visually tasting. The bored socialite took in the dove gray riding breeches that hugged her long, lean thighs before disappearing into dusty, knee-high riding boots. The cool stare then lifted to sun-streaked locks that fell over Skyler's forehead. She kept her hair in a short, practical cut layered against her neck. The look was boyishly sexy, and she was used to second glances from women, and some men.

Alexandra sauntered forward, moving purposefully into her field of vision. She leaned against the wall, folding her arms across her ribs in a way that called attention to her ample breasts. The flirting had slowly escalated in recent weeks from small hints to blatant propositions. Skyler continued to work the leather of the jump saddle secured to a metal stand in front of her. Cleaning and oiling the saddles and bridles in her barn was her time for thinking. The wall full of soft, gleaming leather in front of her was a testament to many hours of reflection. That is, when she felt like thinking. Sometimes she just felt like polishing and not thinking at all. That's why the saddles in Creek Barn were the softest of any on the farm; she kept them well oiled after they were cleaned with saddle soap.

"What can I do for you?" she asked when her visitor showed no sign of leaving her to enjoy her solitude. "Isn't Clint keeping you busy enough?"

Alexandra pursed her lips in a practiced pout few men seemed able to resist. Perhaps she expected to wield the same power over a lesbian horse trainer. "That's why I came to see you," she purred. "Some trollop at Edward's law firm met Clint at a party and has been gossiping around the office about what a stud he is. Now, my idiot husband is insisting that I change trainers."

Skyler chuckled. Clint Hansen was the trainer at Cherokee Falls' West Barn and a good friend. "Well, he *is* a pretty fine

specimen.” She shrugged one broad shoulder upward to wipe the sweat that trickled past her temple onto the sleeve of her dark blue polo shirt. “So, did Eddie catch you getting more than a riding lesson?”

“Don’t be crude, Skyler Reese. Of course not,” Alexandra replied with an irritated toss of her shoulder-length curls.

Her pretense at indignation was wasted on Skyler. “Not that you haven’t tried, I’m sure. You must be slipping, Alex. I’ve never known you to fail to snag whatever man you set your sights on.”

Alexandra scowled. “Seems he has some rule about not touching married women.”

That particular restriction wasn’t in Skyler’s rulebook. She looked up from her task and arched a “do tell” eyebrow.

Alexandra’s pout slowly turned to a smirk. “But I know he wanted to,” she purred. “There’s always that certain part of the male anatomy that doesn’t lie. I’ve had fun torturing him.”

Skyler rolled her eyes. “That’s my friend you’ve been torturing,” she warned as she dipped her fingers in the oil again and continued rubbing it into the leather.

They were quiet for several moments as Alexandra’s eyes followed the movement of her hands. Dip, stroke, stroke. Her fascination was almost amusing. Alexandra viewed other women as nothing more than competition, but, like quite a few straight women, she made an exception for Skyler, instead seeing her as a challenge.

She moved to the wall of saddle racks and pretended to study the equipment. Licking her lips, she lowered her voice to a husky Lauren Bacall timbre. “So, Sky, I thought my husband would be happier if I had a female trainer.”

Skyler paused, lifting her gaze from the saddle to Alexandra’s full red lips. “Did you?”

Alexandra sashayed over and ran a manicured nail along Skyler’s tanned forearm. “I’ve never had a female trainer before. I’ve been thinking lately that maybe a woman might be an interesting change.” She watched as Skyler resumed her swirling

strokes across the gleaming leather. “So, I’ve talked to Kate about transferring my mare to Creek Barn. I’m betting the fact that I have a jealous husband doesn’t bother you in the least.”

Skyler took a deep breath and leaned back. She brazenly ran her eyes over Alexandra’s voluptuous figure before returning her shameless gaze.

“No, I wouldn’t have a problem with that, Alex. I feel sure you would prove to be an eager student.”

They both smiled at the double meaning.



A cloudless, blue sky hung over the sandy driveways that tied the Cherokee Falls Equestrian Training Center compound together. At the center of the farm was a huge, white two-story house with a porch, which, true to its Southern heritage, wrapped three-quarters of the way around the structure. The long, main drive to the house was flanked on one side by a large outdoor riding ring and on the other by an indoor arena of equal size. Five twelve-stall barns and an indoor pool/gymnasium building were positioned on the perimeter of the compound like spokes on a wheel. Green enameled metal roofs gleamed atop each oak-sided building. Past the barns were a thousand acres of paddocks, pastures, and forest.

The grand matriarch of the Parker family had established the center two generations ago. Old money made from a once-booming tobacco operation on the Virginia property now rested in an endowment that provided for the equestrian center and its heiress, Katherine Leigh Parker—Kate to her many friends. Although the task of running the facility fit her perfectly, the role of rich heiress wasn’t exactly descriptive. Her deep, sometimes booming, voice had loosened more than one rafter at the local country club in her wild, younger days, but time had softened her demeanor. Loose gray curls cut up over her ears were an attractive contrast to her tanned face and electric blue eyes. While

she was still a formidable figure with an equestrian's grace and erect posture, the once muscular shoulders of her tall frame had softened and were now, like her waist, slightly more padded.

Sitting behind the steering wheel of her golf cart and staring across the Cherokee Falls compound, she paused to soak up the good weather and the tranquility of the moment. The smell of freshly mown pastures and the nickering of contented horses as they drowsed in the spring sun were as close to heaven as she could imagine. She sighed as her eyes settled on the Creek Barn, and her mind turned back to the task before her. So much for peace and quiet. She'd delayed this conversation but she couldn't wait any longer to spring her news on Skyler. Resigning herself to an uneasy discussion, she pressed on the accelerator and guided the cart toward the barn.

She found Skyler exactly where she'd expected. Skyler was the only horse trainer she knew who loved cleaning tack. It was the grunt work usually imposed on low-paid stable help.

"I don't know why you just don't delegate that to the barn help," Kate said.

Skyler flashed a smile that showed white against her tanned face. "It keeps me out of trouble."

"Then we need to haul a hell of a lot more tack down here for you to polish. I saw Alexandra leaving just now. If that's not trouble, I don't know what is."

The two women shared a grin of acknowledgment before Skyler returned her attention to her task. "I love the smell and feel of the leather."

Kate's shoulders shook with a deep chuckle. "I wouldn't spread that around. That would drive some of the women around here crazy."

Skyler's mouth curled in a slight smile as she stood to hang the saddle on its wall rack. She wiped her oily hands on a soft cloth. "Well, all done here. Want to saddle up and take a ride with me to the south pasture? One of the boarders said they saw a broken fence board near the oak grove."

“Not right now,” Kate said. “I came down here to tell you that we’ve got a new horse coming in for your barn, and they should be here this afternoon. It’s a stallion, so I want you around to help out in case he’s a handful.”

“Whose horse is it?”

“Jessica Black is the owner.”

“Jessica Black?” Skyler frowned. The name was familiar, probably another spoiled debutante whose trust fund allowed her to play with horses rather than get a real job. Just what she needed. “Is she going to be training here or just putting her stallion in training?”

“You’ve got a problem with Jessica?” Kate’s blue eyes narrowed. “Don’t tell me you... Just how well do you know her, Sky?”

*Whoa, where did that come from?* Skyler raised her hands in surrender. “Not at all, Kate. I swear. I’ve never actually met her. I’ve just heard on the circuit that she’s a real handful.”

Kate’s expression relaxed, but she still seemed wary. “Jess is just very intense, and something of a perfectionist, exactly like you, Sky. Her goal is to make the next Olympic team. And she was well on her way, too, until her horse slipped on the cross-country course.”

“I think I heard about that. Her gelding was put down, wasn’t he?” News of a horse being euthanized on the course traveled fast around the world of competitive eventing.

Kate nodded. “The fall broke his leg and hers, too. Pretty badly. She’s had two surgeries and six months on crutches.”

“That’s rough.”

“Yeah, well. This horse shipping in here today is her chance to get back on the circuit. He’s been campaigned by another rider and is in good enough shape to make the trials. But Jess has to get herself into shape and get to know her new mount. I’ve promised to help her.”

Skyler stared at the saddle, her hands completely still. There was nobody she would like to help more than Kate Parker. She

owed her. But she knew what this meant. It meant going back to the circuit that had banished her as a professional rider several years ago. It meant probably running into Sarah again. “Kate, you know I’m not the right choice for this.”

But Kate’s tone left no room for argument. “I’m putting her in your barn because I want her to have the best trainer available. You’ve been there, Sky. You know how to get there again.”

Yeah, she remembered the hard work, seven days a week. The relentless push for perfection. The egos. The politics. She shook her head. “Plenty of trainers know how to get there.”

Kate held her gaze. “You can’t hide here at Cherokee Falls forever. One day, you’ll have to go back, and this is the best reason you’ll ever have. Trust me, please.”

Skyler released a drawn-out breath. Each trainer who supervised a Cherokee Falls barn was given full authority over the horses and riders assigned to that barn. But the Parker Foundation owned the training center, and Skyler realized that Kate’s insistence was a gentle reminder of that. “All right. I’ll give them a look.”

Kate smiled her relief, then waggled a stern finger in Skyler’s direction. “And...I love you, old friend, but I’m here to warn you that this one won’t be another notch on your bedpost.”

“She’s that cute, huh?” Skyler grinned, glad for the move back to a lighter subject.

“Beautiful, just like her mother.” Kate grew serious again. “Really, Jess is like a daughter to me, and she’s coming here to recover.” After a brief pause, she said, “Her mother means a lot to me. I promised Laura I would take care of our kid.”

*Our kid?* Skyler was surprised. It was the first time she had ever heard Kate mention her only serious relationship. She knew there had been someone in Kate’s life, but during those years Skyler had been a rider for hire, traveling the eventing circuit to make a name for herself. By the time she returned to Cherokee Falls, Kate was a confirmed bachelorette again and never spoke of what had happened.

Keeping private thoughts private was something Skyler understood and she had no desire to pry further, so she smiled and executed a mock bow. “Enough said. I’ll be a perfect lady.”

Kate laughed. “That I’ve got to see.”