

# By Blood (Anderson Stables Book 2)

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For my parents, who have always been supportive of my writing “hobby.” **Chapter One** IT HAD felt like the worst winter of Vince Anderson’s life. Or at least the worst in several years. He’d spent the entire fall and winter away from home, helping his dad train racehorses for a family friend, who was also his dad’s training partner, in Florida. That meant leaving behind his pregnant ex-girlfriend and his boyfriend, whom he had only just started dating the day before leaving. Vince’s son, Hunter Thomas Anderson, had been born on January nineteenth. He wished he could have been there, but his sister had sent him constant text updates and emailed him a ton of pictures. He’d called Jane in November to find out what he could do for her, knowing that he wouldn’t be there for the birth, and she had just laughed. “Vince, relax. We have this under control. Mandy will be here for me, and my parents. And Dustin seems interested in helping out when he can. He’s going to be Uncle Dustin, by the way.” “Don’t you think it’s a little premature for that?” Vince had asked. “I haven’t even been with him three months, and it’s been long-distance.” “If you go about relationships thinking they could end at any time, you’re doomed already,” she’d replied. “I’m not going to shut him out just because you’re a negative Nancy and afraid things won’t work out. I don’t think that’s fair to him.” Vince had ended up trying to live by those words later, but at the time he’d merely gotten her back on topic. “I’m going to send you some money. If you have time, can you go out and buy Dustin a laptop? It’s my Christmas present to him so I can have mine when I come back. If you don’t have time, see if Mandy can do it. Half of the money is yours for whatever you need money for. I don’t know the first thing about what you need for a baby, so just take the money to help. The rest is for the laptop. It should be enough for something basic but good quality.” When she’d gotten the checks in the mail she’d called him and complained that it was too much and that he should think about himself a little more. He’d told her that he was trying to be a good father and a good boyfriend. Dustin had ended up with a nicer laptop than Vince had expected, along with a gift card to the electronics store in case he wanted any programs or games for it. He’d called Vince on Christmas and told him how bad he felt not spending as much on Vince as Vince had on him. He wasn’t sure how much Dustin thought the laptop cost, because Dustin had definitely spent close to if not more than that amount on Vince. Dustin had gotten Vince exactly what he’d asked for—though he had only gotten one thing in the mail. Dustin had purchased a whole new show grooming kit for Vince and his show jumper, Xander, along with a new tack box. These he’d kept at the barn, but had taken a picture and emailed it to Vince the night before. He’d also gotten Xander a new halter—Vince knew the old one was starting to get worn out—and one for his own horse, Justin, and in the e-mail had included a picture of the horses wearing them. Vince had gotten a package in the mail from Dustin and waited until Christmas morning to open it. Inside was something he hadn’t asked for but had mentioned needing—a new pair of riding gloves. They were lightweight and perfect for riding the racehorses he was helping to train. Now, *finally*, Vince and his father were on their way home. They had three hours left of driving time, and Vince had just given the driver’s seat over to Wes at a rest stop on the highway. They’d gotten in the truck before the sun had even risen over their Pennsylvania hotel to begin their fourth and final day of driving. Wes had wanted to bring the trailer in case they decided to take

home a horse or two, but they hadn't ended up with any new additions to the barn. "We should only have to stop one more time," Wes said as he climbed into the truck. He handed Vince a bottle of water and a bag of candy. "Who's been blowing up your phone for the last hour?" Vince put the water in the cup holder and plopped the candy in his lap. "Mostly Jane, it looks like. She sent me a bunch of pictures of Hunter. I think I'm going to go see them tonight. She told me it could wait until I get settled in, but I want to go tonight." "I'm going to see them as soon as I can," Wes said as he pulled out of the gas station. "I'd like to meet my grandson soon." "I'm sure you can come with me and Dustin," Vince replied before adding, "The other texts were just Anna. She wanted to know when we'd be back, so she can get on the guys to clean up the place and stop slacking off." Wes snorted. "The only one there capable of slacking off is Chris. Find an excuse to fire him, will you?" Anna had been giving him almost daily reports on the stable, and Chris had not only been caught slacking a few times, but a few things had happened that might have been done by him, though they had no proof. One of those incidents had involved the violent death of one of the barn cats that had clearly not been caused by a horse or another cat. He'd heard about it from Anna and Dustin, who had been more than angry. "As soon as I have proof of something, he's gone, trust me," Vince stated. He opened his bag of chocolate as he read his last new text message. *It's Dustin. I got one of those prepaid phones now.* Vince smiled as he added the number to his contacts and typed back. *No texting on the job.* Dustin's response came a few minutes later. *Why not? Everyone else does. I'm kidding. I don't care. I know you guys aren't idiots.* "What are you smiling about over there?" Wes asked, glancing at him. "More baby pictures?" "Nah, just Dustin," Vince replied, putting his phone down to grab some candy. "Apparently he got a phone." "You know, I didn't want to bring this up earlier," his father began carefully, "but you said before that nothing was going on between you guys. But you were video chatting with him and talking about him more than anyone else all winter, even Jane and Hunter. Has that changed?" Vince hoped he wasn't blushing. "Possibly. How do you think I convinced him to stay when he wanted to leave?" "I don't think I need details," Wes declared. Vince snorted. "You dragged me to Florida before *that* could happen." "You only need ten minutes, maybe less." Vince rubbed a hand over his face. "Thanks, Dad. Now I'm more convinced that Mom really was a hero. No, he didn't want that yet. Don't you dare tell him I told you this, but he went through hell when he was homeless." He paused a moment. Telling anyone about something so personal to Dustin didn't feel right, but this was his dad. There was no way Wes would ever tell anyone, and Vince doubted Dustin would really care if someone like Wes knew what he'd been through. "He told me he was raped more than once, and he wanted to get tested first." Wes sounded genuinely sympathetic when he replied, "I've heard the streets can be rough like that for kids. Did he get tested?" "I assume so," Vince replied with an awkward shrug. "Jane was going to take him. But he still hasn't told me anything. That kind of worries me." "So you can sit down and talk when we get back," Wes suggested. "Find out what's going on and how to deal with it. You should go check out the cabin. Take Xander too. I know you missed that horse like hell." "Yes," Vince stated. "I seriously did." "Is that why Dustin was leaving?" his dad asked a minute later. "Did things get awkward?" Vince nodded. "Basically. He tried starting things on my birthday, but he was drunk, and I didn't want it to start like that. So he thought I didn't want a relationship and avoided me when I tried to talk to him." Wes changed lanes to pass a truck. "He did seem uncomfortable when we had that little meeting about you, now that I think about it. I didn't really pay attention to it at the time, though." "I noticed it. But all I care about is that it doesn't matter anymore." THE FIRST thing Vince took note of when they pulled in to the long gravel driveway was that his brother-in-law had already been by with his crew to do the spring landscaping. The grass was still sparse, but grass seed had been planted where the ground had been dug up by the plow. The trees were still bare but devoid of the usual broken branches. The gravel on the driveway was fresh, and they had filled all the holes likely created during the winter. The second thing he noticed was Xander outside in his pasture, running along the fence as they pulled up like he knew Vince was in the truck. As soon as Vince stepped out of the cab, the big bay gelding started pacing, tossing his head, and calling to him. Vince laughed. Sometimes he wondered if Xander was actually a giant dog, but it made him happy to know that the horse still remembered him and was clearly glad to see him. He climbed over the wooden fence and into the field to hug him. "Are you planning

on greeting the rest of us that way?" Vince turned around and saw Anna standing with Wes and the rest of the stable hands, minus Chris, who apparently didn't want to welcome them back. "You guys want hugs?" he asked as he gave Xander a kiss on the nose and a last pat before climbing over the fence again, trying very hard not to look at Dustin so that his expression wouldn't give them away to everyone. "No thanks, but we are glad you're back," Joe answered. Vince smiled. "Most of you, it looks like." Anna rolled her eyes. "Yes, all of us but that certain someone. Do you want a rundown on how things have been going, or do you want to wait until tomorrow?" "Tomorrow is fine," he replied. "Give me a few hours to relax before I have to get back to work again." "Nah," Wes argued as he started pulling bags out of the truck, "you don't need to relax. Take your horse and go check out the cabin." He pretended to look thoughtfully at his employees, apparently trying to put on some sort of act for his son's benefit. "Take Dustin with you. See how he's doing with that horse of his, now that he's been in training for a year." Vince finally glanced at Dustin, who raised an eyebrow at him. God, the kid had gotten more attractive in the last eight months. And Vince supposed he should stop thinking of him as a kid. Sure, they were almost five years apart in age, but Dustin had turned twenty a couple of days before. It wasn't like he was sixteen or something. Which was good, since that would make things slightly illegal. Vince looked away and shrugged. "Sure. Can I get my stuff put away first?" His dad motioned to Vince's bags as he set them on the ground. "Go ahead." Vince headed to his house, loaded down with all the stuff he'd needed for eight months out of town. He tossed most of it onto the floor in his living room, then gathered a few things in a small backpack and headed to the barn. Xander was cross-tied in the aisle, and Dustin was finishing getting the saddle on him. The horse sensed Vince coming and turned to look at him, letting out a happy neigh. "I can finish that," Vince said, gently taking the bridle from Dustin's shoulder. Dustin smiled, then glanced around before asking, "Your dad knows?" Vince nodded. "Only as of today." Dustin just nodded and went on to finish tacking up his chestnut gelding, Justin, who was waiting at a nearby set of cross ties. Five minutes later they were riding out onto the trails that lined the Anderson Stables property. Vince was just as happy to finally be riding his horse again as he was to be with Dustin for the first time in over half a year. He'd been riding horses during morning workouts at the track in Florida, but finally being on the horse he'd rescued when he was nineteen was such a great feeling. "I'm glad your dad's okay with this," Dustin commented. Vince nodded. "Me too, trust me." Dustin laughed. God, that was an amazing sound. "I got out to the driveway before anyone else, while you were saying hello to Xane. Your dad actually walked up next to me and said, 'Don't feel bad, kid, he sold his soul for that horse.'" That made Vince laugh. "Wow, Dad." "He missed you," Dustin added. "Xander, I mean. He really seemed depressed and ate less, like he didn't want to do anything but sleep. He didn't even want to be around any of us or the other horses. He was off on his own in the pasture a lot." "Yeah, Anna mentioned she had the vet run blood work to make sure he wasn't sick. It all came back normal, so she assumed he was depressed." "I never would have thought animals had emotions until I started working here." Vince laughed again. "They clearly do. Maybe not as complicated as we do, but definitely." Dustin was quiet for a moment before saying, "I'm not offended, in case you were wondering. That you went to your horse right away. We said we didn't want to let everyone know yet." Vince glanced over at him. "Do you have any idea how badly I've wanted to hug you since I got back here? Kiss you, even? I'm almost tempted to tell everyone now." Dustin smiled at him. "Maybe not a good idea with Chris around, but I won't complain about a better greeting when we get wherever we're going." Vince just smiled at him. "I remember doing this last year," Dustin commented a few minutes later as they stopped to clear a small dead tree out of the path. "You had to mess up my day by reminding me that your dad was going to sell Justin." Vince tossed a small branch off the trail and smiled. "But then I convinced Dad that you guys needed each other." Dustin grinned. "By the way, thanks for making sure I kept him. I can't imagine how I'd feel if I really left here and gave him back to your dad." "I was doing it mainly for myself," Vince admitted, watching the horses napping in front of them. "That whole situation was so messed up, and it was all my fault. I knew I'd be a wreck if you left. I was as miserable as you were during that time." Dustin nodded. "I believe you." "Then I had to leave eight hours after finally fixing things," Vince added. "And I was afraid I hadn't actually fixed anything even though you said we were

good. I half thought you'd up and leave anyway." "I never even considered it," Dustin assured him. "I mainly thought 'wow, this sucks, but he'll be back, I just hope he doesn't find someone better than me while he's gone.'" "No way," Vince argued. "Probably only a quarter of the guys I worked with spoke English, and my Spanish sucks. It would be hard to date someone you can't communicate with. Plus, I was always thinking of you and how I wished I'd said something to you sooner." "Why didn't you?" Vince shrugged. "I'm a coward, I guess. Jane kept telling me I should talk to you, but I was afraid to. I hoped you'd feel the same way and say something first. Then you did, and I fucked it up." Dustin shook his head. "No, you're right. It wasn't right to start something when one of us was drunk." Vince nodded. "I wish I hadn't made you think I was rejecting you." "It's better now," Dustin said with a smile, turning to look at him. "I forgive you." Vince couldn't resist anymore. He pulled Dustin into a hug and kissed him. Dustin grabbed the back of Vince's shirt and kissed him back. Passionately and deeply, like he'd been waiting eight months for this. Which was exactly what had gotten Vince through that time, knowing he'd be with Dustin at last. "Okay," Dustin breathed, pulling back slightly. "That was worth the wait." Vince smiled and kissed him again, lightly. "Come on, let's get going." They got to the cabin a short time later. It was a tiny, one-room building Vince's mom had had built as her private sanctuary two decades ago. Vince checked the corral fence, then untacked Xander while Dustin tended to Justin. When he finished that, Vince slung his backpack from his back and pulled out the pest-control products they used on the outside of the cabin, well away from the corral. He handed Dustin the key to the cabin while he did that, and Dustin opened the windows and swept dead insects and mouse droppings outside. Vince joined him inside and set up mousetraps and insect repellents. He pulled the sheet off the sofa and checked it over, then sat down with a sigh. "Water?" he asked, offering a bottle from his backpack. Dustin smiled as he sat down beside him and took the offered bottle. "Thanks." Vince pulled the other bottle from his bag and took a drink. "It's good to be back." "I'm glad you're back," Dustin replied as he gently grasped Vince's hand. Vince rubbed his thumb over the back of Dustin's hand. "So," he began awkwardly, forcing himself to start the conversation he knew they needed to have, "how, uh, did your tests come back?" Dustin sighed and took his hand away to rub it over his face. "Basically what I already knew but was afraid to tell you." That worried Vince instantly. "What is it?" Dustin took a deep breath. "I have herpes," he said quietly. Vince let out a breath of relief. "Okay. That's it?" Dustin nodded. "Everything else was negative. Somehow." Vince reached out and pulled Dustin's hand back to himself. "You knew already?" Dustin nodded again. "I broke out once, right before I met you." He laughed humorlessly. "With the education I had, I assumed I was going to die. Health class told us that every STD was a sign of AIDS. No matter what it is, it's AIDS, and you're dying. So I was surprised when I lived long enough to get here. The nurse at the clinic was very patient explaining that to me when I asked what each test was for. She wasn't impressed with my Catholic schooling." "Neither am I," Vince murmured. "But we can deal with this." "Are you sure?" Dustin asked, looking at him skeptically. "It's not going to kill either of us," Vince replied. He set his water on the floor and pulled Dustin into a tight embrace. "You really don't care that I'm not clean?" Dustin murmured. Vince leaned back to look at him. "Jesus, Dust. Do you honestly think that matters to me? It matters because I care about you. Safe sex is not that difficult. And don't point out Hunter's existence, because I checked after the fact, and that box was expired. I threw out what was left. So we can handle this." Dustin took another deep breath. "You're sure?" Vince leaned in and kissed him, starting soft but taking it deeper when Dustin kissed him back roughly. He held Dustin as close as he possibly could, running one hand through Dustin's hair while he struggled to get his other hand under Dustin's shirt. When he finally found skin, he ran his hand over Dustin's back and side, trying to convince Dustin he meant what he said. "Vince," Dustin panted, his arms wrapped tightly around Vince, "are you—" "I bought a new box. It's in my bag," Vince replied breathlessly. "If you want." Dustin looked at him for a long moment, then murmured, "Yeah. Yeah, I want you." He looked away quickly. "But it's not easy for me." Vince lifted Dustin's chin. "Dust, you can tell me to stop. We don't have to do anything if you don't want to." "No," Dustin breathed. "No, I want this. Just don't take it personally if for some reason I suddenly can't handle it." Vince nodded and kissed Dustin's neck. "I won't." "And Vince?" He looked back up at Dustin, who looked utterly determined. "Yeah?" "If we're doing this, I need it all. I mean, I need you to...." Vince had a feeling

he understood. He gently pressed Dustin onto his back and held him. "To prove to you that it's not always rape? That it will never be when it's me?" Dustin squeezed his arms around Vince and nodded against his shoulder. "Please." Vince kissed his neck and murmured, "Tell me if it's too much for you. I'm not going to be offended." Dustin just nodded. Vince took things as slowly as he could. He'd had eight months to get used to the idea of having sex with Dustin instead of Jane, so he wasn't nearly as nervous as he would have been if they'd done this the night before he left for Florida. And it wasn't just for Dustin that he kept things slow. It felt right that way, like if he rushed things, it would ruin something special. Their touches were soft, their kisses lingered, and Vince made more eye contact than he was sure he ever had during sex before. The only issues Dustin seemed to have involved Vince actually entering him, but a lot of kisses and murmured reassurances and patience solved those issues. It was more a building of intimacy and desire than sex. Vince felt more emotionally drawn in than ever before. With Jane it had always been pleasant but unfulfilling. With Dustin it was like the world stopped spinning and time halted just for them. Vince wondered if it was cliché to think that, but he truly felt like nothing else was happening in the world but what was taking place between them. And as he held Dustin afterward, Vince realized he was in love. He'd thought he was in love with Jane for a long time, but he realized in that moment that it had always been a platonic type of love. The intimacy had never felt right with her, but it definitely felt right with Dustin. If Dustin left him, he'd be completely screwed. "Thank you, Vince," Dustin said quietly. Vince took Dustin's hand and interlaced their fingers. "I'm glad I could help." Dustin ran a thumb over the back of Vince's hand. "I don't know if I'll ever be totally over what happened to me. I don't know if this will always be a problem or not." Vince squeezed his hand. "It's not a problem, Dust. Trust me." Dustin nodded. "I do." "I'm glad." "So is this our getaway spot until everyone knows?" Dustin asked after a few minutes. "We'll figure something out," Vince assured him. "But there's nothing wrong with this place." "Agreed." **Chapter Two** THEY GOT back to the barn about an hour later, much happier than when they'd left. Neither of them would have guessed that the mood wouldn't last very long. "Hey," Vince suggested as they dismounted in the yard, "how about we set up a course in the ring, so I can really see how Justin is coming along?" "Sure," Dustin agreed. Dustin loosened Justin's saddle, then tied him up in the barn while Vince untacked Xander and put him in his stall, then Vince joined Dustin in setting up a trail-training course in the arena. It was mostly made of ground poles at various heights, but not high enough to be jumps. Wes joined Vince at the fence as Dustin went for Justin. "The cabin was nice?" he asked. "Jeez, Dad," Vince grumbled. "Yeah, fine. Apparently mice moved in, though. We set some traps." "Good," Wes replied. "So what's got Justin so jittery?" Vince looked to where Dustin was leading the big chestnut gelding into the arena. Justin seemed agitated, which was strange considering he'd been perfectly fine on the trail. "No idea." "I don't know what's up with him," Dustin commented, stopping on the other side of the fence from them. "He started getting antsy when I tightened the saddle, but there's nothing wrong with the cinch or anything. Nothing's pinching." "Maybe he's tired of working today?" Wes suggested. "Hop on him and get him settled." Dustin swung up onto Justin's back. As soon as Dustin sat down, Justin was more agitated. Dustin got him moving to work it out, but the horse got more and more worked up. "Something's wrong," Vince stated. "This isn't normal for Justin. He was just fine." He climbed onto the fence and called, "Dustin! Get off him. Let's figure out what's up." Dustin shifted his weight back in the saddle to pull Justin to a halt, and at that moment, Justin freaked out completely. Dustin did a decent job of trying to hang on to the saddle as Justin bucked like mad, but Vince wasn't even sure he would have been able to ride that out. As Dustin lost his battle to stay on, Vince and Wes jumped over the fence. "I got the horse!" Wes called. Vince went straight to Dustin, who was rolling in the dirt in obvious pain. Thankfully he'd narrowly missed landing on one of the ground poles. "Dust! Are you—" "I'm fine," Dustin hissed. Vince decided it was a better idea not to mention that no one's forearm was supposed to bend at a ninety-degree angle, and therefore he was obviously *not* fine. He knelt down on the ground by Dustin but didn't get to say anything before Dustin groaned out one word. "Justin." "I got him." Vince looked up as Anna knelt beside him. She must have heard the commotion from the barn. "Thanks." He got to his feet and cautiously approached Justin, who was still aggressively agitated. Wes was trying to calm him and yell at Joe to call 911. Vince moved

quickly to undo the saddle. As he pulled it off, he looked to see if anything was under it and found it clean. There was a thin saddle blanket over the thicker pad still on Justin's back, and that also appeared clean. But when Vince pulled the saddle blanket off, he found the reason for Justin's behavior. There were at least twenty thumbtacks pushed into the slightly thicker saddle pad. "Don't hate me, Justin," Vince said as he quickly yanked the pad straight up off the horse's back. He then stepped over to his dad with it and showed him. Now that he could see more than the top of the pad, he realized that what he'd at first thought were thumbtacks were actually nails. There were a total of forty of them embedded in the thick pad, and they were just short enough to poke through with pressure. Wes took one look, and his gaze flew to the fence. Joe was on the phone with 911, and Mia was asking Anna if she needed anything. "Where's Chris?" he shouted. They all seemed to suddenly realize he wasn't there and looked around frantically. Still holding the saddle pad, Vince ran over to Joe and took the phone. Joe and Mia took off for the barn at a full-out run. "Sir?" "I'm sorry, ma'am," Vince said to the operator on the line. "I'm the barn manager. I just took the phone." "All right, sir," she replied pleasantly. "I have been told there was an accident involving a horse. Are there serious injuries?" "Yes, one of my stable hands was thrown from the saddle. He appears to have a broken arm, but I haven't gotten to see if that's all. He was wearing a helmet." "What's his age?" "He's twenty. We also need a police officer, please. We have clear evidence that a stable hand intentionally harmed the horse so it would throw the rider." "Of course, sir. There should be an ambulance and sheriff arriving shortly." "Vince!" Joe yelled, running up to the fence. "Chris is gone, but you need to go see Xander. He's flipping out." "Fuck." He shoved the phone back at Joe, dropped the saddle pad to the ground, and ran through the nearby gate out of the arena. He could suddenly hear Xander's screams—a horrifying, gut-wrenching sound. He hadn't heard it previously over the yelling and Justin's agitated noises. He ran straight to Xander's stall, where the horse was kicking the walls and proclaiming his anger. Mia was in the aisle, and Vince motioned her to the tack room and the emergency supplies. "Get me a dose of tranquilizer." "Here," she replied, handing a syringe over, already prepared. Vince was thankful to have employees who understood what to do even in emergency situations. He grabbed the syringe, walked right into Xander's stall, and not even thinking about the fact that, even though he had a bond with Xander, the enraged gelding could still easily kill him, he gave him the shot. Only as he was waiting the short minute for it to take effect—back outside the stall—did Vince really take in the situation. Xander had several what he hoped this time *were* thumbtacks pushed into his chest and lower neck. Vince counted seven, and they were all causing rivulets of blood to trickle down the horse's front. He almost felt physically sick trying to decide who to worry about more: Xander, Dustin, or Justin. His dad had Justin, Anna was with Dustin, and he was the only one he trusted to deal with Xander at the moment. Thinking that didn't stop him from stressing over all of them, though. Vince wanted Chris arrested. *Immediately.* When Xander was more relaxed, Vince was relieved to learn that the offending objects in his horse's chest were thumbtacks, not nails that would have caused more damage without a layer of wool in the way as had been the case with Justin. He couldn't help wondering if maybe Chris had realized the tacks wouldn't work in the saddle pad, but the nails wouldn't be easy to get into Xander. But why hurt Xander anyway? Why go through the effort of using a different method just to hurt him? Why not hurt Justin, if that was what Chris wanted to do, and get out? Wondering why Chris had decided to hurt Justin was beside the point. Chris was obviously sick of just verbally bullying Dustin. But the weird part was that the whole thing should have taken more thought and planning than Vince had thought Chris capable of, based on his previous bullying. Then again, almost a year ago Chris had tried to get Dustin injured by attempting to make him ride a horse that would have been too much for him, either as an act of new-guy hazing or because he was angry Dustin had replaced his former gambling buddy. Only when Dustin refused, did Chris get blindly violent. At the same time, the things he'd said to Vince when Vince had taken him aside had been so callously hateful that his intelligence seemed questionable. Maybe it was his plan to make Vince think he was a dumb violent drunk, so they never expected anything that would require planning—despite the stunt he'd pulled by cutting open bags of feed so the mice would get to them before anyone noticed. He never did find out why Chris had singled Dustin out before. Maybe they were dealing with some sort of

psychopath. Vince shook his head and began carefully pulling the tacks out, placing them in an empty plastic container Mia had found for him before cleaning the tiny wounds with clean water. He made sure to check the floor just inside the stall for any more tacks and found two that Chris had failed to get into Xander. Stepping on them would have caused the gelding—or a human who happened to find them—more pain. By then the ambulance and police had arrived, and Vince went back to the arena. The medics were talking to Dustin where he now sat upright in the arena dirt, and Vince headed in that direction. “Hey, Dust, do you want me to meet you at the hospital?” Dustin shook his head, now devoid of helmet. “I think they need you here. It’s just my arm, I’ll be fine.” “I’ll go, so he has a ride home,” Anna offered. Vince nodded reluctantly, knowing Dustin was right. “Okay. Can I talk to you first?” he asked, turning to Anna. She nodded, and they walked out of the arena, Vince giving Dustin one more glance, hoping he’d be fine. Dustin glanced back and smiled weakly. “What was up with Xander?” Anna asked, drawing his attention back to her. “Same thing as Justin,” Vince answered, then took a deep breath. “There’s something that you guys should know, because I’m afraid Chris might come back.” “He will,” she agreed. “All his shit is still in his cabin.” Vince nodded. “Well, either he just hates me, or he figured out that Dustin and I are, uh...” “A thing?” Anna supplied. Then she laughed. “That kid was depressed all winter without you. The way he practically ran out of the barn when you got here was a giveaway too. You both try to hide it, but it’s obvious. Even before you got together, it was heartbreakingly obvious. It’s good to have confirmation, though.” Vince stuffed his hands into his pockets and coughed. “Okay, well, I’m still worried about Chris. So I’m going to convince Dustin to leave his cabin. Move in with me or my dad. And I’m going to tell Mia and Joe once things get settled a little today.”

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## Anderson Stables: Book Two

When Vincent Anderson returns from eight months in Florida helping his dad train racehorses, he expects a peaceful homecoming. But the initial happiness over the reunion with his boyfriend Dustin doesn't last long. Chris, a disgruntled stable hand, causes a riding accident that sends Dustin to the hospital; then Chris disappears.

The fear of Chris's return hovers over the stable like a dark cloud while Vince and Dustin build their relationship and Vince works with his own horse, Xander, to begin trying for the United States Olympic equestrian team. The competition becomes the last of Vince's concerns when Chris shows up at the barn brandishing a gun and demanding money. Vince faces his former employee alone, and what happens next changes everything.

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