



SPIRIT SANCTUARY

...Rebel lay in bed, listening to the shower run, and wondering what kept Kai going at three in the morning. His dick ached, pulsing to life as he imagined Kai with water and soap suds cascading down his naked body.

He wondered if Kai were in as much pain as he was right now, tormented by a cock that had no idea what time it was—only that there was an incredibly sexy man behind a closed door, his ripples of muscles sluiced with steamy water and spicy soap.

Unable to hold back, he swallowed hard and reached for a bottle of lube he kept in the bedside drawer. It took him a long, frustrating moment to find it in the darkness and squirt cool, slippery jelly into his palm, but once he tossed the bottle back in the drawer, he relaxed.

Kai was anything but quiet in the shower, and Rebel smiled. Yep, the man was definitely gay, because no straight man sharing a house with another guy would dare to sing “Defying Gravity” from *Wicked* in the shower.

Rebel was starting to defy his own kind of gravity as he fisted his dick at the base and slowly rolled upward, shivering as pleasure spread through him. He held his breath, his hips lifting from the mattress as he reached the tip of his shaft and quickly stroked back to his testicles.

A soft groan left his lips as he pinched the head of his cock and massaged the ridge, feeling every inch of his dick the way

he hoped Kai would explore him. He thought about Kai lying beside him, tickling him with his breath and gentle, damp kisses as he played with him, teasing him almost to the breaking point.

He wanted it so much it hurt...

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SPIRIT SANCTUARY

BY

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*For Naomi and Brutus. And for Peanut, their brother,
who has crossed to Rainbow Bridge.*

CHAPTER 1

Summer heat like this didn't come around often, at least not this late in October. The blacktop looked ready to boil, and the grass along the side of the highway was yellowed, the tips hanging low as though to tell the sun each and every blade surrendered.

It mirrored how Rebel Wirth felt, stuck an hour's ride out from The Sanctuary stable, surrounded by weeds and mocked by the road within crawling distance. He picked up his cell phone and shook his head. The no-good thing had snapped, just like his ankle when he'd fallen out of the saddle and attempted to right himself.

Stupid move. He'd known before he ever hit the ground

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that the impact and angle would result in a nasty combination, and he'd been right. The blood in the dirt and the bone sticking through his skin had proved him correct.

God, how he hated the sight of blood. Ever since he'd been in college his gut would twist and his vision would threaten to go dark—and that was when he saw other people bleeding. When it came to himself, he couldn't look, though this time he'd forced himself to remove his riding boot and take a peek. The pain had been mind-numbing in intensity, the sort of agony a man remembered for the rest of his life—and he had a feeling that would be his very last memory.

He rested a moment and tried to think of a plan to get back to The Sanctuary office. Since he was supposed to be off for the weekend, no one would come looking for him. He'd bitched and moaned his way to a temporary replacement tending the horses and adoption processes even though he hated to think of someone doing his job. As long as he never took a day off he knew the stable ran smoothly, horses were moved to good homes, and those awaiting transport found their way to Spirit Sanctuary rather than a Canadian slaughterhouse. Now he was looking at taking at least a day off from the office, maybe more—as long as someone found him before the vultures gathered.

Get your ass toward the road. At least if he lay near the street he might be able to signal a passing car or truck. After that it was all a matter of getting the person to stop and help him, which he knew from shocking YouTube videos might pose the bigger problem. Who would have ever guessed there

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would be dozens of videos depicting injured folks left on the side of the road or in parking lots while the rest of humanity passed them by? At least he suspected one day all those insomniac sessions at the computer would do him some good.

He also knew from many sleepless late nights watching the Discovery channel that he might be able to last for days out here if his body went into survival mode. A guy and his daughter had once survived for a week in the Australian outback without food or water.

He'd be lucky if he made it past sundown with the way he felt. Apparently he didn't have a survival mode attitude.

Where were all the bright moments from his thirty-two years? Wasn't his life supposed to flash before his eyes sometime soon?

"Shit." He struggled to sit up and caught site of birds circling overhead. He couldn't tell for sure if they were vultures, but they may as well have been scavengers waiting to clean his carcass. As long as they were in the mood for some dried up Rebel jerky they were in luck.

Tires sped across the blacktop and Rebel shielded his eyes just in time to see a silver truck barreling down the road with the windows open and country music blaring. He managed to shift his weight until he knelt on one knee, his body crooked, thorns digging into his thigh and hip.

"Hey!" he shouted, waving his hat in the air above his head. The truck approached, the driver in a white Stetson oblivious to anything but the road ahead and Rascal Flatts. In a moment of desperation Rebel picked up a loose rock and

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hurled it at the truck, landing it in the bed. He hadn't thrown that hard or far since he'd spent a year playing affiliated baseball.

The truck screeched to a dusty stop, the vehicle temporarily obscured by debris kicked up from the road. All at once the music stopped and Rebel held his breath, waiting for the driver to exit.

"Son of a bitch," the man grumbled. The cab door opened and slammed shut while Rebel looked on. The driver peered into the back of the truck and pulled off his hat to scratch his head. Coal black hair framed his square, suntanned face as he frowned and shook his head.

"Over here!" Rebel shouted.

The man slowly lifted his head and looked around as the dust settled. Once he spotted Rebel he abandoned the truck and walked toward the wire fence. "Did you throw something at me?"

"Yeah."

"What in the hell are you throwin' rocks for? Do you realize what you could have done?"

He didn't have the typical drawl of a Texan, but he certainly looked the part of a cowboy. Tight jeans hugged his hips and thighs while the glint of a belt buckle drew Rebel's gaze to his crotch.

"I asked you a question." The guy looked about ready to hop the fence and come after him.

"Look, I just—" He stared at the long, lean cowboy and almost forgot his bum ankle. Most of his volunteers and

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sanctuary employees were women, retired men, and fathers looking for second jobs. This guy was young, built, and too damn hot for his own good. Black waves of hair peeked out from beneath his cowboy hat while the wide rim shaded his dark eyes and shadowed his unshaven face.

God has sent me an angel in disguise.

Rebel could have stared at his truck riding cowboy for a good ten minutes without blinking—until he shifted for a better look.

Instantly he sucked in a breath and nearly collapsed into a ball in the weeds. Pain ripped through him and he slammed his fist into the ground, cursing under his breath.

“Don’t think you’re going to crawl away and hide, you sorry son of a—” The man bore down on him, striding through the field like an angry giant. He nearly stepped on Rebel’s good ankle as he approached and stood over him, the heel of his boot crunching down on the cell phone he’d abandoned. As a final farewell, the phone gave a half-hearted buzz that sounded almost like his ringtone. Almost.

“You tryin’ to steal horses?” the stranger asked. He planted his hands on his hips and his shadow spread out over the ground, making him Goliath in appearance.

Rebel managed to turn onto his back. He tried to erase the pain from his expression but knew he failed. If there was one thing he couldn’t do it was hide his emotions, especially when it came to his land and his horses.

“I run this place,” he said through his teeth.

The man’s dark eyes widened. “You run what place?”

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“Spirit Sanctuary.”

“No you don’t.” The guy gave a smug grin. “I’m running The Sanctuary.”

He had to be hallucinating due to excruciating pain. “Says who?”

“Says Arlene McDivett.”

Rebel lay back and closed his eyes. Arlene had been in control of the phones for nine years now, which gave her three more years of experience than he had. In her mind, that made her in charge of the place.

“You’re my fill-in,” he mumbled. “Phillips, right?”

“Kai Phillips.” The guy crouched beside him and squinted at his chest. “R. Wirth.”

“That’s right.”

Kai grunted, still eyeing the embroidered name patch. He didn’t seem overly concerned with the situation and stood. “Ransom?”

“Rebel?”

“Yeah, that’s what she said. Rebel. You’re not supposed to be here.”

Rebel glared at him. Just who did he think he was, acting like he knew the routine?

“What’d you do? Fall off a horse?”

Rebel nodded and stretched his leg out, mindful of his injury. “I broke my ankle.”

At last the guy seemed surprised, his mouth dropping open in soundless horror as he took notice of Rebel’s injury. He reached out to touch it before Rebel pulled away.

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“Holy hell. Can you stand? Can you move?”

“Haven’t tried.”

“How long have you been out here?”

“Long enough,” he answered.

“Here.” The man offered his hand but frowned. “Can you make it to the truck?”

As far as Rebel could see, he didn’t have a choice. It was either hobble his way toward the road, or die from thirst and a nasty sunburn out in the unforgiving wilds of Texas.

“I’ll try.”

Rebel clutched Kai’s wrist and tried to gain momentum. He failed at propelling himself forward, leaving Kai to haul him to his one good foot. It took him a moment to find and keep his balance, which left Kai holding him around the waist, their bodies smashed together. If he hadn’t been so concerned about looking like a complete ass, Rebel may have actually enjoyed the contact. But they had at least a hundred yards to get from the pasture to the truck, and he was already hoping for the mercy of a rifle to put him out of his misery.

“Ready?”

Rebel nodded. No one was ever going to let him live this down. The guy who’d dedicated his life to wild horses and the rescue of equines throughout the United States had been thrown by his mount. Once he healed they’d rip on him for months over him breaking his ankle the moment he left the office and got on a horse.

“Don’t put weight on it,” Kai said.

Gee, really?

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Rebel grabbed a handful of Kai's shirt and hopped forward, feeling as though with every step the truck moved ten feet further away.

"How's it feeling?"

"Peachy," he answered through his teeth.

"We're almost there. As soon as we get to the truck, you'll be fine."

Rebel wanted to ask if he had a medical staff hiding in the back of the truck but held his tongue and clung to Kai, feeling the ripple of muscles and sweat dampened skin beneath his cotton shirt. It seemed unfair that he was alone, clinging to Kai because of an injury rather than because they'd both been swept up by passion. Karma obviously hated his guts.

"Alright, how do you suppose we're going to get you over the fence?"

Sweat trickled down his face and ran down his back. Propped up against Kai, he surveyed the fence line, knowing there was no way in hell he'd be able to vault over it. He wasn't sure he could fit underneath it, either, without ripping his flesh to shreds on the thorns.

"I think you're going to need to be a gentleman," he muttered.

Kai flashed a grin. "Arlene didn't mention the job got this physical."

Oh, it would get physical alright, at least in Rebel's fantasies. While he was comfortably numbed with pain medication he was going to bend the truth a little and reminisce how Kai had wrestled him over the fence and into

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the back of the truck where he murmured how much he wanted to make love right there, on the side of the road. They'd be two hot, sweaty, horny men unable to deny themselves a moment later.

"Ready?" Before Rebel could respond, Kai hopped the fence and motioned for him to sit on the cross bar. "You sort of turn and I'll catch you."

"Why don't you just spot me?" he grumbled.

"Whatever." He clapped his hands and got into position, moving from one foot to the other like a football player ready to intercept him. "Come on. We're missing the barbeque."

"The what?" Rebel asked.

And then he fell.

Kai grabbed him beneath the arms and eased him onto his good leg. He clutched Rebel tighter than necessary, his chest pressed to his back, his chin resting on his shoulder. The first thing Rebel noticed was how hard Kai was breathing, then the placement of his hands on his chest, hugging him. What should have been a humiliating moment became unbearably delicious.

Out here, cowboys didn't help one another like this. They should have, but they didn't.

"Meat," Kai said. Rebel could have sworn he felt the man behind him move his hips forward. "For my arrival."

Rebel couldn't wait for the arrival of Kai's meat. The longer they stood unmoving, the more his cock began to ache for the feel of Kai's hands exploring his body.

"You get meat?"

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“We both do.” Kai started to move and forced Rebel to hop forward until they reached the truck. “You like meat, don’t you?”

He wasn’t quite sure if he meant on a grill or the fresh kind he wanted to devour, so he nodded and opened the cab door. Kai released him and he managed to slide into the truck where he sat and caught his breath, avoiding Kai’s gaze.

If he was wrong about this, he was going to look like a total ass. Some guys gave off false signals, and whether it was intentional or not wasn’t the point. If he was wrong, he was wrong. The last thing he wanted to do was get all worked up over nothing.

“Where’s the nearest hospital?” Kai asked as he turned the engine.

Rebel gestured with his thumb at the road behind them. “About a half hour out. Get back to the stables and I’ll have someone drive me there.”

“Doesn’t that hurt?” Kai nodded toward Rebel’s leg.

“I’ve made it this far, I’ll survive a while longer.”

Kai made a face. “Like hell you are. You’re going to the ER.”

* * *

A crazy, overly dramatic mother and three crazy, overly dramatic sisters made Kai a pro at dealing with complete nonsense. He turned on his hazard lights and gunned it down the back roads, figuring a bone sticking out of flesh was a damn good reason for speeding.

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“Ha,” he said as the hospital ER sign came into view. “Nineteen minutes. I think I just qualified.”

Rebel had sunk lower in his seat, his expression sullen and face pale. Kai reached into the back seat and grabbed a bottle of water.

“Here,” he said, forcing the bottle into Rebel’s hand. “Pretend it’s a beer.”

He exited the truck and found a wheelchair parked near the entrance, which he took without asking. When he returned to the truck he found Rebel sitting with the door open and the empty bottle of water beside him on the seat.

Maybe he’d come on a little too strong with all the talk of meat. Or maybe he’d seemed a little too willing by holding onto Rebel once he managed to get over the fence. He couldn’t help himself, not when Rebel had spent the first ten minutes staring up at him with a lusty, come-fuck-me look on his tanned face.

At least he knew he had the right idea since no straight man looked at another guy the way Rebel had been checking him out. Despite a nasty injury, the guy had one thing on his mind—and Kai was more than willing to get those thoughts out of Rebel’s head and into being—as soon as he was doctored up.

“In about three hours you’re going to have some sweet pain medication,” he promised.

Rebel turned and looked at him. “Three hours?”

“Maybe two if you lie and say you’re having chest pains.”

“What?”

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“Trust me, my sister works at a hospital in Memphis. In the emergency room, if all you have is a broken ankle, don’t expect five star treatment. They only rush if it looks like you might die.” He gestured for him to get out of the car as he moved the wheelchair into place. Once Rebel collapsed in the wheelchair, Kai clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’m sure we can get you nursed back to health even if you don’t take priority here.”

Rebel looked up at him with a wary, borderline disgusted look on his face. Something was definitely eating this guy. Without another word he wheeled Rebel into the waiting room and up to the counter where he gave some information and filled out paperwork. Once they were told to wait, he pushed him near some ugly plastic chairs against the wall, grabbed a cup of cold coffee, and took a seat.

“You know,” he said, spreading his knees. “You should be playing baseball with an arm like that.”

“I used to,” Rebel mumbled as he flipped over the piece of paper he’d been given and filled out the back side.

“No kiddin’. College?”

“I played pro.” He crossed out a line and scribbled above it without bothering to look up.

Kai raised a brow. Arlene hadn’t said much about her boss, though Kai didn’t mind getting to know him one-on-one. As long as he could keep him talking he could see where this was going—and God how he hoped it would go somewhere.

“For who?”

“Couple of indie teams in the Midwest. Oklahoma,

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Indiana, Michigan, Ohio...nothing big.”

“Were you a pitcher?”

Rebel finally looked up. “Nah. Played mostly in center field,” he answered. “Though I pitched once when we went through our bullpen.”

“Do any good?”

“The batters were looking for some fancy stuff, but I didn’t have the speed to make them work for it. My fastball clocked in at like sixty-five.”

Kai cocked a brow. “Wow, and they didn’t send you up to the majors immediately? That’s almost faster than my grandma can pitch.”

“I know, amazed me too when I didn’t get the call.”

“So was hitting off you like batting practice?”

Rebel sat up a little straighter. “They didn’t know what to do with me out there, so I ended up striking out the last two batters. And you know what? The last guy was a former major leaguer hitting almost four hundred. You should have seen his face when the ump made the call and he walked back to the dugout.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” Excitement rang in his voice and Kai had a feeling Rebel had completely forgotten about his ankle. “We ended up winning thirteen to eleven in fourteen innings. I don’t think I slept at all for two days after that game. I was awesome.”

“So besides being modest, you were pretty good at being a utility player?”

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Rebel made a face. “Call it dumb luck. Out of seven years in professional ball, I still have people mention that one inning. Maybe I should have been a pitcher after all.”

“Whatever wins the game, right?” He took the opportunity to sit forward and look into Rebel’s dark chocolate eyes. It didn’t matter what he said as long as those perfect, full lips continued to move.

If they’d been alone in the middle of the night, he may have dared to slide a little closer and place his hand on Rebel’s knee. With one gentle squeeze, Kai was certain he would have known if Rebel was interested, but this wasn’t the place. He wasn’t much of a public affection kind of guy and he knew better than to make a move out in the sticks. In the seventy-three miles he’d driven toward The Sanctuary, he’d seen two dozen signs about morality, Godliness, and faith, none of which accepted his sexual preference. Touching Rebel here, now, was practically suicide.

“Mr. Wirth, I’m going to need your insurance information,” the front desk clerk said as she returned with his driver’s license. She didn’t bat an eye at his foot, which was currently covered with a white towel. Kai assumed the towel was for the comfort of other ER patients and their waiting families rather than to keep bacteria away from an open wound.

Startled, Rebel dropped the clipboard and half the waiting room turned to stare at him.

“Do you know how much longer this is going to take?” he mumbled as he fished his wallet out of his pocket and

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exchanged his license for his insurance card.

“Sorry, I don’t.”

“Not even ballpark?”

The nurse frowned. “I’m just in charge of entering information.”

Kai lifted his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. “Not even for a celebrity?”

The girl’s eyes narrowed and gave Kai a suspicious glare. “What celebrity?”

Ah ha. Now he had her wondering. He nodded at Rebel, then smiled at the cute nurse, with her dark hair in a bun and her black-frame glasses lowered to the tip of her nose. She looked like a cross between a naughty librarian and a sassy nurse, which he hoped meant she had a bad girl side just begging for some attention.

“Do you follow baseball?”

She shook her head.

Thank God she didn’t follow baseball, because he was about to feed her a string of lies. “Well, Miss...Keri, is it?” He waited for her to give a slow nod, the kind of gesture that told him she wasn’t ready to bite just yet. “This here is Rebel Wirth and he’s one of the best pitchers the Midwest has ever seen.”

“Is he?”

“He is. Imagine, right here in your ER you have one of the greatest pitchers to ever play in the Midwest indie leagues.”

“This isn’t the Midwest, sweetheart. This is Texas, and down here we consider the Midwest just Northern Texas.” She

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shifted her weight and planted her hand on her hip. “Let’s just say I’m not yet impressed by your famous friend.”

“Do you know how fast he can throw a pitch?”

“I haven’t a clue.” And it didn’t sound like she cared.

“Sixty-five miles an hour, thank you very much,” he said, making it sound impressive even though he was pretty sure kids in Little League were pitching faster than Rebel these days. What she didn’t know wasn’t going to hurt her. “He saved his team from certain defeat with speed like that. He’s so good he’s played for four different states. Can you imagine seeing a guy pitch that fast? That’s like a speeding train.”

She looked down her nose at him. “Choo. Choo,” she said sardonically. “We’ll get to Mr. Baseball as soon as we take care of the most urgent patients.”

With that, she walked away, and Kai sank into his seat.

Rebel grunted and shook his head. “Nice try.”

“I thought I had her when she said she didn’t know anything about baseball.”

Rebel shrugged. “She must know your kind.”

Kai feigned surprise even though he was secretly happy to be thought of as a “kind.” If nothing else, it meant Rebel was beginning to notice him. “You mean the tall, strong, and irresistible type?”

“She walked away, didn’t she?”

He’d always hated when things went exactly as planned, and Rebel seemed to have no intention of making flirting easy. That was fine by Kai, even if it left him with an aching dick. In all of his past relationships he’d learned the harder the

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chase, the more satisfying the relationship.

“Mr. Wirth.” The naughty nurse returned and spun around Rebel’s wheelchair. She issued a tight smile to Kai before patting Rebel on the shoulder. “We have an open room for you where I think you’ll be more comfortable.”

Rebel shot Kai a look of surprise as the nurse wheeled him around the plastic chairs and toward the exam rooms.

With a shake of his head, Kai chuckled to himself. “That’s my kind, all right.”

CHAPTER 2

Four hours and several X-rays later, Rebel was escorted out on crutches with a prescription for pain meds in his shirt pocket. He scanned the waiting room and found Kai in the same corner with his hat pulled low over his eyes, his arms crossed, and his legs wide open. Undoubtedly asleep, he offered the perfect opportunity for Rebel to stare all he wanted.

Man, did he have some long, slender legs and powerful forearms. Too bad he couldn't see Kai's kissable lips and handsome, square-jawed face. Rebel wasn't sure if plain old hunger or sexual desire made him salivate at the thought of kissing and licking his way from Kai's feet up to his torso, but

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now wasn't the time to get horny. He'd fantasized himself to a semi hard dick while sitting alone in the exam room, wondering just what kind of man Kai was, especially since he was supposed to temporarily take his place at The Sanctuary.

A toddler ran into Kai's legs and woke him with a start. He sat up and looked around, finding Rebel across the room almost immediately. An easy smile settled onto his face and he stood, brushed off his jeans, and walked toward him.

"So they stuck a bandage on it and told you to quit your crying?"

"Something like that."

Kai nodded. "Good. So now what?"

"I need to get my prescription filled and then I believe you promised me meat."

The words came out before Rebel could stop them and he instantly felt heat spread across the back of his neck. He pretended to adjust his crutches, anything to look away from Kai and hide his expression.

"I am known for my Italian sausage."

Rebel met his eye and caught him grinning, which did nothing to ease his growing frustration. He hobbled out the automatic doors behind Kai and into a wall of hot late afternoon air, the kind that called for blasting the AC in the car and an ice cold beer.

He waited on a stone bench for Kai to pull the truck up to the circle drive, and at last they were gone, heading back to The Sanctuary at turbo speed, which seemed to be the only way Kai drove. There was a lesson to be learned about the

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way a person drove and Rebel was beginning to think Kai liked everything fast and out of control—though he looked like he knew exactly what he was doing.

They drove a good ten miles in silence, both of them staring at the road ahead and the vast open spaces and billboards on either side of the two-lane highway.

“So where are you from?” Rebel asked.

“A little bit of everywhere,” Kai answered. “Born in Canada, spent a few years in Kansas, moved to Vermont, and then lived in North Carolina and South Carolina until my dad got relocated to outside of Indianapolis.”

“What did he do?”

“He trained German shepherds to protect people. Sometimes he worked for rich folks, sometimes he worked for police forces and the government. He went wherever he was needed, and we followed.”

“So how’d you get into horses if he was a dog person?”

Kai continued to stare straight ahead but his posture changed, his body rigid. “I ain’t him,” he answered quietly, his grip on the steering wheel belying his tone of voice.

With the medication slowly working its way through Rebel’s system, he wasn’t in the mood for a father/son hardship story and guessed Kai didn’t want to talk about it either.

“My mom cooked for most of central Indiana when I was in high school,” he said, the irritation in his voice slowly lifting. “Mama Lucia’s Fine Italian Cooking. Voted best Italian food five years in a row. She once cooked for the

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Pacers *and* the Colts at charity events.”

“Hence how you know your meat.”

“Exactly. My mom turned me into a catering packhorse, so from there I met a lot of people and got into special education.”

“So you don’t know horses?” Rebel asked.

Kai squinted. “I know my organization and how to bring about the best in my staff.”

Yep, the guy had a lot going for him, but he clearly didn’t know squat about horses with an answer like that. He was damn lucky he brought more to the table than looks since organization had never been Rebel’s strong point.

“And you’re from around here or a transplant?” Kai asked.

“I’m from Texas,” he said proudly.

And why wouldn’t he be proud of his homeland? Texas screamed the wild American West, the untamed wilderness, and the weathered, hard life of a cowboy. Texas was a red, white and blue flag of courage, strength, and loyalty. God didn’t just bless Texas, if He’d had a choice, He would have had private residences in South Padre Island, San Antonio, and Dallas. Texas wasn’t part of the United States, it was Texas. You didn’t mess with Texas.

Kai shot him a look, obviously sensing the greatness beside him. “A true American cowboy with a major league arm. Only in Texas.”

“I don’t like to brag or nothin’.”

“You sort of lose bragging rights when you’re found on your ass in the middle of nowhere.” That sexy-as-all-hell grin

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returned to Kai's face as he gave Rebel a playful look.

He shrugged. "This injury gives me more time to do the paperwork while you do the hard labor."

"Hard labor?" Kai seemed to mull over the idea. He rubbed his hand over his stubbly chin and nodded. "The gritty, sweaty stuff?"

Oh, hell yeah. Now Rebel had all sorts of visual images wrestling for attention in his creative mind and they were all about Kai. He imagined his replacement walking shirtless around the ranch with tight jeans and a cowboy hat. Like some Calvin Klein model, he'd haul bales of hay and feed from stall to stall, his muscles rippling, while perspiration beaded on his chest and hard, flat stomach.

Yes, sir. Hard, sweaty, gritty labor that left Kai naked in the shower was just the image that made Rebel feel good all over. Screw Vicodin. Kai Phillips could be one hell of a drug.

"That's part of the job," Rebel replied. "Or didn't they tell you we work our asses off around here?"

"I'm up for most anything." Kai gave him a sideways glance and smiled again. "The harder the work, the better the outcome."

"Good work ethic."

"It's always been my ethic." He turned onto a side street where signs for The Sanctuary led visitors toward the stable, office, vet clinic, and riding trails. "I didn't come here to fool around. At least not while I'm on the clock."

* * *

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The surprise in seeing their fearless leader returned was instantly snuffed out once the staff and volunteers saw Rebel hobble from the silver pickup truck. The gasps of horror concerning his broken ankle and trip to the ER lasted only slightly longer than his initial greeting as Arlene pushed Rebel aside and ushered Kai into the party.

“Way to go, boss,” Reed said, shaking his head at Rebel.

Once upon a time Rebel had been smitten with Reed and his boyish dimples. Something about the way he wore his jeans and a button-down shirt made him look like a clothing model come to life right on the ranch.

Despite his looks, Rebel had never made any move on the kid. He’d always known Reed wasn’t gay, but it had done nothing to curb his fantasies. As one of the long-term employees at The Sanctuary, Reed had found out about Rebel in a casual sort of way and had never made a big deal about it. Most of the time he seemed flattered when Rebel came up and looked him over.

“Looks like I’m staying right here,” Rebel answered, taking a seat in a camp chair around the fire the rest of the staff had made.

“Right beside the cold beer. Good choice to torture yourself.”

“What did I miss today?”

Reed frowned. “Nothin’, boss.”

“Did Sorrel come back?”

“Yep. We thought she snuck away from a trail ride and came back when she felt like it. You know, you ought to tell

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people when you're going out. It's sort of a rule you created. You might get terminated for a stunt like this." Reed handed him an ice cold bottle of water and patted him on the shoulder. "Just kidding, Reb."

With another smile he should have had patented by now, Reed took his place beside his long-time girlfriend Daphne, who fit Reed's personality and his looks all the way and then some.

Daphne had been hired solely for her looks and ability to draw in donors. Long, blond hair always flowed out of her ponytail while her lips always seemed shiny and perfect, as though somewhere in her saddle bag she had a make-up artist and hair designer primping her along the trails. Without her, their stable doors would have closed to rehabbed horses and underprivileged or disabled children attending summer camps and therapy sessions.

Rebel settled back and watched the interactions the way he always did during gatherings. After hours, when he wasn't in charge, he blended into the Texas night and listened to the flow of conversations around him. Here he could watch and learn what he didn't see during the work day.

People flocked to Kai's side, milling around him as he talked with his hands and managed to pull everyone into whatever the topic happened to be. He nodded and laughed as though he'd known the staff his entire life and was just catching up on the daily news of what horses were in which barn and what they had coming from auctions and the like.

Arlene managed to corral him and guide him toward a

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game of bean bags taking place with the aid of tiki torches and a string of crimson paper lanterns hanging from the trees. Despite the heat of day, the night air felt cool and welcome, a breeze drifting across the open land. The scent of alfalfa and freshly mowed grass mingled with the smoke from the fire pit, the barbeque, and food for twenty-five people.

Over the music and laughter, Rebel could clearly hear Kai laughing. God, he seemed so easy to talk to, so perfect no matter the situation. Where Rebel receded into darkness, Kai gravitated toward the fire and the crowd, slipping into place as though he ran the joint.

They could use someone like this at The Sanctuary, at least for a while. Rebel sat back and clenched his fist around the cold bottle of water Reed had given him. He could use someone like this on and off the job, though he'd always made it a point of not mixing business with pleasure—not that there had been an instance where he could put the two together.

“Hanging in there?” Kai collapsed into the camp chair beside him and clapped him on the shoulder. He allowed his fingers to linger a little too long against Rebel’s shirt collar, his touch cool and soothing from gripping a can of beer.

“Yep,” Rebel answered, his voice strained like a kid out on a first date. He unscrewed the cap and gulped down the last of his water, then tapped the empty bottle against his knee.

“You look like you need something thick and juicy.”

Rebel shot him a look and found Kai smiling, with the most ornery look on his face. If anything, the guy definitely didn’t beat around the bush.

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“Are you going to get it for me?”

“Why not?” He took a sip of beer, the firelight playing against the glass bottle. With the rim inches from his mouth, he squinted into the darkness. “Tell me how you like it.”

Rebel’s cock ached for another feel of Kai. He liked it slow and sensual at first, every second a new opportunity to explore his lover and the way he liked to be touched. Once they knew each other, he was up for most anything as long as it left both of them satisfied.

“I like it over an open flame,” he mumbled, spreading his legs a little wider to accommodate his growing dick. The blood in his veins went straight to his groin, and his jeans had never felt so snug before.

“The hotter the better.” Kai ran his hand between Rebel’s shoulders before he stood and strolled away, sliding between a group of people on his way toward the grill. Women blatantly stared at him, checking him out from top to bottom while they masked their expressions behind beer bottles and cowboy hats.

That’s right, look all you want. If there’s anyone on this ranch that’s gonna have him, it’ll be me. Rebel smiled to himself and reached for another bottle of water. This was going to be one hell of a recovery time.

CHAPTER 3

They sure were a friendly, talkative bunch, especially as the night wore on and people had to stick their arms elbow deep into the silver booze bucket. After a day of driving Texas highways and an unexpected trip to the local hospital, Kai wanted nothing more than to sit on the front porch and stare at the night and the pinpricks of stars scattered in a sky only Texas could provide.

The only company he wanted was Otis, the resident mongrel, who seemed unfazed by life in general, and Rebel, who hadn't said much over the course of the night.

In terms of a party, the man may as well have been furniture. He sat in the middle of the crowd but never drew

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attention to himself, aside from fielding work-related questions. It was obvious about the way he referred to horses by name that he loved what he did—he just seemed to always be doing it.

Most of the party had died down, with folks returning home for the night, leaving behind stragglers chatting near their trucks and SUVs. Out of ten employees and about forty volunteers, only Rebel stayed the night at the ranch, which Kai had learned from Arlene before she went home.

“This is his life,” she’d told him. “You better respect that.”

“Hey.” Kai walked up to Rebel when the last trucks pulled out of the dirt lot and down the drive. He hadn’t moved from his camp chair, and Kai waited for him to look up. “You still doin’ okay?”

Rebel nodded slowly and stifled a yawn. Pain creased his eyes and he grimaced as he moved, stretching his legs out. “Fine.” He didn’t look fine, that was for sure, but he forced a smile.

“Nice night.” Kai took a seat and spread his legs until his knee touched Rebel’s. He felt him instinctively move on contact, then settle into his seat and relax. “You’ve got quite the set-up here.”

“It’s peaceful now, but just you wait ’til morning when feed and supplies come in. We’re relaxing tonight, but tomorrow we have a ranch to run.”

“Is that a threat or a warning?”

With his easy, irresistible smile, Rebel chuckled. “Just the truth.”

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“Oh yeah?”

“I made arrangements weeks ago and tried to keep it simple. Tomorrow we’ll see what you’re really made of.”

“I have no problem showing you what I’ve got.” Kai purposely shifted, rubbing his leg against Rebel’s, challenging him in a different way. He swore he could feel the electricity sparking from Rebel’s nerves, waiting to be channeled into something constructive. All he needed was for Rebel to make the first move.

Rebel cleared his throat and reached for his crutches. “Do you know where you’re staying?”

In the beginning, with Rebel out of town, the plan had been to stay at the ranch and keep everything running. Now he was more assisting than directing operations, which left him unsure of where he stood. He shrugged and removed his hat, trying to play awkward when sharing a house with Rebel seemed damn near perfect, especially with no one else around.

“Arlene said I could stay here.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that.” Rebel struggled to his feet and pushed his way toward the ranch house, his crutches squeaking with each step. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure Kai followed and did a terrible job at a frown. “Come on.”

So that’s how he wanted to play. In two long strides Kai caught up, following the tension Rebel had all around him. “Remember, you’re not supposed to be here, so if I’m in your way, it’s your own fault. This is supposed to be my castle.”

“Yeah, well, we don’t have castles in Texas.”

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“I take it Texas is too awesome for castles?”

Rebel chuckled to himself. “Castles are for pussies. Texas is for...Texans.”

“Wow. That’s deep.”

“It’s two in the morning.” Rebel balanced himself and unlocked the front door of the modest two-story house. Compared to the other buildings they’d passed on the way in, the house was unimpressive from the outside. The horses appeared to be living it up in their state-of-the-art air-conditioned stables.

“So where am I staying?”

Rebel opened the door, presenting a darkened living room with a leather couch and a flat screen television set that almost had Kai drooling. He wondered if he could make an excuse to stay until the Superbowl just so he could watch the game in high def on a screen that would broadcast the players in life-size action.

“There.” Rebel nodded up the stairs. “First door on the left.”

Kai peered up the staircase at the wide, hardwood landing and antique lighting fixtures. Crimson cloth wallpaper with what looked like tiny white roses and a dark green loveseat with an end table completed the look of Victorian ranch style.

“Ignore the decoration. I haven’t gotten that far into the house to change it yet.”

“Just moved in?”

“Nah, been rearranging the place for the last four years. I just don’t have the time to do more than a room here and a

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room there. But don't worry, I already brought the guestroom into this century."

"And what about you? Where are you staying?" He wondered if he was coming on a little strong and cleared his throat. "In case you need something during the night."

Rebel gave him a look. "Across the hall."

Close, but not nearly close enough as far as Kai was concerned. They wouldn't be close enough until they were both sweaty and naked together in bed—or on the loveseat in the hall. Or maybe the leather couch in the living room.

"Do you need spare clothes, or did you bring stuff of your own?"

Clothes? Who needed clothes? Kai could go for some leather restraints, hot candle wax, some body paint, and a dildo. Unless handcuffs counted, he didn't need clothes.

Whoa, where did those thoughts come from? And how was he going to sleep tonight with images of Rebel handcuffing him and forcing him to his knees running through his mind?

"Nah, I'm good." He turned toward the front door and tried to force the thoughts from his head. Not happening, at least not easily. "Let me get my stuff out of the truck."

* * *

Rebel hobbled his way into the bathroom and went through two cycles with his electronic toothbrush. Behind the constant buzz he listened to Kai whistle as he opened and shut dresser drawers, depositing his belongings in the guest room.

Talk about torture. He wasn't sure what ached more—the

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ankle he'd snapped or his uncontrollable dick. Making it through the night seemed difficult enough while surviving several weeks of Kai doing business and getting dirty on the ranch would most likely kill him.

They were going to be sharing the same laundry basket and shower, which seemed fairly innocent but still intimate. He'd never been attracted to anyone who'd stayed overnight—not that he had many guests at the ranch. If it was someone making a donation, he booked a nice hotel several miles down the road or left the ranch completely and gave them his home. Once in a while a bad storm hit and volunteers stayed late to clean up downed branches and broken fences, but that resulted in folks crashing on the living room floor.

This wasn't just a night of sharing a house, this was going to be weeks of fitting Kai into the ranch's schedule—and into his own daily routine. No more sleeping naked—or at least no more sleeping naked alone. As he gargled, he wondered if Kai were the boxer, briefs, or commando type—and whether or not he'd find out any time soon.

Kai tapped on the bathroom door just as Rebel finished flossing. “Are you decent?”

The moment he'd limped his way to the sink, he'd discarded his shirt in the laundry basket. He glanced down at his jeans, which the ER department had butchered in order to set the break. “Yep.”

Kai strolled in with a small black toiletry bag, which he flipped up in the air and caught. He placed folded knit pajama bottom and a baby blue T-shirt with a picture of a baseball

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catcher onto the sink and smoothed out the wrinkles. Brow raised, Rebel looked him over in the bathroom mirror, wondering if he was reading too much into the shirt. A guy squatted down with plenty of protection had him thinking of only one thing and it sure wasn't baseball.

"You know." Kai brushed past him, resting one hand momentarily on Rebel's shoulder while clutching the toiletry bag in the other. "My sister-in-law bought me this thing for Christmas and I think it's the best damn present I ever received."

"I normally throw my stuff into my suitcase."

Kai made a face. He unzipped the bag, displaying a neat arsenal of shampoo, shaving cream, toothpaste, and various other items all organized in individual elastic holders. Rebel swallowed, wondering if he was always a neat freak or if this was just a happy accident.

One by one Kai set the bottles on the sink and arranged them by size. He carefully turned each one to make sure the labels all faced out while Rebel looked on in disbelief. At first glance, Kai appeared rugged and manly, not overly concerned with organization. Neatness wasn't Rebel's forte and everyone at the ranch hated stepping foot in the disaster he called his office. If Kai were this orderly with his toiletries, he was in for a heart attack once he saw where he'd be doing office work.

"There." Kai took a breath and smiled, then adjusted his hair gel a microscopic turn. "Perfect."

Well, at least he's hot. Maybe a little OCD, but hot.

"You look worried." Kai took out his toothbrush and

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slowly measured out a dollop of toothpaste.

Rebel shrugged. “I’m just thinking it’s going to be...interesting.”

With the toothbrush dangling from his mouth, Kai smiled. “I like interesting.”

CHAPTER 4

Rebel lay in bed, listening to the shower run, and wondering what kept Kai going at three in the morning. His dick ached, pulsing to life as he imagined Kai with water and soap suds cascading down his naked body.

He wondered if Kai were in as much pain as he was right now, tormented by a cock that had no idea what time it was—only that there was an incredibly sexy man behind a closed door, his ripples of muscles sluiced with steamy water and spicy soap.

Unable to hold back, he swallowed hard and reached for a bottle of lube he kept in the bedside drawer. It took him a long, frustrating moment to find it in the darkness and squirt

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cool, slippery jelly into his palm, but once he tossed the bottle back in the drawer, he relaxed.

Kai was anything but quiet in the shower, and Rebel smiled. Yep, the man was definitely gay, because no straight man sharing a house with another guy would dare to sing “Defying Gravity” from *Wicked* in the shower.

Rebel was starting to defy his own kind of gravity as he fisted his dick at the base and slowly rolled upward, shivering as pleasure spread through him. He held his breath, his hips lifting from the mattress as he reached the tip of his shaft and quickly stroked back to his testicles.

A soft groan left his lips as he pinched the head of his cock and massaged the ridge, feeling every inch of his dick the way he hoped Kai would explore him. He thought about Kai lying beside him, tickling him with his breath and gentle, damp kisses as he played with him, teasing him almost to the breaking point.

He wanted it so much it hurt and, as he began to work his way between his legs, he murmured Kai’s name, whispering to him as though begging his lover to give him the relief he needed.

“Please,” he murmured, imagining it was Kai teasing his hole. He’d nearly curled himself into a ball, using one hand to brace himself and the other to touch and arouse his already rock-hard dick.

He penetrated his hole with his index finger and slid it in as far as he could manage, then slowly pulled out. His dick twitched in response, his balls heavy and ready to unload

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directly into Kai's mouth. He pumped several times in a row, each one a little deeper, filling himself a little more. Normally he preferred a toy, but it would take too long to find.

The sound of Kai's voice was better than a toy; it was real and deep, fueling Rebel's desires. If only he were murmuring Rebel's name instead of song lyrics, telling him how much he wanted to swallow every last drop of his seed.

Rebel had himself worked up, his hips pumping in time with each hard stroke. The bedsprings squeaked and he wondered if Kai could hear him. Clearly he would know what he was doing...and then what? Maybe he'd join him...

He began stroking harder, no longer concerned about being caught in the act. He needed this too much to stop now.

The images in his head turned to Kai walking into the room, a towel around his hips and his dark hair damp. He imagined the surprise on his face turning into a seductive smile as he leaned against the doorframe and watched, his gaze locked on Rebel's thick, engorged cock.

That was more than Rebel could handle. With one last thrust into his hole, he turned onto his side and grabbed a tissue, just barely catching a load of hot sperm. He took a shuddering breath as his body went limp and his frustration turned to satisfaction.

The shower turned off. Rebel closed his eyes, listening to the last drops hit the shower floor and Kai draw back the curtain. There he was, a door away and naked, Kai's body warm, slick, and clean. Rebel's heart rate refused to slow, his libido denying him sleep. All he could think about was how

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damn good Kai had to look fresh out of the shower—and him drying off and changing into pajama pants and the baby blue T-shirt with a catcher on the front.

He bit his lower lip, feeling his dick begin to stiffen again while Kai whistled a tune Rebel didn't recognize. He shifted in bed, trying to ignore the ache in his groin and fall asleep. With two buses full of teenagers coming to the ranch in the morning, he needed to be alert, not a sexually satisfied zombie.

At last Kai exited the bathroom and walked into the guestroom.

"Hey, Rebel."

"Yeah?" he replied, doing his best to sound at least a little groggy.

"What time do we start in the morning?"

"Six."

"I'll see you at five forty-five."

"Fantastic."

Kai chuckled and closed the door. The bed groaned once as though he'd done a belly flop onto the mattress, and that was the end of Rebel's welcomed distraction.

With a sigh, Rebel stretched his hands over his head and stared at the ceiling. This was going to be the longest night of his life—and not necessarily in a good way.

* * *

Mornings in Texas arrived with a big, bright sun peering

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through the bedroom window. Kai turned over in bed and placed his pillow over his head, groaning as he heard horses whinny from the stables and the loudest damn rooster in the world crowing.

By no means was he a morning person. For him, the day should have legally started around eleven, but he wanted to make a good first impression and seem ready for work even if deep down inside all he wanted was to crawl back into bed.

Slowly he stretched out, wondering if Rebel had gotten an early start. Pushing the pillow aside, he glanced at the clock, seeing it was five forty-four in the morning. That stupid rooster had cheated him out of a full minute of much needed sleep.

Inhaling, he caught a hint of coffee and perked up. A strong cup of coffee, maybe a little breakfast, and Rebel down in the kitchen would be a nice way to start the day. Of course, waking up to Rebel beside him would have made it better, but there he didn't have a choice. If it was going to happen, it would happen. But, God, he hoped it would happen soon.

At last he forced himself out of bed and walked out into the hall. After a quick stop in the bathroom to brush his teeth, he strolled down the stairs, hearing the morning news playing in the kitchen. He turned the corner and found Rebel in a rolling office chair, wheeling himself from the stove to the kitchen table crowded with two sets of plates, coffee, a stack of mail, and three unread newspapers.

"Ingenious," Kai said as he nodded toward the leather

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office chair.

"I thought so, too." Rebel issued one of his irresistible smiles that gave him the most delicious dimples. "Hungry?"

For a piece of you. He glanced at the microwave clock and shrugged. "If you think we have time to sit around and eat."

Rebel eyed him. "You're not going to be able to keep up your stamina on an empty stomach."

"Are you questioning my stamina?"

Lips parted, Rebel stared at him, his expression slowly leading into a smile. "I haven't seen your stamina at work yet."

"You want to see my stamina at work?"

Rebel looked him over, his gaze pausing momentarily at Kai's groin. He didn't have to look down to know his dick had already responded to the challenge, pushing against his knit pants with a growing erection. *Ha! How's that for stamina?*

"Sit," Rebel ordered. "You got five minutes to wolf this down before the buses arrive."

He did as told and pulled up a seat right beside Rebel. "Buses full of what?"

Rebel made a face, clearly dreading whatever the morning held. "Teenagers."

"How many?"

"Seventy something."

"All at once?"

"Yep."

"For what?" God, this sounded like a freaking nightmare.

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“It’s part of some sort of detention program in school Arlene set up. They get in trouble, they come clean up horse crap for a couple of hours, feed and water the animals, and follow volunteers around with whatever else needs to be done. We work them hard for six hours and they get a point taken off their record.”

“Really? When I was in school you sat in a classroom and listened to a CD and did homework until the teacher told you to leave.”

“This is a little more serious than your average delinquency,” Rebel muttered. He made a sandwich out of toast, scrambled eggs, and crispy bacon. “They come here to learn discipline and responsibility.”

Kai nodded. “And how often does this happen?”

“Second Tuesday of every month. Arlene made arrangements with three separate schools in Houston to bus kids here for a while. Gets them out of the city for a bit and gives them a chance to care for something else and forget about what’s going on in their own lives.”

“So today we’re just keeping track of them?”

“Pretty much. For the most part I come out to see them in, then go back to work and check up on them around nine to make sure they’re still working. At noon Arlene and a few of the volunteers take them to the fire pit and barbeque, then they’re back on the buses and out of here by one-thirty.”

Sounded easy enough in theory, though Kai had a feeling The Sanctuary didn’t do smooth operations. If the piles of

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newspapers and mail were any indication, the ranch ran on a prayer.

Kai wiped off his hands and slapped his palms on his knees. He lived for a challenge—though he was wondering if this might be his death. “Good. Let’s get to it.”

CHAPTER 5

They left the house and walked into instant commotion. The buses had pulled into their usual spots near the gelding barn where curious young horses watched teenagers from a safe distance behind the corral fence. Kids were shouting, shoving and playing with each other as laughter broke out from within the many circles the students formed.

Rebel paused on the porch and slowly negotiated his way down the wooden stairs, ducking beneath a hanging annual as Kai followed behind him. Arlene blew a whistle, which drew the regular crowd of detention students out of their cliques and into one of five lines where ranch volunteers waited to collect them.

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“So what do the cool kids of Houston say these days?” Kai asked.

With a grin, Rebel glanced over his shoulder. “Probably something that would sound ridiculous coming from you.”

“That’s true. Thanks for reminding me.”

As he approached, the kids looked past their volunteer leaders and craned their necks for a better view of him on crutches. A few of the girls looked concerned, but several of the boys nudged each other and snickered.

“Dude, whatcha do?” a kid in a bandana and a wife beater asked. “Fall off a horse?”

“Trick pony,” he answered.

“Nice.” The kid gave a wide grin and nodded. “Smooth, Mr. Wirth.”

“I try.”

“Yeah, real smooth. Captain Rebel Retard was probably fucking a stallion again.”

Rebel quickly scanned the crowd as he came to a stop, wondering who had made the comment. As he expected, a flutter of laughter started in the middle of the crowd but quickly died as other students scoffed and crossed their arms. It didn’t happen on a regular basis, but once in a while they had trouble with the students, which he assumed was a given since they were already delinquents in school.

Arlene blew a whistle twice and shouted for the groups to follow their leaders to their assigned tasks. Within minutes, the crowd broke up and the students moved like cattle in different directions, kicking up dirt as they tromped toward the

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different stables and disappeared through the building doors.

He watched them leave, the sting of high school comments and college pranks suddenly resurrected as he stood motionless, supported by his crutches. He'd been called a fag well before he'd come to terms with his sexuality, but the initial shock he'd felt still resonated inside of him. The fear of being discovered, of earning the title of what it meant to be gay, to be less than a man, had always haunted him, even when he was in his first few relationships with men.

Even now he wasn't sure if he tried to purposely hide his sexuality, but he sure as hell didn't want the world to know, especially when it came to hosting a bunch of kids at his ranch. It shouldn't have mattered to them since they were here because he was doing them a favor and helping them stay out of trouble, but they didn't see it that way. They saw it as getting up at four in the morning to be bused in for a Tuesday of hard labor.

Kai clapped him on the shoulder. "Good to know teenage angst and complete lack of social skills still exists in the eighteen and younger population."

"It runs rampant," Rebel murmured. He started toward the office, walking as fast as his crutches would allow.

In the back of his mind he could imagine what they were saying to their friends and the others who would listen. *I can't believe we have to shovel shit for that fudge packer. He's probably too busy blowing guys to do this himself. Look at that delicate fag and his new fuck buddy going off alone.*

It angered and frustrated him, and before he knew it he lost

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hold of one of his crutches and sent it flying off to the side. He started to reach for it, no longer caring if he dove and hit the ground hard.

Kai caught him by the arm and wrenched him hard, keeping him from falling. He waited a second as though to make sure Rebel steadied himself, then retrieved the crutch. Without looking at him, Rebel took it back and stormed off, wishing he had two good feet to kick in the door.

He fumbled for his keys and unlocked the office door, then pushed it open with his crutch. The damn thing was too heavy to make for a dramatic entrance, but he ignored it and walked through, smelling mint from the candy dish he always had available.

Kai shut the door behind them and paused until Rebel turned to look at him.

“What?” Rebel asked.

“Teenagers say a lot of stupid things to impress their friends.”

“And?”

“And I’m just sayin’—”

“Well, don’t say a damn thing.”

Kai rolled his tongue along the inside of his cheek and crossed his arms. “Is there anything I could say or do that would piss you off more?”

Rebel exhaled and propped his crutches up against the wall. He took a seat at his desk and pulled his fingers through his hair, staring at piles of paperwork he’d left strewn across his work space. Eyes cast down, he felt his heart hammering,

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blood and anger pumping through his veins.

Kai leaned over the desk and Rebel forced his gaze up, finding his temporary replacement staring him down. “Or is there something I can say that will make you forget?”

Rebel grunted. That familiar ache Kai seemed to masterfully create returned, despite his frustration. He sat back and Kai leaned forward, breathing like a bull about to charge.

“You don’t think I can do it?”

“I never said that,” Rebel answered, his voice hoarse. It had been a long time since someone had looked at him this way, drawing him in with one hungry yet commanding look. The last few years had been solely dedicated to rehabilitating horses and keeping track of up to a hundred animals at a time. The rest of his life became secondary to his work, especially since each day meant life and death for so many horses.

Unable to speak, Rebel swallowed hard, watching as Kai stalked around the desk. He gripped the arms of the desk chair as though it would somehow help him, but nothing would save him—and he didn’t want to be saved. He wanted Kai in control of him, telling him to sit there and shut the hell up. He wanted it rough, he wanted it commanding, and he wanted it now.

“You’re way too worked up,” Kai murmured, looking him over. “Didn’t the doctor tell you to relax and take it easy?”

“He said to stay off my foot as much as possible.”

Kai smiled and leaned forward, resting his hands over Rebel’s wrists. “Good. Don’t get up.”

Before he could ask why, Kai tilted his head and kissed

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Rebel lightly on the lips, a gentle but electrifying caress. It felt as though all the breath in his lungs had been drawn out, and he grabbed hold of the back of Kai's head as though to steal his breath and senses back.

Kai plunged his tongue into Rebel's mouth, kissing him hard, kissing him deep, just the way he needed. Just as he started to taste Kai, his lover slowly pulled back and nibbled on his lower lip until he drew in a harsh breath.

Eyes closed, Rebel sighed, feeling Kai's lips on his chin and then his neck, tickling him with soft, damp kisses and the scrape of his unshaven face. The chair squeaked as Kai pushed it against the wall and nudged Rebel's knees apart, holding him in place.

"Right now," Kai whispered, "the rest of the ranch doesn't exist." Rebel sat speechless, watching as Kai unbuttoned his shirt. "The door is locked, everyone is busy, and you're mine for the next half hour."

His cock throbbed from the confinement of his jeans, begging to be let out. Rebel spread his knees a little wider, squirming in discomfort as Kai opened his shirt and touched him for the first time. Skin against skin contact sent a rush of adrenaline and desire through him. It had been way too long since he'd snuck off with a lover, and the thrill of it pushed him on. He gripped Kai's upper arms and tried to pull him forward, but he wasn't moving. Instead, Kai met him with another hot, wet kiss, the kind of kiss that made the office disappear.

It was going to be easier to let go of his frustration than

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Rebel had first thought.

His heart hammered, every nerve in his body silently pleading for it to all continue. He waited with impatient, trembling breaths as Kai made his way down his body, peppering him with kisses over his chest and stomach. He inhaled sharply the moment Kai reached his belly button and nipped at him, heightening his pleasure with a touch of pain.

Unable to help himself, Rebel tilted his head back and ran his fingers through Kai's thick, black hair, gently pressing his head down.

"I know what you want," Kai murmured as he knelt on the office floor. He breathed hard against Rebel's stomach, tempting him with each hot breath.

"Am I making it that obvious?"

Kai grunted and caressed the outline of Rebel's dick straining against his jeans. He followed the length of his cock from his balls to the tip, then down again. "Pretty damn obvious."

Rebel pushed his hips forward and held his breath, his teeth gritted in frustration. This was going to be it. He was going to die in his office chair as the victim of a neglected erection.

"You're making it difficult to resist," Kai whispered. He kissed his way back up Rebel's stomach and slowly unbuttoned his jeans. He paused and Rebel forced his eyes open, watching as Kai smiled up at him, then lowered his head and sat back, giving Rebel a perfect view of his lover's hands on his torso.

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Kai's hands were dark compared to Rebel's flesh, his fingers wide and long, his hands square and manly. Just when he thought he couldn't get any harder, the sight of Kai unzipping him made his entire body ache. He bit his lip to stifle a groan and watched his cock spring free from his underwear with a little help from Kai. The bulbous, plum-colored head was wet with arousal, the thick stem pulsing on its own, wanting to be swallowed by Kai's full, luscious mouth.

He gripped the edge of the chair and leaned back farther as Kai took hold of him, exploring him for the first time. He watched one of the dark hands he'd admired slowly run from the base of his cock to the tip while the other gently massaged his sac through his underwear.

Kai glanced up as though to make sure Rebel was still watching him, then bent forward and took the head of Rebel's dick between his lips.

Desire surged through him, causing him to lift off the office chair, plunging his cock as far as he could into Kai's waiting mouth. With his ass off the seat, Kai took the opportunity to pull Rebel's jeans around his ankles, leaving him in only his underwear.

With his hands on Rebel's thighs, Kai forced him back down and looked up, his lips damp and slightly swollen.

"For a man who deals with horses, I think you need to be tamed."

"And just how do you plan on doing that?" Rebel asked with the last of his breath.

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“Any way I can.” He motioned for Rebel to lift his hips and gave his underwear a tug, allowing the bunched material to fall to his ankles. Once he had him undressed, he sat back and looked him over, nodding in approval of his new plaything.

Silence fell between them as Kai ran his palms over the wiry hair on Rebel’s thighs and moved his way up, gripping him by the hips. He started all over again, working his tongue up from Rebel’s testicles to the tip of his quivering penis. As soon as Rebel started to rise, Kai pushed him back into his seat, controlling how much stimulation he’d receive.

Rebel groaned in protest, voicing his unanswered needs.

Kai kissed the head of his dick, swirling his tongue along the ridge as though to promise Rebel he’d have what he wanted—but not just yet.

“Sit forward,” Kai demanded.

Rebel scooted as far as he could, obeying his lover for the hope of satisfaction.

“Do you have any lube here?”

How in the world could he expect Rebel to think at a time like this? “I have lotion.” He stretched his arm toward the desk and opened the top drawer. The moment he grabbed hold of the tube, Kai snatched it from him and flipped the top open, squirting almond-scented lotion into his palm.

Rebel swallowed and watched as Kai rubbed the lotion between his fingers, then massaged his way beneath his testicles. Kai sat forward again and kissed Rebel’s stomach, then closed his lips around his cock as he slowly penetrated

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him with one lubed finger and massaged his rock hard prostate.

Kai pumped him with his mouth, plunging him with several shallow thrusts, then bringing him deeper. He sucked on Rebel's sensitive flesh, his tempo increasing with each hot, wet stroke until he had him all the way to his balls.

The unexpected sensation tightened every muscle in his body. He sat rigid and needy, afraid to move and unable to breathe. His eyes closed, his body fighting to react to the overwhelming sensations washing through him. He had to hold on a little longer, savoring his first time with Kai. *Not yet...oh, God, not yet.*

But Kai didn't seem to care how much Rebel wanted to hold on. He fucked him harder and faster, grunting as he took every inch of Rebel into his mouth. One lubed finger became two and he rubbed Rebel's prostate until the sensation overwhelmed him.

Rebel attempted to stifle a cry, but he couldn't hold back. His cock throbbed, spurting his seed into the back of Kai's throat. He bore down on his good leg and thrust himself as deep as Kai could take him, burying himself in Kai's hot, welcoming mouth. Each thrust came on its own, a primal response to what he needed fulfilled.

At last he could breathe again, his heart pounding, his body quivering as he came down from an intense orgasm that spread all over his body. He tilted his head back, enjoying the sensations, amazed. He couldn't remember ever feeling like this, so completely overwhelmed and satisfied at the same

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time. No one had ever made him experience this before.

Slowly Kai released him and nuzzled his stomach, breathing hard against his flesh.

“You’re easy to break, you know that?” Kai asked, his voice a seductive whisper. He rested his hands on Rebel’s thighs and knelt before him.

Leaning forward, Rebel kissed him softly. “Something around here should be easy.”

CHAPTER 6

“You have a bigger mess in one office than most corporations have in their entire buildings.” Kai stood with his hands on his hips and frowned as he surveyed the stacks of papers, binders, coffee cups, and various other items Rebel had managed to acquire. He gave a heavy sigh and shook his head. “How long did it take to get like this?”

Rebel returned an arched look. “I have a lot to do.”

“Yeah, but the question is how in the hell you manage to do it. Look at this place.”

“What?”

Kai rolled his eyes, feeling as though he’d returned to a long-term relationship. They hadn’t even known each other a

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full twenty-four hours and they were bantering over nonsense. “How can you say *what* when you’re in the middle of a paperwork nightmare?”

“I just cleaned before you got here.”

Feigning shock, Kai clutched his hand over his heart. “That’s it. I quit.”

“Look, I guarantee you if you’re looking for any forms or paperwork, I can find it.”

“Well, I can’t, and if I’m going to be running this place on your behalf, things are going to change.” He picked up a manila folder overstuffed with pink and yellow carbon copies. He removed the rubber bands holding it together and opened it, flipping through the wrinkled sheets. “What’s this?”

“The hard copies from horses we’ve taken in this year.”

Kai cocked his brow. He held almost eleven months of documentation in an overstuffed folder with no labeling whatsoever. For a man who put his boxers in the drawer starting from lightest to darkest fabric, this was hell on earth. “So every horse that has been on your land is included in this folder?”

“Yep.”

“That sounds important to me.”

“It is.”

“And this is how you keep it?” He hefted the folder and shook his head in disbelief. “Seriously?”

“It’s all together, isn’t it?” Rebel climbed to his feet and limped his way around the desk, his teeth gritted and nostrils flared. “Secured with three rubber bands.”

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The edge in Rebel's voice told Kai he'd definitely struck a nerve. Most of the people he knew that led disorganized lives swore they could find every important piece of documentation no matter how many piles surrounded their desk. It really didn't matter if they could find it. If no one else could locate the paperwork, it would become a disaster.

"So what if you needed to find a horse you took in during the month of March?"

Rebel swiped the folder from his grasp and rifled through the contents. "Then I'd look right here if I wanted an original hardcopy or on the USB drive, the office computer, or my home computer for backup files."

Kai nodded in approval. "Now I'm impressed."

Rebel grinned and smacked Kai in the chest with the folder. "That's how we do things here in Texas."

Kai shook his head. "I must have forgotten where I was since I can't see past this pigsty."

Rebel returned to his chair and turned on the computer screen. With his fist propping up his chin, he mumbled something about checking all of his emails before they got down to business. Kai shrugged and turned up the A/C, then plunked himself down in a leather chair opposite Rebel and began going through files in what seemed like a never-ending pile.

"So you're a neat freak," Rebel asked as he stared at the computer screen.

"No, I'm just neat. You live in a sty."

Rebel grunted. "I told you. I can find anything in here."

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“I bet you can, but if someone else needed to do your job, they couldn’t.”

He clicked the mouse, presumably deleting junk emails or just using the computer as a distraction to ignore Kai. “True.”

That sounded like compromise, which was enough to put Kai at ease. The less Rebel wanted to argue about the state of his office, the more time they could spend getting work finished. “You do whatever you have to do and I’ll label, organize, and file everything I can.”

Inhaling, Rebel ran his hand over his face. “If I had the time—”

“I know.” Kai stood and reached for another pile of folders, clearing the corner of the desk. “How many horses do you have here again?”

“About a hundred at any given time, though I try to keep it around seventy-five. Since June we’ve had our numbers up with some neglect cases that we couldn’t refuse since they came in from a local ranch. Took in twenty-seven from animal services in the past six weeks alone, but three of them didn’t make it.” He shook his head and leaned back in his chair. “Maybe a day or two earlier and we could have saved all of them.”

“Yeah, but you saved twenty-four, right?”

Rebel gave a hard sigh. “It’s the ones that don’t make it that stay with you. When you see them come off the trailers and they’re nothing but skin and bones, their bodies all sunken in and malnourished, you just wonder how someone could walk by every day and not feed or water their own animals. I

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just don't see what goes through a person's mind when they see a beautiful horse turned into nothing. How could you turn away when your own horse is starving right outside your door? That's what I just don't understand about people."

"It's probably best that you don't know what goes through their minds."

His sullen expression remained, but Rebel managed a nod. "It's best I don't know who any of them are or I'd leave them worse than their horses, that's for damn sure."

Kai bowed his head and flipped through the paperwork on his lap. He'd always been a sucker for a man with a good heart. Rebel seemed about as nice as they came, a genuine compassionate person surrounded by a heap of paperwork for the animals under his protection. He obviously put his heart, soul, and time into caring for them and forgot everything else—including himself.

"How'd you get into this, anyhow?"

Rebel glanced at a photo on the wall of a quarter horse and forced a humorless smile. "That's American Spirit. My grandparents owned a couple of palominos and she was the one I usually took out down the trails when I was a teenager. When I went off to college, they got rid of their horses and sold them. I didn't think much of it until a girl on campus convinced me to go with her to some animal rights protest. Her name was Casey and she was real insistent that I go with her, and I liked animals so I decided what the hell? May as well go and get her off my back."

Kai nodded and ran his thumb along the smooth, cool

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surface of the folder.

“She ended up taking me to a horse auction and there was my horse up for sale in the arena.”

“So whoever bought the horse resold it?”

“Whoever bought her didn’t give a fuck. She had flies all over her face and wouldn’t put weight on her front right leg. The auctioneer didn’t even bother walking her around the arena. She just stood there while the crowd looked at her, so they lowered the bid like they felt sorry for her.” He balled his hand into a fist until his knuckles turned white. “And we’re standing there when Casey leans over and says to me ‘now the killers are going to bid.’”

Kai felt his lips part as he sat motionless, listening. He didn’t know much about horses and auctions, but whatever the hell a killer was, it sure couldn’t be good.

“This guy looked like Santa Claus with his long, white beard, suspenders, and this dirty red shirt. He bid on my horse twice until the bid got up to sixty-five dollars. Casey dug her fingernails into my arm and started to pray that something would happen for the sake of the mare.”

“Did she know it was your horse?”

He shook his head. “I kept looking at Spirit and thinking there was no way that was her. It had to be another palomino and I was just thinking of her. The auctioneer started to close the buy and I don’t know what came over me, but I bid on her. Eighty-five dollars. The killer waved me off and walked away since he knew he wasn’t going to get more than a hundred to sell her as meat.”

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Relief washed over Kai. “Thank God you got your horse back.”

“I practically jumped over the fence to claim her, but they made me get out and sign a bunch of papers and stuff to make it official. All the while Casey kept going on and on about how great it was and how she knew I’d make a difference and all this stuff and I kept telling her to just calm down so I could make sure I got everything squared away. All the while I’m signing papers I kept thinking how I was going to get her back and where I was going to keep her.”

Kai grunted. A man of passion and impulse—right up his alley.

“I handed everything over to the auctioneer people and turned to see her standing in her stall. She looked pathetic there, but I could still see what she’d been like when she was mine. That horse would turn and bite the shit out of me if I wasn’t watching.” He shook his head. “So I figured there was only one way to find out if that was really Spirit.”

The chair squeaked as Rebel turned back and forth, his expression suddenly tense. “Right before I went to see her, the auctioneer said, ‘Son, you need to pay for her right quick.’ I dug into my pocket, pulled out about forty dollars, and told him I’d be back with the rest later.”

Kai froze and stared at him, knowing exactly where his story was going. *Shit.*

“He said they didn’t do that sort of thing and he needed payment right then and there, so me and Casey went to her car, dumped out her purse, looked under the seats and in the

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glove compartment, practically begged everyone we saw to give us just a dollar to get that horse. I had Casey in tears she was so upset over it, but we kept trying. We got up to seventy bucks and that was as high as we could get.”

“You were only fifteen off. They couldn’t just wait for you to come up with the rest?”

“Yeah, that’s what we both said. Horses go to the highest bidder as long as the bidder pays up.” Rebel fixed his gaze on the computer screen. “The killer had eighty-five. He came up, paid in cash, and took the rights to the horse. He looked right at me, too, like he knew all along we were just there to cause trouble and make him work harder for his payoff. By that time Casey was practically hysterical over the whole thing and I tried to calm her down while I watched him load my horse into a trailer. That’s the part I’ll never forget, the way she fought him going in there. I think she knew why he’d bought her, where he was taking her. She’d seen me and I knew if I remembered her she’d remember me.”

Kai nodded. “Of course she knew.”

Rebel’s expression darkened. “He beat the shit out of her with a baseball bat in front of all these people and no one said a damn thing. No one. They just watched and walked by while she screamed and tried to pull away from him. She had blood coming out her nose and from the side of her neck where he’d made a lasso with barbed wire.”

“What did you do?”

Rebel looked up again. “I broke his goddamn jaw.”

Kai’s eyes widened. “You did what?”

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"I walked up, turned him around, and hit him in the face. After that, everyone took notice. I had a whole crowd of people watching. Thank God I had the sense to hit him with my right hand and not my pitchin' hand."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah, that's what I heard. A lot. The police got called, people got questioned, and it made the news all over Texas about some college kids off to save horses. Casey was beside herself at how many horses got picked up by people rather than going off to slaughter."

"Yeah, I bet. So you ended up taking Spirit back?"

"A horse rescue in Colorado sent down a representative and they took Spirit to their organization and determined she was going to be a lawn ornament because of her lameness. It's hard to get a horse adopted when no one can ride or use it at all, but they knew all along I wanted her back. After I officially took over rescue operations down here six years ago, they sent her back to me. She died a year later right here on my land, surrounded by a dozen horses who shared her pasture and similar life stories. We made it as peaceful as we could for her and that's about all I could want. God knows what happened in between those years of her getting sold and me finding her again, but I had to have her back at the end. This is her sanctuary, not mine. Every horse we take in here is a tribute to her and the life she deserved."

"So it was definitely her after all?"

Rebel rolled up his shirt sleeve, displaying a puckered scar on his forearm. He grinned as he examined the mark. "Uh

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huh.”

Kai took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “You have no idea how relieved I am.”

Rebel grunted. “If you’d checked out our website you could have seen the story behind The Sanctuary.”

“Yeah, and I would have come right up and bear hugged the crap out of you after reading that.”

With a wide grin spread across his face, Rebel chuckled. “You’d fit right in. When a horse leaves for its new home, some of the volunteers started a group hug to congratulate everyone on the success of rehabbing another lost spirit.”

“Everything’s weirder in Texas.”

“Bigger,” he corrected. The hint of a seductive smile played at the corners of his mouth. “It’s bigger down here.”

Kai raised a brow. After the roller-coaster of emotions Rebel had taken him on, he wanted sex. Hell, after listening to Rebel’s sexy Texas drawl, he wanted sex. Who was he trying to kid? He just plain wanted sex and Rebel made it difficult to think of anything else. “That’s right. I have firsthand knowledge that the adage is true. How could I forget?”

Rebel shifted his weight and clicked the mouse a few more times. “How are things going on that side of the table?”

“I think it’s about time we took an intermission.”

CHAPTER 7

Rebel was falling fast and he knew it—but he didn't care. For a while now he'd been coasting, sputtering along without anything in sight that piqued his interests. But now he knew exactly what he wanted and he wanted him badly. It felt as though he'd let go deep inside, finally receptive to what Kai could give him.

"I told you we're all about hard work around here," Rebel playfully murmured.

"Trust me, I have some hard work for you to finish," Kai answered.

Rebel shook his head and chuckled. "That's just about the worst pickup line I think I've ever heard."

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“Maybe, but it’s not stopping you, is it?”

“Not at all.” Using his good leg, Rebel wheeled himself halfway around the table, then sat on the edge of the table.

With a smile, Kai stood and grabbed a handful of Rebel’s shirt. He wasted no time and pulled him closer, rough and urgent, telling him how badly he wanted to have him. “Maybe I should show you the way we do things around the rest of the country.”

“Is it work related?”

Lips inches apart from Rebel’s, Kai shook his head. “Better.”

Rebel’s eyes widened. He already knew how good it could be to receive and now he wanted to return the favor and show Kai how it could be in Texas. “With you around, I’m not going to get any work done. I just want you to know that.”

“We will.” Kai traced the shell of Rebel’s ear and ran the tips of his fingers along his lover’s neck, leaving him shivering in anticipation of another kiss hot, wet kiss. “Now that I know you have at least some semblance of order, we can take a break.”

“Is that how you’re used to doing things where you’re from? Taking a break on the hour?”

“You don’t want to?”

Rebel angled his hips forward until he knew Kai felt the distinct bulge in his jeans. With one harsh breath, Kai grabbed hold of him. “What do you think?” Rebel asked.

“I think, despite our obvious differences, we just might have something in common.”

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Rebel didn't offer a reply. He took a step back and ran his palms up and down Kai's torso, massaging his chest and abdomen, feeling the tiny pebbles of Kai's erect nipples and the ripples of his hard stomach. Kai answered him with a deep sigh and reached for Rebel, but his attempt was swatted away.

He drew back suddenly and gave Rebel a questioning look, which Rebel immediately put to ease as he gazed down and watched Kai reach for his belt.

"My turn."

Kai swallowed, allowing an easy smile to take over as he stood with his feet shoulder's width apart and enjoyed the view. He appeared mesmerized by Rebel's patience as he scooted to the edge of the desk and pulled Kai closer by his belt loop. One by one he pushed each button through the holes and ceremoniously unwrapped him. He circled his thumbs around Kai's nipples, exploring his soft, supple flesh and hard underlying muscles.

Touching him made Rebel unsure of what he wanted to do first, like a kid surrounded by too many possibilities. He could suckle the flat discs of Kai's nipples, bring him forward and bite him on the neck, or abandon everything and go right for the zipper.

A bite was irresistible. He grabbed Kai by his open shirt and brought him forward, nearly knocking him off balance.

Kai exhaled hard, his knuckles resting on the table as he braced himself. Rebel hooked his good leg around the back of Kai's calf, keeping him exactly where Rebel wanted him as he tilted his head up and kissed Kai good and slow. He explored

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Kai's mouth with his tongue, and his shoulders, chest, and back with his hands. Once Rebel felt him relax and lean into him, Rebel dug his fingers into Kai's back and heard him groan softly.

"You wanna play rough?" Kai murmured against his lips.

Without a word, Rebel kissed his way along Kai's neck. He felt Kai exhale hard as he pressed his fingernails into Kai's flesh and scraped along his abdomen. Sucking in a breath, Kai pulled away and looked down where Rebel had left behind four thin, red trails.

Kai's lips parted as he examined the new marks briefly. Before he could say a word, Rebel slid his fingers into his jeans and dragged Kai forward.

"I want to play in whatever way gets you off." Rebel slowly removed Kai's belt through the loops and allowed it to dangle. With Kai breathing hard above him, he smiled to himself and unbuttoned his jeans, his knuckles brushing against the wiry dark hair on his flat belly, caressing his soft, warm skin.

The rasp of a zipper accompanied Kai's harsh breaths as Rebel opened his jeans and inhaled, feeling a rush of excitement shoot straight down into his groin. All hopes of starting slow vanished the moment he saw Kai's package bulging from the slit of his boxers.

He licked his lips, anticipating the salty flavor and the scent of Kai's unique musk filling his nostrils. Once he slid Kai's jeans far enough down his hips, he parted the slit in his underwear and caressed him with the tips of his fingers.

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Kai reacted instantly, his cock hardening beneath Rebel's grasp. Rebel played him like an instrument, watching in satisfaction as Kai pulsed beneath each light stroke. Rebel worked his cock up and down with one hand as he reached back on the table and rummaged through a pile of papers. Once he found cool, braided leather, he wrapped his fingers around the riding crop and pulled it free.

"I told you I could find anything in here," he said as he moved from his seat on the desk to his office chair.

While Kai looked on, Rebel rolled himself into place and skimmed the wide, leather tip along his bare knees and thighs, slowly making his way up to his boxers. He drew back his wrist and lightly slapped the front of Kai's legs, listening to his partner's unsteady breathing and the rhythm of skin and leather together.

He tapped Kai harder, leaving behind a bright red spot on his thigh, which Rebel wanted to lean forward and lick.

Rebel swallowed hard as he admired Kai's long, lean body and the possibilities of what he could do to him. Kai's cock bobbed each time Rebel traced his hips with the riding crop's wide, flat tip. He gave Kai's waistband a tug and pulled his boxers down his slim hips, leaving his gorgeous, thick cock and large, ruddy sac in plain view. Rebel licked his lips and traced the prominent veins leading from the base to the tip with his fingers, studying the slight curve of his member and the plum-shaped tip already dripping with arousal. He sat forward and took a taste, licking him, sucking on the tip while Kai swore under his breath.

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He released him, leaving Kai's dick stiff and shiny with his saliva. Kai started to reach for him, but Rebel swatted the back of his hand with the crop. Kai jerked back.

"Turn around," Rebel said.

Kai glanced at him, then kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his jeans while his boxers pooled at his ankles. He slowly turned and placed his hands on his hips, giving Rebel the perfect view of his round, tight ass.

Blindly he reached for the lotion they'd left out on the table. He managed to open the lid and squirt cool lubrication onto his hand. Rebel lubed up his hands with lotion and spread his fingers, kneading Kai's cheeks, rubbing his thumbs in circles near his seam as he worked his way down to Kai's hole. Gently he prodded him, working along his rim with one hand while he slapped the backs of Kai's legs with the crop, leaving behind a trail of red marks. Kai groaned again, telling him he needed more than what he'd been given. As punishment for his impatience, Rebel drew back the crop and slapped his ass cheek.

Kai sucked in a breath and glanced over his shoulder while Rebel trailed the tip along his butt and lower back in light strokes, pleasure after pain. Kai twisted farther around, his stiff cock bobbing with his movement. Once he caught Rebel staring, he gripped his dick just below the head and gave it one full stroke.

It seemed like a waste of a perfectly thick, hard erection and Rebel was all about conservation. He placed his hand over Kai's and moved with him while he continued to pet his ass,

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alternating between soft strokes and hard grabs.

“Taste it,” Kai rasped.

Rebel glanced up at him before he sat forward in his office chair, bringing himself in alignment with Kai’s hips. He inhaled deeply, smelling Kai’s unique, male scent.

Carefully trimmed back pubic hair tickled his palm as he massaged Kai’s heavy sac, supporting the weight as he explored the underside with the tips of his fingers. Kai pulled his feet wide apart, inviting Rebel to have him completely.

Greedy for another taste, Rebel parted his lips and captured the tip of his cock, sliding his tongue back and forth across the head while he reached around and cupped Kai’s ass. He pulled his cheeks apart and heard him groan, indicating he wanted to be touched, needed to be penetrated.

“You feel so good,” Kai murmured. “Too damn good.”

And it was only the beginning. Rebel had plenty more planned for him, an entire arsenal of pleasure for Kai to survive.

Back and forth Rebel glided over his sensitive flesh, teasing but not entering. Not yet. Not until he had him almost begging for it.

Kai moved forward, thrusting his cock into Rebel’s mouth. He rested his hands on Rebel’s shoulders and groaned as his hips moved slowly at first, bringing him as deep as Rebel could take.

Eyes closed, Rebel welcomed the blunt feel and salty taste of Kai at the back of his throat, wanting to give him relief. He grabbed Kai’s ass and kneaded his cheeks, listening as he

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grunted in response.

His office chair squeaked with each thrust, the sound of Kai's pleasure in his small office more exciting than he'd imagined. The working ranch outside his door passed through his mind, the stables filled with volunteers, the dozens of people cleaning and tending to the horses...all of them unaware of their wounded leader off for a midmorning delight.

This was all his, his private haven that no one could take away. Here he could be himself in the comfort of his own home, away from ridicule and disapproval.

And now he wanted to share the pleasure with Kai. He massaged Kai's hole, opening him with his slick fingers as he continued to pump him with his mouth. Rebel penetrated Kai with his middle finger, stretching him open until he reached Kai's rock hard prostate.

Rebel had Kai exactly where he wanted him and wasn't about to stop. He plunged into Kai as deep as he could, feeling his lover's excitement. He held onto him through each deep thrust until Kai's soft groans turned into more urgent grunts. He gave one last hard push of his hips and stopped, cradling Rebel's head in his hands. Kai spread his fingers and tilted back his head, allowing a hiss to leave his lips while his cock twitched and filled Rebel's welcoming mouth with his seed.

With a groan, Rebel drank him down, taking everything he could, from the bitter taste of sperm to the musk of his partner and his sounds of pleasure. This was only just the beginning, the first day of many weeks they'd be alone together.

Slowly Rebel released Kai and kissed the tip of his semi-

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hard dick. He gazed up and found Kai staring down at him, his eyes glazed and heavily lidded, the perfect lazy pair of bedroom eyes. He bent and kissed Rebel on the lips, lingering for a moment as though he also needed to memorize their first time together, the first day of what he'd hoped would turn into weeks, then months, then years.

"Now quit distracting me," Kai murmured. "I have work to do around here."

Rebel chuckled. "I'll do my best."

CHAPTER 8

The kids were all gathered around for their reward of a campfire lunch by the time Kai finished reorganizing Rebel's disaster of an office.

His sister had once told him he was sick for insisting that he be allowed to alphabetize her spice rack and wine refrigerator before the rest of the family came over for the holidays, and he agreed. He was sick, and organized—and that had come in handy. After two hours, not one folder or stray piece of paperwork remained on Rebel's desk.

"I need a nap," Kai said as he followed Rebel out of his office and toward the smell of food.

"It's the heat, old man."

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“The heat? Did the heat cause that mess in there?” He flashed a grin, then slapped Rebel on the back. It had been almost two years since he’d been in a serious relationship and this felt damn close to falling into step with a live-in partner, someone who shared more than just a bed—or a desk, for that matter.

“Will you give it a rest?” Rebel grumbled. “It was a mess, now it’s clean. Congratulations. I’ll never find anything again.”

Kai adjusted his hat and shook his head. Yep, like an old married couple bickering and loving every minute of it. “Relax. You’ve got six to eight weeks to learn to read all the labels I made.”

“Great.”

They sidled up to the open grill where a young man Kai recognized from the night before was flipping burgers while his girlfriend kept everyone in line. Between the two of them, they seemed to be keeping the teens happy and fed while buses sat idle in the background, waiting to gather them up and send them back to the city.

“Still haven’t given that guy the slip, huh?” The cook asked as he flipped burgers and hotdogs with rapid fire speed.

“Reed,” his girlfriend warned as she adjusted her pink apron with the name *Daphne* across the front.

“Oh, come on, Rebel knows I’m pulling his chain.” He grabbed a paper plate and tossed two giant burger patties onto it, then shoved it into Kai’s grasp. “Sooner or later he’s going to find out that Rebel is a pain in the ass.”

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"I'm standing right here." Rebel shifted his weight and gave Reed a stern look.

"It's not like he's telling me anything new." Kai gave Rebel a hearty shoulder rub and nodded toward an empty picnic table. "Come on. My blood sugar is getting low."

They walked to their table as the various cliques looked on from their lunches. Kai picked up on the familiar vibe of boredom, criticism, and general apathy only teenagers could produce. He wondered if he'd been a little too friendly once they'd walked out into the open. Maybe they should have been more careful and hid...but he'd never been the type to run to the back of the closet.

It seemed stupid to want to hide from a group of kids, but he could see why Rebel had been angry. Feeling them staring, hearing the faintest whispers exchanged, brought back memories of coming out for the first time.

He'd been twenty-three when he'd finally figured out it wasn't going to go away. Strip clubs didn't cure him, praying didn't purge his demons, and no amount of denying how he felt changed anything.

A bunch of snot-nosed brats trying to earn credit for their mistakes shouldn't have mattered to anyone. He'd never been the kind who sought approval from the cool kids, though with how much his family had moved, it didn't seem to matter. With each different school and zip code came a brand new clique staring him down, judging him to see if he was worthy. If only they'd known back then that high school was a very small pond and most popular didn't mean shit when you hit

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your thirties.

Rebel turned his hamburger upside down and took a bite. "Another twenty minutes and we'll give you a badge and call you a survivor."

"That's all I get?"

"What else do you want?"

Kai stared at him. "Do you really want to ask me that question?"

Rebel raised a brow and grinned back. "True. You're transparent," he said quietly. "I already know what we both want."

"And how much longer do we have to wait?"

"Not long."

From the corner of his eye Kai saw a couple of kids walking back from one of the barns. They were smacking the crap out of each other as they jogged along in baggy jeans and gym shoes without laces, saying typical stupid teenager stuff.

He turned his head and watched them as they circled the barbeque like a pack of young dogs out on their own. They looked dangerous and foolish at the same time, trying way too hard to be cool and stand out in a crowd of teenagers who all looked the same. Youth really was wasted on the young and they were proof of that.

As soon as they approached, Daphne stormed toward them with her fingers knotted in her hair. "What did I tell y'all about stepping away from the group? When we ring the bell, everyone stays here. You realize one more time and you've lost your detention privileges here, right?"

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“Sorry we missed the fag fest,” one of the kids said as he shuffled along and nudged his friends.

Daphne came up alongside him and shook her finger. “You watch your mouth.”

“Or what are you going to do? Tell your little fairy of a boss to kick my ass?”

“I’m going to recommend the school disciplines you for your behavior.”

The kid stared down Rebel from across the yard. “So?”

“So get back with the group.” Rebel maneuvered his crutches to the side and stood. With greater speed than Kai anticipated, he hobbled his way across the yard and stood eye to eye with the kid. “Or get on the bus and get out of here.”

The kids spread out, their tight pack broken at once by Rebel’s sudden presence in the midst of their group. Despite the crutches he appeared strong and unwavering, completely unlike the man who’d backed down to their taunts in the morning.

The kid with the mouth stepped forward and tilted his head to the side, his hands balled into fists. “I don’t like those options.”

“You’ve been given two choices. That’s all you get,” Rebel said.

The kid scowled, his young, square face twisted in apathy. He looked ready to fight but stopped short of throwing the first punch, which was lucky for him. Whatever he’d intended on starting he’d apparently reconsidered now that he stood with Rebel blocking his path.

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“Oh yeah?” the kid challenged, shifting back and forth with his chest out as though he’d picked a hundred fights in his sixteen or seventeen years.

“One more word and I’ll make the choice for you.”

“You can’t touch me.” The kid pointed his finger at Rebel’s chest and got in his face, daring him.

With more calm than Kai could have ever mustered, Rebel glanced from the kid’s finger to his face and stood silent for a moment. He leaned forward on his crutches and turned his head to the side, challenging him back. “I don’t have to touch you.”

“You don’t want to mess with me,” the kid said. “I could fuck you up.”

“Get on the bus. You’re not welcome as a volunteer here anymore.”

“Why would I want to volunteer for some guy who takes it up the ass?”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I ain’t afraid of shit.”

“Then why the big show for your friends?”

“Get out of my face.”

“You’re on my property taking up my time. Answer the question.”

The kid became visibly agitated and Kai started to stand, afraid the situation would escalate and the kid would take Rebel down. One good shove and Rebel would lose his balance. Even if he could manage to throw the teen off, he would still end up flat on his back in front of the crowd and

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that might be enough to end the program—not to mention completely humiliate Rebel in the process.

But this was his land and his fight, and Kai paused short of coming to Rebel's aid, knowing it wasn't his place to step in. He watched in silence, surrounded by the rest of the volunteers, staff, and students with plates of potato salad and half-finished hotdogs. From everything he'd seen thus far, Rebel was soft-spoken and anything but confrontational.

With his heart racing, Kai remained seated at the picnic bench, watching and waiting for words to turn into action.

To his surprise, the kid looked away, turning to his friends for help. With their heads bowed, they shifted their weight and fidgeted uncomfortably, abandoning their friend as he continued his show.

"This is stupid," the kid said as he turned and walked off toward the buses, hiking his jeans up as he walked. The rest of the teens who'd stood by his side milled around as though unsure of whether they should follow or return to the picnic and keep their privileges. As though some silent plan had been made up, they all started toward the tables and took seats where they could find space.

Rebel stood alone long after the teen had gone back to the bus and the confrontation had ended. He stood with his head tilted down and his hat shielding his face and expression. Like the Marlboro man on crutches, he appeared mysterious and strong, a man who'd tamed the most dangerous part of Texas—the youngest, most ridiculous outlaws under the age of eighteen.

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"I'm impressed," Kai said as he walked up.

"With what?"

"How you finished that."

Rebel looked down and shrugged. "Without knocking his teeth out?"

"Well, I didn't think you'd do something stupid and actually throw a punch."

"So you thought he was going to knock my teeth out?"

Kai grunted. "You're an ex-baseball player. I expected a pretty heated but sort of pointless shouting match with chest bumping and name calling. Then maybe a cowboy hat thrown in the dirt and stepped on for good measure."

At last Rebel grinned. "This is Texas. We respect our hats in Texas."

Kai clapped Rebel on the back and chuckled to himself. "It looks like I still have a lot to learn about Texas."

With one brow cocked, Rebel looked him over before he made his way back toward the picnic tables. "Yeah, that's obvious. It's a good thing you've got another eight weeks here. We'll make you an honorary Texan by the end of this."

"Who says it has to end?"

Rebel didn't answer, but the smile on his face and his irresistible dimples were all the answer Kai needed.

GABRINA GARZA

Gabrina Garza is a Latina romance writer who lives in the Chicagoland Area. She's dedicated to bringing readers fun, exciting stories with characters women (and men) can relate to. When not writing, she's actively involved in animal rescue and donates portions of her royalties to rescue efforts. Her "pack" includes two children, five cats, and currently eight dogs (relax, she fosters abused and abandoned dogs)—plus one husband who is more trouble than the rest of them combined. She'd tell you she's also a secret ninja with laser beams for eyes and kick-ass six-inch vinyl boots, but she'd be lying about the ninja part. You should visit her immediately because her website promises all the virtual cookies you can eat. Her books are fat free and made with 100% natural ingredients and should therefore be consumed monthly in a literary sort of way. Her long-term goal is to take over the world and eliminate all forms of reality television. Until then, please save a life, spy and neuter! Check out her website for all you never wanted to know: www.gabrina.com.

* * *

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