



## *Montclair*

by Sara Mitchell

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Sabrina halted at the stable's open entrance, trying to ignore a whole battery of disturbing physical symptoms. Her body wanted nothing to do with the barn. Her mind seconded the motion. But her *heart*...

"I want to do this," she announced resolutely. "Hunter...I really want to do this."

"Good. Prove it."

Stung by what seemed to be his indifference, Sabrina stepped forward. Smells and sounds enveloped her senses. Hay and grain. Leather. The pungent odor of manure. Horses snorting, an occasional nicker. A hoof stamping restlessly.

All as familiar as her own skin, and right now totally overwhelming.

"Shall I give you a push?" Hunter asked.

Sabrina wiped her damp palms on her jeans, giving him a sickly smile. "No. I want to do it."

"If you throw up, the floor's wash-and-wear. We had brick pavers installed last summer. They're rubberized, so if you're going to be sick, make sure it's in the aisle."

Chin jutting, Sabrina stalked stiff-legged into the cool, shadowed interior. She tossed a glance over her shoulder. "Well? Are you going to join me, or are you afraid I might mess up your boots?"

With a satisfied smirk on his face, Hunter followed.

Sabrina shook it off. Right now, all her attention was divided between controlling the fear and testing her limits. Her step slowed, then stopped. She forced her gaze to focus on her surroundings. *I'm in a stable, surrounded by horses, but I'll deal with it.*

The physical symptoms intensified: rapid heartbeat, skittering pulse, clammy hands, twitching muscles. *Good, Sabrina. Try not to leave anything out.*

“Lady Fair’s stall is this way.”

She jerked at Hunter’s touch. “Oh, sorry. This way? Let’s go.” She took a deep breath. She wanted to do this. *Needed* to do this. Hunter was right, even if his manner was abrasive, almost cruel. She didn’t understand why he was treating her this way, but she couldn’t spare the time or energy thinking about it now. Strangely, his flippancy only fueled her determination. Right now, all she wanted was to grab the first horse she saw, leap onto its back, and trample the smirk clear off Hunter’s face.

Hunt watched her fight what was doubtless an excruciating mental battle. He understood, to a certain extent, since he was fighting a few of his own. His protective instincts demanded that he sweep Sabrina into his arms, promise her that everything would be all right, and that he was going to help her through this.

But it was Sabrina’s battle, not his.

Timing. It was all a matter of timing, instinct, and finesse.

Hunt shook his head at a couple of people who passed by, warning them to silence. Strange, he hadn’t realized how susceptible to Sabrina’s vulnerability he had become. Even now, he was taking her to Lady’s stall in a roundabout way, down aisles vacated at the moment. Lady Fair would be shock enough; he didn’t want to throw Sabrina more than she could handle.

“Hey, boss! Can you give me a hand?” Jay called, hurrying down the aisle, craggy face wearing a ferocious scowl. “One of the owners of a horse you’re boarding has been trying for five minutes—oh. Sorry.” The head groomsmen glanced awkwardly from Sabrina to Hunt. “I...uh... I’ll go find Carla or Stu.”

He retreated, and Hunt finished counting to fifty.

“I hope you don’t look at me that way when *I* irritate you,” Sabrina said.

Hunt shook himself mentally and glanced down at her. “How was I looking?”

“Um...*quietly* steamed.” The smile spread. “I’m okay, Hunter. Not great, but better than I thought I would be.” She looked around. “Where are all the horses?”

“Oh...this block must be in the pasture right now. Don’t worry, though. Lady Fair’s just around the corner, at the other end.” He made a mental note to skewer Jay if the mare had been taken to the pasture by mistake.

“Actually, I’m glad. It was enough of an effort just coming here.”

“You’re doing fine.” He pursed his lips, inspecting her complexion. “A little green around the gills. But at least you’re not—”

“I get the picture. Don’t get too cocky. Things might change.”

He shrugged. He *wanted* to tease her, coax some color back into her face. Light to the night-dark eyes. But he couldn’t. Not now. Not yet. “What happened the last time you walked into a barn?”

“It was the barn at Woodleigh. My own horse—Sundancer. I made it to his stall. Then I ran—literally—out the door. It was...awful. I hated myself for being such a wimp.” Her hand moved, a revealing, jerky little movement. “That’s why I’m so determined. I mean, you’ve made me understand, and...I’m tired of running.”

He held her gaze in a level stare. “Then shall we go meet Lady Fair?”

She nodded. Hunt silently led her down the aisle and around the corner, faintly astonished when he felt the acceleration of his own pulse. Sabrina might have thought walking inside the stables was her water jump—historically always a difficult obstacle both riders and horses dreaded. Hunt disagreed. Sabrina was approaching her water jump right now.

He stopped two stalls from the end. “Her stall is number twenty-eight. Go ahead. Introduce yourself. She’s a lamb.”

With only a slightly doubtful look, Sabrina sailed past and moved to the entrance of the stall. She still seemed a little uncertain, Hunt saw, but she approached without hesitation.

“Hello, Lady Fair. So you’re the poor, unfortunate animal who’s—”

She halted mid-sentence and stumbled back, hands thrown up in front of her face. A low, keening moan ripped from her throat. “No!”

Hunt reached her in two long strides. “Easy, Sabrina. Easy...”

She ignored him. “She looks like...looks like—”

“Like Vesuvius,” Hunt finished. “I know.” He took her arm, intending to gently fore her back up to the stall, where a puzzled Lady Fair stood watching, ears pricked forward.

Stiff-armed, Sabrina fought him, twisting to escape. Hunt grimly held on, knowing that if she freed herself and ran, chasing her down would result in a firestorm of gossip. “You have to look at her,” he said, soothing her with his voice. “She looks like Vesuvius, but she *isn’t*. Come on, now, I want you to meet her.”

Sabrina shook her head violently.

He deliberately hardened his voice. “You said you were tired of running away.” She flinched at his tone, then began to struggle in earnest. Gritting his teeth, Hunt shifted his hold to prevent her escape. “I’m not letting you go!” he finally snapped. “Cool it, Sabrina.”

Her abrupt, total obedience threw him; for a second Hunt felt as though he'd stepped off a cliff. His hold gentled, and he opened his mouth to comfort her. Then he got a good look at her face, and a chill spiked down the back of his neck. Her eyes were open, fixed in a face stripped of color, as expressionless as a corpse. Hunt closed his eyes, swallowing hard.

"It's all right, Sabrina," he said, then cleared his throat. "It's all right," he repeated, murmuring the phrase in her ear, feeling the brittleness of her frame, smelling the faint fragrance of her shampoo in the tangled mass of hair. "You can face this. I'm going to help you, Sabrina. You're not alone." *God, help me to get through to her.* "It's all right...all right." As if with a mind of its own, his hand lifted to stroke her hair....

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