A muscular man wearing a black cowboy hat and a black belt with a large silver buckle. He is shirtless and has a thick, braided whip draped over his right shoulder. He is looking down and to the left. The background is a warm, golden field under a bright sky.

WORKED

AN M/M SPANKING STORY

T. M. CHRIS

Worked

by T. M. Chris

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All characters in this book are at least eighteen years old

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Chapter 1

Peyton shut the lid on his suitcase with a definitive click, then immediately opened it again. Maybe he should bring his chaps. They weren't the sort of chaps a man worked in. More like the sort he paraded around in. The leather was a high-gloss, chrome-studded black that had never even smelled dirt, let alone touched it. Still, the ranch might have a disco night. Then he'd be wishing he'd brought them.

When he pulled the chaps from his closet, his very best—and most sarcastic—friend, Bettina, who was sprawled across his bed taking up at least half of it while he tried to use the other half as a staging area, said, “Uh huh,” like he'd just proven her right about something.

“Shut up.”

So he was bringing club clothes. That didn't mean he wasn't totally serious about this endeavor. Two weeks at The Bars and Stars, a dude ranch that doubled as a boot camp, and he would be a whole new man with a whole new attitude. But he would still need club clothes. And a bathing suit. Just in case.

“I don't see anything about them having a pool,” Bettina said as he tucked his silver lamé thong-back bikini into a side pocket. “There's a trough, but I think it's for watering the horses.”

Peyton glanced at the brochure she was perusing, though he already had every page of it committed to memory. “There's probably a hot spring on the grounds.”

“There's probably not. Peyton, this feels like a really bad idea. You don't know anything about these people.”

“I told you they come highly recommended.” By that one friend of his. Well, not friend exactly. A guy he'd met at the club who'd shouted in his ear about how he'd finally managed to quit smoking while they ground against each other on the

dance floor. “Their program is guaranteed to whip you into shape. Guar-an-teeed.” He tapped the brochure for emphasis.

“If you were trying to quit smoking, I’d be in favor of it. But you’re trying to... what is it you’re trying to do, Peyton?”

“Become a new man.”

“Which entails what exactly? I’m not saying you couldn’t use some improvement.” She sniffed, as if the thing he needed to improve on was the way he smelled, which couldn’t be further from the truth. “But there’s plenty you could do right here at home. Start an exercise program, improve your diet, learn a second language, enroll in grad school, have a relationship that lasts longer than a Starbucks coffee drink. Whatever it is you think you need improving on, do it.”

“But that’s what I need improving on,” he said as he stashed his less revealing but also more flattering—not unrelated—bathing suit in the pocket opposite from the thong. Depending on how good the food at the ranch was, he might appreciate the extra coverage. “I can’t do any of those things you listed because I never do *anything*.”

“You do lots of things.”

“Not things that take more than an hour. Not things you have to do again tomorrow.”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

“Bitch.”

“You said it yourself.” Bettina flipped the brochure shut and rolled onto her back. “You do lack a certain... resolve.”

Resolve. That was it in a nutshell. He often decided to do things—like apply for a promotion at work or move out of this crappy apartment where the landlord was absolutely price gouging—but he rarely did them. He joined softball leagues and never made it to a single game. He bought pots to plant a container garden but left the seeds to molder. He’d once painted half of the wall opposite his bed a cheerful vivid aqua and now, four years later, a half-blue wall still taunted him

every morning when he woke up. It was a miracle he'd followed through on his unmeant promise to the guy on the dance floor about "checking into it," but somehow he had.

Googling The Bars and Stars had been the easy part. Ordering a brochure and flipping through it as he watched reruns of Schitt's Creek instead of starting that new show his friends swore was so good—those parts were also easy. Daydreaming about cowboys dressed in real chaps rather than pleather ones? Easy. Imagining himself being a different person, one filled with ambition and resolve? Easy. He'd been daydreaming his whole life.

Filling out the online form and submitting his credit card details hadn't been so hard either. Online shopping was fueled by impulsiveness, not stick-to-itiveness. Just ask his personal Amazon driver, who would be the first to notice Peyton's absence if he ever slipped in the shower and died. The question was whether, having paid for two weeks of boot camp at The Bars and Stars, he would actually show up. His packed suitcase said yes. His personal history said no.

He closed the lid even more firmly than he had the last time, then set the suitcase next to his carry-on. He put the duffel where he'd stashed his shoes and toiletries next to them, and that was it. He was packed. He was going. He would return a completely different person, fortified by fresh air, good food, physical labor, and whatever "firmly delivered motivation and discipline" meant. Lectures, probably.

"I don't know," Bettina said, sitting up to give his closed suitcase a contemplative look. "This place is weird. The terms and conditions are absolutely bonkers."

"Only you would read the terms and conditions."

Bettina was a lawyer, which showed how much resolve *she* had. He, on the other hand, had only made it through four years of a mid-tier college because his mother had filled in the application and his father had paid. He'd lived in the dorm they'd signed him up for with the roommate the college had randomly matched him to until the administration got sick of

him hanging around and handed him a diploma. It was a Bachelor's of Showing Up, and it qualified him to work in the company his father's best friend owned.

He wasn't incompetent at his job. In fact, he often had very good ideas for product upgrades or process improvements. He just never followed through on any of them, always figuring that tomorrow would be soon enough to discuss it, if it was even worth bothering about. But being reasonably tall, extremely handsome (not just according to him, either), well-mannered, and willing to listen to men talk about sports even if he had no idea what they were saying, he'd accidentally survived one layoff after another and even got promoted once, though that had been a mistake quickly fixed by a reorg that left him report-less again.

"Well, you *should* read them," Bettina said, still talking about the terms and conditions, which absolutely no one except lawyers ever did read. "There are a surprising number of references to punishments."

"Punishments?"

"Their word, not mine. You're expected to comply with the program, and if you don't, there are punishments. As your attorney—"

"Except you're not," he pointed out.

"But if I were, I'd insist that the exact nature of said punishments be spelled out. That contract you signed gives them the right to do pretty much anything to you without any legal recourse. They could put you in a cell, feed you nothing except bread and water, torture you."

Peyton made a face at her. "They're trying to help me, Bettina. The punishments are for not sticking with the program. Which, in case you've forgotten what we were discussing two minutes ago, is exactly what will happen if I don't have a strong incentive."

The guy on the dance floor had mentioned—yelled—something about punishments, and it was the idea of there

being consequences for his lack of perseverance that had kept the idea of doing a stint at The Bars and Stars firmly in his mind until it almost seemed like he had no choice but to act on it. His trouble was that there never *had* been consequences. He'd never been thrown out of the nest and told to fly, had never had anything withheld from him that was worth working for.

Not to say he always got everything he wanted. There was that horrible Christmas when the big present under the tree turned out to be an XBox One rather than a PlayStation. But generally things were okay. Good enough. When he went to a club, men approached him. When he dropped the ball at work, someone else picked it up. When he disappointed his friends by not showing up to help them move, they shrugged and said, "Well, it's Peyton. What did you expect?" and didn't bother to ask him the next time.

If his parents had disapproved of his sexuality, that would have been worth fighting over. He'd psyched himself up to come out to them, telling himself this was something he was going to do whether it was easy or not. If they tried to say he didn't know his own mind or that his sexuality was a phase, he would stand firm, for however long it took to convince them.

He'd practically made himself sick worrying about it, but the actual event had been anticlimactic. His mother had given him a hug, and his father had said, "Thanks for sharing that with us." And that had been the end of The Most Dramatic Episode in a Young Gay Man's Life. His big chance to take a stand had fizzled to nothing, and he'd been coasting ever since.

"You'd better call me," Bettina said. "Every day. I want to know you're not in a cage getting your feet whipped."

"If only," he said with a wink.

She rolled her eyes at him, knowing he was kidding. He never missed a leather night, but even when it came to kink, he was a halfway kind of guy. He didn't mind a mid-fuck SWAT, but he didn't ask to be choked. He was a bottom to his core,

but fuck or suck, frot or stroke, it was all the same to him. As long as he got off.

Bettina rose to her feet, unearthing a slipper that had been buried beneath her and which ought to be in his suitcase. The charmingly rustic plank floors showcased in the brochure were undoubtedly cold and full of splinters. He unzipped his suitcase.

“Enough with the packing,” Bettina protested. “You’re bringing a ridiculous amount of shit for someone who’s only going away for two weeks and is supposed to be roughing it.”

“I never said I was roughing it.” He managed to squeeze the errant slipper in between his jock straps and his moisturizing kit. “The accommodations might be rustic, but it’s not camping. I’ll have a bed and a shower and three hot meals a day. I’ll be fine. And when I come back? All this is going to change, Bettina.” He pointed at the aqua wall, which would be the first thing to change. “Mark my words.”

He’d said that before, a hundred times, and Bettina knew it. She jangled her car keys, indicating without words that she was ready to leave for the airport whenever he was. He could have taken a Lyft and spared himself the sarcasm, but he’d asked her to drive him because he was afraid he would chicken out otherwise.

Bettina took charge, the way she always did when they had somewhere to go, getting his suitcases loaded into her trunk and calling up directions to the airport on her GPS, as if they could miss it. She double-checked his boarding pass to see which terminal they were headed for—not trusting him to have the correct information himself—and pulled up in front of the airport with ten minutes to spare before his designated check-in time.

“You don’t have to do this,” she said as they sat in the passenger loading and unloading zone with Peyton looking through his window at the terminal as if someone might come over and fetch him if he waited long enough. “If you want to take charge of your life, I can help you draw up a plan.”

Peyton shook his head. His drawers were littered with plans Bettina had drawn up for him—exercise programs, shopping lists, daily affirmations, sketches of ideas he'd had for product improvements. He never followed through on any of them, so nothing ever changed, not even his friendship with Bettina. The next time he started whining about his life meaning nothing and going nowhere, she would draw up another plan, but he would still be right here, looking at life instead of doing it.

“I'm going,” he announced with faked firmness. He put his hand on the door handle.

“All right, have fun. Give me a call when you're ready to come home, and I'll pick you.”

“My return flight is on the itinerary I emailed you.”

“I know, just... even if it's before then.”

Bettina didn't believe he would really get on the plane. And if he *did* get on the plane, she didn't believe he would last the whole two weeks. Bettina wasn't usually wrong, but this time he was going to make her be wrong. This time, he would do it.

Chapter 2

Somebody met him at the airport—somebody in a cowboy hat who looked at his suitcases like he was out of his mind before throwing them with absolutely no regard for the fact that one of them was genuine Gucci into the back of a Range Rover.

The cowboy didn't say a lot, but he was clearly in charge, which kept Peyton from making a U-turn for the departing flights terminal after taking a single breath of the hundred-degree air. He climbed into the cab of the Range Rover and was relieved to discover it had air conditioning. For a moment he'd been worried these people took the ranching part of their ranch too seriously.

"I'm Peyton," he said as he aimed one of the vents at his face, but the driver, who already knew his name because it'd been printed on the sign he'd been holding, merely grunted.

They drove and drove and drove—away from the airport past a stretch of tall buildings then a stretch of shorter buildings and eventually a stretch with no buildings at all as the highway turned into a road and the road turned into dirt—all without speaking.

"It's kind of a ways out there, huh?" He was completely at this guy's mercy, with no idea whether they were heading for The Bars and Stars or a concrete bunker where he kept his victims.

"Almost there," the driver said, like it was a concession.

Peyton got out his phone and sent Bettina a pin. Just in case.

"Did you give up halfway there?" she texted back. "According to their website, the ranch is another thirty miles from there."

Peyton sent her an emoji with its tongue out and put his phone on silent.

Forty-five minutes later they arrived at the ranch, which was surrounded by an unusually tall fence made of solid wood rather than a few strands of barbed wire, as if the ranch were more worried about keeping people out than animals in. Above a sturdy iron gate, “The Bars and Stars” had been spelled out with what looked like sticks.

Peyton held his breath as the gate swung open, but on the other side was a ranch as ranch-like as anything he’d ever seen on TV. The large pink house with the wraparound porch was familiar from the brochure. That was the guest house, where he would have a room to himself.

Smaller buildings surrounded the guest house—barns and sheds, enclosures for animals. Bales of hay were arranged like props—or furniture—but no one sat on any of them. The people he could see were all busy, and most of them wore cowboy hats, which he hadn’t brought one of. He wondered if they had a gift store. He wasn’t sure about giving himself hat head, but his neck was long enough to pull off a wide brim. Maybe in black, to match his chaps.

Over by the corral, a guy wearing a brown cowboy hat, matching cowboy boots, a pair of dusty jeans, and absolutely no shirt was chopping wood, swinging the ax like he had something against the log he was splitting. Peyton wasn’t sure why the ranch needed firewood when it was at least a hundred and ten out, but he approved of the process of making it.

The ax-wielding cowboy had a fine back, topped by an impressive set of shoulders. With every swing, his biceps bulged and his ass bunched. Peyton would happily sit there all day watching him except now that the driver had shut off the engine, the temperature inside the cab was quickly climbing to exceed the temperature outside the cab. Which meant that if he didn’t open the door and get out, he would soon be a roasted duckling.

Unfortunately, opening the door meant facing... whatever was out there. An impatient driver wondering why he wasn’t collecting his luggage, for starters.

Peyton stepped down from the cab and immediately became drenched in sweat. He staggered under the combined weight of his three suitcases—which the driver didn't offer to help carry—up the porch stairs and through a screen door into a lobby which was thankfully as well air conditioned as the Range Rover. Maybe he would survive.

He was checked in by a cute twink, given a printed schedule detailing his plan of action for the next two weeks, and directed to a wide set of curving stairs. Juggling three suitcases, his room key, and the printed schedule, he managed to make it up the stairs and down the hall to room 201, which featured a canopied bed covered in a patchwork quilt, a blocky wood dresser, a closet about the size of a refrigerator, and a view of the guy chopping wood.

Unsure what he was supposed to be doing next and afraid to check the schedule because then he would find out, Peyton stood for several minutes appreciating the view. That cowboy could really swing an ax. Peyton imaged he could pound an ass just as hard, given the power in his thighs which met in a prominent bulge showcased by a pair of Levi's 501 button-fly jeans. Classic. Peyton wanted to peel them off with his teeth, dust be damned.

The sound of a gong echoing down the hall startled him from his ogling. The gong probably meant something, and the secret to its meaning was probably on the piece of paper he'd thus far refused to look at.

Dinner.

Okay, that wasn't hard to deal with. He knew how to eat. If someone tried to make him chop wood after dinner, he would just... tell them he preferred to watch. He was the customer, after all, and the customer was always right.

According to the brochure, dinner was served family style, which meant platters of food on round tables covered in blue gingham tablecloths with vases of fresh daises as centerpieces. Peyton took the first empty seat he came across, next to a heavyweight guy sweating through his t-shirt. The

dining hall was air conditioned, but the guy was big enough he would need a freezer to stay cool.

“Howdy, pardner,” the guy said, in what was clearly a faked drawl. He took a break from forking chicken cutlets onto his plate to hold out a hand. “I’m Ambrose.”

“Peyton.” Peyton accepted the plate of chicken cutlets from Ambrose and served himself one. “Have you been here long?”

“Just got in today,” Ambrose said around a forkful of roasted potatoes. “I’m on the weight plan. You?”

“The, uh, get-my-shit-together plan, I guess you’d say.”

Ambrose laughed. “We could all use that one. That’s why we’re here, to get whipped into shape.” He patted his stomach.

Peyton wished his own problem was so visibly obvious because Bettina was right about his goal not being very concrete. How would he know when he was done?

“At least there’s plenty of eye candy to enjoy,” he said as he glanced around the room at the circulating waiters. Every one of them was a nine or a ten, either as cute as the twink at the front desk or as stacked as the guy out front chopping wood. “They understand their clientele. The place isn’t so much a boot camp as a booty camp, if you get what I mean.”

The Bars and Stars was a dude ranch for dudes. For gay ones, in particular. Peyton had made sure of it. Whatever might be wrong with him—and it was a long list—being gay wasn’t on it. The stand he’d been prepared to take back in his teens about being gay now and forever was the one hill he was still willing to die on.

“Maybe if they give my eyes enough to feast on, I can avoid feasting on all this food,” Ambrose said with a sigh, because damn if there wasn’t a whole lot of food. It was all reasonably healthy but way plentiful.

“I suppose they’ll work it off us,” Peyton suggested.

The brochure had made it sound like they would be getting exercise in the form of learning how to rope and ride, which Peyton hoped would be more fun than jogging or doing burpees. His track record with those activities wasn't great.

"I could stand to firm up myself." He squeezed his midsection.

He wasn't as soft as Ambrose, but he was nowhere near as toned as the wood-chopping cowboy who he intended to jerk off to before retiring for the night. He'd often thought it would be nice to have abs like that, but one set of sit-ups always changed his mind. If he ever had trouble attracting men, that might be enough motivation to get him moving, but for now his face and height, both of which he'd lucked into rather than earned, did the work for him.

"It's not so much about losing weight," Ambrose said. "It's more about changing my habits and, I don't know, my general approach to life."

"Exactly." He pointed at Ambrose with his fork. "An overhaul. Mental, physical, the whole deal. Here's to a brand new us." He raised his glass and gave Ambrose's a clink, then took a sip to finalize the toast. "Shame it's only water." He glanced around for the bar. A carafe of wine? Something?

"Don't bother," said a man easing himself into the empty seat on Peyton's other side. He winced as his ass made contact with the chair. "There's no alcohol at The Bars and Stars."

"Because of the alkie's?" Peyton asked.

"Because they want everyone to keep a clear head." The man shifted his weight tentatively from one ass cheek to the other, as if unable to find a comfortable position.

"Did you get thrown by a horse?" Peyton asked him. The guy's ass must be bruised to high-heaven the way he was acting.

The man snorted. Peyton had no idea what was funny, but the man didn't elaborate, so he dropped the subject. He hated looking like he didn't know what was going on.

“I’m Peyton, by the way.”

“Greg.”

“How long you been here?”

“Long enough to be leaving. My flight out is tomorrow morning.” Greg helped himself to a chicken cutlet and a big scoop of green beans. Peyton had already finished his food, but Ambrose was having seconds, so he hung around for the sake of being social.

“You think it helped you any?” he asked Greg.

Greg smirked. He sure found the situation entertaining. “I’m going home a changed man. Gotta figure out how to keep up the discipline without external reinforcement, but for now I’ve got no desire to engage in those old behaviors ever again.”

“What were you in for?”

“Porn addiction.”

Peyton laughed, then realized Greg was serious and stifled his mirth. He shouldn’t be disrespectful of other people’s problems. Like when he’d referred to alcoholics as alkies a minute ago. Any of the people around him might be an alcoholic, which was a serious problem, not a joke. He didn’t like it when Bettina made fun of him for his problem. Still, the idea of coming here to handle a gay porn addiction was pretty amusing.

“All these hot dudes with their shirts off didn’t lend more fuel to the fire?”

“Those guys aren’t here to pleasure us. They’re here to discipline us, punish us. Right now, I’d be happy to never see a hot guy again.”

Peyton frowned. He hadn’t come to The Bars and Stars to be turned off hot men.

“So it’s like aversion therapy,” Ambrose said. “When you think of jerking it to a hot guy, you associate it with

punishment. I guess that's what they're going to do with me and food." He looked glumly at his plate.

Peyton relaxed. He didn't have a porn problem, so his aversion therapy wouldn't be targeted toward hot men or jerking off. He supposed his would be targeted toward working hard or following through or... or something. He should have read that personalized schedule they'd given him.

"What's the punishment?" he asked. "Like mucking out stalls?" He didn't know what 'mucking out stalls' meant exactly, but it sounded ranch-like and also unpleasant.

"You remember that contract you signed?"

Peyton nodded.

"Did you read the terms and conditions on it?"

Peyton shook his head.

"Then let's just say you should have."

And that was all the information Greg was prepared to hand out.

Chapter 3

He was late. If he'd looked at his itinerary last night instead of working his dick to the memory of muscles bunching, he would have known what time he was supposed to be at the corral and planned accordingly. He didn't have a porn addiction, but it was definitely possible he used masturbation to avoid scary or unpleasant items on his to do list. Like this morning's session, to which he was late.

He skated around the corner of the barn to the corral where he was supposed to meet his trainer and found a stone-faced cowboy with his arms crossed over his chest. The man wore a long-sleeved plaid shirt fastened nearly to the top with pearl snaps, but Peyton knew what he looked like without a shirt on because that was his wood chopper, the hunk with the swoon-worthy physique. Beneath the brim of a well-worn cowboy hat, the guy's deeply tanned face was every bit as swoon-worthy. But also angry.

"Sorry I'm late." He offered his hand, which the cowboy looked at like it was a used tissue so he changed the shaking motion to a wave as if he'd meant to wave all along. "I'm Peyton. But I guess you know that 'cause you're standing here waiting for me. Because I'm late," he added redundantly.

"Tex," the man spat out.

"Right. Tex. Um, do you mean your name is Tex? Because I don't know if you know this, but we're literally *in* Texas. Not that you can't call yourself anything you want, but Tex isn't exactly original, is it?"

"Here's how it works," Tex said, ignoring his prattling. "I'll be taking you through various exercises, mostly ranch work, for purposes of evaluating your physical condition and testing your mettle. That's what your trouble is, right? You lack mettle."

Mettle was an old-fashioned word, but it was accurate enough. "I guess."

“You *guess?*” Tex clapped his hands directly in front of Peyton’s face, making him flinch. “No more wishy-washy bullshit, no more hiding from reality. You lack mettle—yes or no?”

“Yes. Definitely yes.” It was just an answer, an answer he’d been forced to give, but he did feel better for giving it without equivocation. He lacked mettle.

“Mettle. Courage. Determination. Stick-to-itiveness. Whatever you want to call it. Way I hear it, you’re not good for much.”

Now that wasn’t fair. He gave a helluva blowjob, which he would happily demonstrate for Tex at any time.

“So we’re gonna fix that,” Tex continued, referring to Peyton’s lack of mettle, not his blowjob technique, because he couldn’t read Peyton’s mind. “By the end of your stay with us, you’ll have a backbone and know how to use it. You’re also going to have bigger guns, but that’s a by-product.” He pinched Peyton’s upper arm between his fingers, as if measuring it. Actually, more like crushing it.

Peyton pulled his arm away with a yelp. “Okay, but does it have to hurt? Go easy on me. It’s my first day.”

“Every day counts. Every minute counts. Every action counts. And yes, it’s going to hurt. This isn’t a spa, Peyton. I’m not here to coddle your ass. I’m here to work it.”

Peyton didn’t like the sound of that much, even though it was what he’d signed up for. He heaved a giant sigh, imagining the dreariness of the weeks ahead.

Tex was sure nice to look at. He had a chiseled jaw and dark eyes under heavy brows. A couple days’ worth of stubble dusted his chin, and his cheekbones were highlighted with the golden brown of a tan that hadn’t come from a bottle or a heat lamp. His 501 jeans cupped his groin in much the same way Peyton would like to cup it, and there was plenty there to be cupped. Tex was more than a handful—an inch or two taller

than Peyton and sturdy, like Peyton could climb him and he wouldn't even waver.

But the things Tex wanted to do didn't sound like fun, and Peyton was remembering that he really preferred having fun and taking it easy to whatever Tex had in store for him.

"Where do I get a cowboy hat?" he asked to delay the inevitable.

"Sun in your eyes?"

"A little." Mostly he just thought they looked cool, though the sun was pretty bright considering it was only nine in the morning. Hot too. How was Tex surviving in that long-sleeved shirt? Hopefully he would take it off soon.

"Well, you don't have to worry about the sun because our job is in there." Tex pointed at the barn, which looked reassuringly cool and shady. "You're going to be mucking out stalls."

Oh, for fuck's sake. It was like he'd made it happen by imagining it. He couldn't muck out stalls because... because he had no idea what that even meant. He took a step away from the barn, toward the guest house where they had air conditioning and soft things to sit on, but Tex barred his way with a steely arm across his chest.

"You're not quitting on me already, are you?"

"Maybe?" He would love to impress Tex, then let Tex have his way with him over a bale of hay—or perhaps something less prickly—but impressing Tex wasn't what would happen if he went in that barn. And neither was sex.

"No, you're not." Tex's hand swiped up his chest and around his neck to cup the back of his head. "You know what your problem is, Peyton?"

"Lack of mettle," Peyton answer despondently. They'd already gone over that.

"Yeah, sure. But what's behind it? Where does the lack of mettle come from?"

Peyton shook his head. He would like to blame his genes, but his mother was a doctor and his father ran his own business. Neither of them had ever shied away from hard work.

“Fear,” Tex said.

Peyton threw a quick glance into the dark recesses of the barn, where it was true that anything might lurk but probably nothing worse than horses and hay. “Like fear that it’s going to smell bad? Or that a horse might kick me?”

“Fear you won’t be able to do it. When you set these goals of yours, the ones you never meet, do you ever come close to meeting them?”

“I usually don’t even start.”

“Exactly. That’s fear, Peyton. You’re afraid you’ll come across as foolish if you can’t do something, afraid everyone will see it, afraid that if you try—and fail—then it was wasted effort, wasted time. It’s easier to not try, isn’t it?”

Peyton thought about the ideas he’d had for product upgrades, the ones Bettina had helped him sketch out. The reason he’d never brought any of them to his manager was exactly what Tex was saying. He was afraid his manager would laugh at him, would label his ideas as useless or naive or outright impossible. He was only in marketing after all. He wasn’t an engineer.

He’d *wanted* to be an engineer. But engineering classes were hard and the programs were difficult to get into. He wasn’t an engineer because he’d been afraid to try to be one. And since he wasn’t one, he was afraid to propose his ideas at work.

“I’m afraid?” It sounded an awful lot like the truth. “How do I get unafraid?”

“That’s what we’re here for. Over the next two weeks, you’re going to try a lot of new things, and you’ll most likely fail at some of them. But the more you try, the better you’ll get, and the truth I’d like you to see, Peyton, is that it’s the

work itself that's important, not the result. Just give me your honest effort."

"But what if you want me to do something I can't do?"

"I'm only going to give you tasks I think you can complete, and I'll be right there guiding you through them, but if you can't, you can't. There will only be trouble between us if I find you quitting."

"I don't want to quit." He said it in a whisper because it felt so huge. He didn't want to quit. And yet, he always did. "You can help me?"

"By the end of our time together, you're going to be as fine a specimen of manhood as one could wish to meet. Now get your ass in that barn, and let's get moving." Tex released the hold on the back of his neck and he oozed slowly in the direction of the barn until Tex dropped a swat on the seat of his pants to hurry him along.

"Ow." He rubbed his ass cheek with one hand as he trotted forward with a little more alacrity.

"Like I said, if you make an effort, the two of us will be fine. But if I catch you slacking, there'll be consequences."

Punishment. He'd been expecting it, thanks to the warnings from both Bettina and Greg. But if mucking out stalls was work, then what would the punishments be? He didn't ask, figuring his best bet was to avoid them. He would be a dutiful worker. Nothing he couldn't handle, Tex had said. All he had to do was try.

But ugh. Mucking out stalls was both as smelly and as sweaty as he'd expected it to be. Stalls, it turned out, were the places horses slept. And horses, it further turned out, didn't understand about not shitting where you sleep, requiring humans to step in and remove the piss-covered, feces-strewn straw and replace it with clean straw.

The clean straw was relatively light and smelled way better than the dirty straw, though it tickled his nose. Nevertheless, the first stall pretty much did him in. His back

and shoulders ached from the strain of repetitive motion, and he felt as filthy as the used straw. But when he threw himself down on a bale of hay in resigned exhaustion, Tex crossed his arms, raised his eyebrows, and generally made him feel like a loser. So he stood up again.

The second stall went faster than the first. Tex had been right—both about him being capable of doing it and him getting better at it. But two stalls was his limit. The point had been proven. Mucking out more stalls would just be work. Boring, smelly drudge work.

“I’m done.” He dropped back onto the hay bale, which was conveniently bed height and had a sweet smell he would forever associate with spreading hay over a plank wood floor.

“You’ve still got three stalls to go.”

“Three?” He could maybe be talked into doing *one*, just to see Tex’s dimples, but three? Not a chance. “My back hurts. My arms hurt. My everything hurts.”

“Not your everything,” Tex said. A little ominously, if Peyton was being honest.

“Everything that counts, unless you want to make my ass hurt.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. This hay bale was not only the perfect height for sleeping on. It was the perfect height for bending over.

“That’s exactly what I’m fixing to do if you don’t get on with those other three stalls.”

Well, count him lucky. If his choice was between mucking stalls and having Tex’s cock in his ass, there wasn’t even a contest. Could sex really be what The Bars and Stars doled out for punishment? They understood about their clientele being gay, right?

“Let me make that easier on you, cowboy.” His joints cracked and his muscles screamed as he clambered to his feet, but the pain of getting vertical again would be worth it. “I hope you’ve got everything we need to keep this safe,” he said as he presented Tex with his backside and reached for his fly.

“This ain’t my first rodeo.”

“Good to hear I’m in capable hands.” He dropped his drawers and leaned over to brace himself on the hay bale, pressing his ass back invitingly. His ass could probably use a shower after all that mucking, but the funk was Tex’s fault, so Tex could deal with it. “Lay it on me, babe.”

He wiggled his rump, eager to feel Tex’s hand on it. And then he did.

Chapter 4

“Ouch!” Peyton looked over his shoulder at Tex who was standing behind him with his hand drawn back to smack his ass again. “Whoa there, cowboy. I don’t mind a little slap and tickle once we get going, but you gotta warm a girl up first.”

Tex smacked him again.

“I said ouch.” He yanked up his trousers as he whirled. He’d had a good stiffy from thinking about what Tex was going to do to him, but it was wilting now. “What the f—?”

He didn’t even get to finish his question before Tex spun him around, planted a hand in the center of his back to bend him over, and landed another wallop.

“This isn’t funny,” Peyton protested, unable to rise because Tex had him so firmly pinned.

“It’s not meant to be funny. It’s meant to be punishment. Now are you going to hold still or do I need to get a rope?”

“A rope?” Peyton squeaked. The squeak was because Tex had just yanked his drawers down, leaving him bare-assed, but not in a fun way. The next slap landed squarely on his naked right ass cheek. “You have no right—”

“Should’ve read that contract.” Tex smacked him again, Peyton’s peremptory flinch causing the blow to land on his thigh instead of on the fleshier part of his ass. “You signed up for this, Peyton, and I intend to deliver it.”

“I didn’t sign up for *this*. I signed up for discipline.”

“Uh huh.” Tex hit him harder.

The blows were falling steadily now—one to the left, one to the right—each one on-target as long as he didn’t wriggle too much. His ass felt like it was glowing red, and it was definitely hanging out where anyone who wandered into the barn would see it. He hadn’t minded the prospect of being caught getting fucked by the handsome, muscular cowboy, but

getting caught having the bejeebus beat out of his backside like he was a misbehaving schoolboy was another matter.

“I’ll sue you to hell,” he threatened.

“Contract,” Tex reminded him without pausing his assault. “And anyway, you won’t. Because you never follow through on anything.”

That smarted worse than the blows. Because Tex was right. Even if he had legal standing to sue, and maybe he didn’t—had he really given them permission to spank him?—he wouldn’t ever get around to doing it.

“Listen,” he bargained. The spanking had been almost funny at first—demeaning, but not physically unbearable. But every subsequent blow raised the fire higher. He could feel Tex’s handprint like a brand, could imagine it glowing like a brand too, white-hot before it faded to red. “I’m leaving. I quit. The contract isn’t valid if I quit.”

“You don’t get to quit this time, Peyton. The only way out of this is to go through it. Now are you going to stop thrashing around and take this like a man, or do I have to put you over my knee?”

Tex loosened the hold he’d been using to keep Peyton’s chest anchored to the bale of hay, which Peyton took as an invitation to leave. He dashed for the door but only managed a single step before tripping over his pants and crashing face first to the floor.

God, he was such a failure. He couldn’t even quit properly. Everything hit him at once. Exhaustion, pain, self-loathing, and that other thing—the one Tex had pointed out earlier as the root of all his problems. Fear.

Suddenly he was crying. Bawling like a newborn calf, his face planted on the straw-strewn floor and his pants around his knees. Tex lifted him to his feet and dusted him off, then sat on the bale of hay over which Peyton had so recently been bent and pulled him into his lap.

“I like seeing you cry, little cowboy.”

“Why?” Peyton asked between sobs. Obviously the man was a horrible, cruel sadist.

“Because for the first time since I met you, you’re taking something seriously. Laughter’s all right in its place, but you use it as a defense mechanism to hide what’s really going on inside you. So go on and have a good cry. That’s an honest emotion. You didn’t perform your best today. You let me down, and now you’re paying the price for it. Those are things worth crying over.”

Peyton cried harder, wetting Tex’s shirt with tears and snot. He wished he’d mucked out all the stalls like Tex had wanted him to. He wished his ass didn’t hurt. But most of all, he wished he wasn’t a quitter.

“How about we fix it, shall we?”

Peyton nodded against Tex’s chest. That would be nice, to fix something.

“Over my knee, then.”

Peyton’s eyes flew open. Over Tex’s knee meant... meant more spanking. Meant more pain and embarrassment. He tensed, prepared to run again, his mouth slack as he searched for the word no.

“You’re going to finish this, Peyton. I intend to make sure of it. The only part that’s up to you is how you take it. Either like it’s the first step toward a new life or like it’s one more thing you tried to duck out of.”

Peyton didn’t see how Tex could make him do it. He really didn’t. Tex had a couple of inches on him and a lot of pounds—all of which was muscle—but if he made a break for it, if he seriously fought to get out of the barn, Tex wouldn’t be able to keep him there, not without doing more damage than any contract would cover. But if he were the type to fight his way out of a barn, he wouldn’t be in this position to begin with.

Could Tex be right about what he needed? Could accepting his punishment with grace and courage be the start

of a new way to approach life?

His lower lip trembled, but he gave Tex the nod. Racked with fear—fear of pain, fear he wouldn't be able to finish what he was about to start, fear it wouldn't change anything even if he did—he draped his upper body across Tex's legs. When Tex tugged his shorts lower he realized he'd foolishly arranged himself so his bare ass faced the barn door, but it was too late to protest now. Tex had already started whaling on him.

The first slap sparked fire across his ass, reigniting the coals that'd been smoldering there. He screwed up his eyes and balled his hands into fists, trying not to yell this time. But the spanking kept going and going, and the conflict inside him rose higher and higher.

He should stick this out. He'd said he would, so he should. But he couldn't, he couldn't. It was too hard, too horrible. He was a grown man with his ass up and his head down and his feet flailing around while another grown man made handprints on him. It was humiliating and horrible and it hurt so bad and he was going to quit, he knew it. But instead of quitting, he started crying. Tears turned his mouth salty as his breath came heavy and wet from between parted lips.

“That's it,” Tex said, pausing a moment to stroke more gently over his ass. Even that hurt, but it hurt in a sweet way—this moment of pride and reprieve. “You're almost there, Peyton. Take a little more for me, okay?”

And suddenly he knew he could. He was going to survive this, as awful as it was. And by accepting it, embracing it—conquering it—he came to sort of like it. The sharp smack of Tex's palm against the bouncing flesh of his ass had a rhythmic pulse like music. Tex's hand was hot, as hot as his ass, and Tex's thighs were warm and hard under his stomach.

Peyton stopped yowling and started moaning as the sensations emanating from his ass underwent a metamorphosis. He was taking what Tex was doling out, not backing off or running away. And he wanted it—wanted Tex's hands on him, wanted Tex's correction. The combination of

pride and physical contact generated a flush even warmer than the one Tex was raising on his rump.

When Tex had tipped him forward, aiming his ass at the roof beams, his dick had ended up between Tex's thighs. It'd been soft then, scared. But it firmed up now as it started to notice it had a male body to rub against. He started bucking—writhing not in escape but to maximize the friction of his cock against Tex's thigh, pushing back to meet the palm slamming down.

And then, just when he thought he might actually be able to come like this, Tex stopped.

“Such a good boy,” he murmured as he stroked a hand lightly up and down Peyton's flanks. “You did so well with that. Come on up here.”

With Tex helping him, Peyton managed to rotate his wrung out, throbbing body around until he was sitting upright on Tex's lap. The denim covering Tex's thigh that had felt so good rubbing against his cock stung like nettles against the heated flesh of his ass, but he ignored the burn, reaching for Tex with his hands, his mouth, his very soul.

“There, there. Settle down. None of that.” Tex corralled his groping hands and evaded his seeking lips.

Peyton whimpered. He needed.

“I'm your trainer,” Tex reminded him, pinning his arms to his sides with a tight hug. “I'm proud of you, very proud of you, and I understand you need some aftercare right now, so you're going to get it. But no lovey-dovey.”

With that, he contradictorily gave Peyton a quick kiss on the lips. But he refused to give more, tucking Peyton's head under his chin so it rested against his chest and keeping him wrapped up too tightly for anything else. Peyton was proud of himself for making it all the way through his punishment and glad Tex was proud of him too, but he felt like there should be more. All that lead-up and no climax. It didn't seem right.

Eventually his dick went down. Then Tex stood him on his feet and pulled his pants up for him, tucking everything away. The fabric was rough against his skin and seemed to trap the heat, echoing it back with double intensity. He ached, more so now than when Tex had stopped because he wasn't turned on anymore. Now there was only the lingering pain of punishment and a lot of uncertainty about what happened next.

Which, unbelievably, turned out to be more stall mucking.

He was so tired, physically and emotionally. The moment he picked up the pitchfork, he felt again the soreness in his chest and abs and arms, the soreness that had led to him refusing to continue, which had led to the soreness he now had in his ass. Quitting again was out of the question. He couldn't take any more punishment and he didn't want Tex mad at him, not after those moments they'd shared.

Even without the sex he'd been angling for, there'd been an intimacy—an intimacy he'd never felt with another man if he was being honest. He'd been vulnerable to Tex, had let Tex see his demons, his fear and pain, his tears. The bond they'd started to form, though new and tenuous, wasn't one he wanted to break. So he mucked. And mucked and mucked until he was ready to cry all over again.

At some point, Tex picked up a pitchfork and started helping. He didn't say anything, just worked at his side as if he knew Peyton was about to drop. He'd said he wouldn't give Peyton anything he couldn't handle, and Peyton saw it was true. Because eventually all the stalls were clean. He'd done it. Well, they'd done it together. But the point was, it got done. Every single stall.

He wiped a shaky hand across his forehead, surveying the row of clean stalls with satisfaction. Tex clapped him on the back.

“That's what success looks like.”

Success.

Peyton turned his face up to Tex's and smiled a smile that felt new and exciting and really, really good.

Chapter 5

Peyton crawled into bed. It was barely afternoon but he felt like he could sleep for the next eighteen hours. Then he remembered his fucking schedule. If he accidentally blew off another appointment, there was no telling what the consequences would be. With trembling hands, he pulled out the stapled sheaf of papers and scanned down the bullet points for day one.

Day *one*. Dear God, he had thirteen more to go. However much resolve he tried to summon, he couldn't fool himself into believing he would make it. He'd probably been assigned to KP duty for the rest of the day or something equally heinous. But no. To his immense relief, he discovered the next item on his agenda was listed simply as "checkup" with the location as "clinic."

A doctor's visit. This was great. Maybe he could get a medical exemption from hard labor. And from spankings, though he had mixed feelings about those. His ass said "don't ever do that to me again" but the warmth emanating from his ass found its way to his heart, as if Tex had left a piece of himself behind.

He asked for directions to the clinic and arrived at a squat, brick building, incongruous amongst all the wood. Inside, he gave the receptionist his name, then sat on one of the hard chairs lined up across from the reception desk, trying not to squirm too much. If spankings were part of the program, they could at least provide cushions.

Were spankings part of the program? The more he thought about it, the more obvious it became that spankings weren't the ranch's official punishment. That would be ridiculous. Sex abuse. Or just plain abuse abuse. Tex had obviously gone rogue, no doubt spurred by desire. He wasn't the first man to want a piece of Peyton's ass, though most guys took a different approach.

When Peyton's name was called, he went into the exam room and dutifully changed into the paper gown the nurse handed him, then sat at the end of the exam table and waited, grateful the table was cushioned but wishing the air conditioning wasn't set quite so high. His nipples were as puckered as they'd been while Tex had been spanking him, and he couldn't help stroking a thumb over one. The stimulation plus the memory of how thoroughly Tex had peppered his ass had his cock plumping under the paper until the door opened and he dropped his hand into his lap to cover the evidence.

Both the doctor and his nurse were good-looking men. Peyton wondered if it was a requirement for employment at The Bars and Stars, that everyone be gay and gorgeous. Didn't hurt, anyway.

"Good afternoon," the doctor said formally. "This is your first day with us, yes? And how did you find it?"

"Painful."

The doctor nodded as if he'd been expecting that answer. "That's why we like to check you over, make sure you're handling the program all right."

"It was awful, doc. I don't think I'm cut out for this."

"For which part?" the doctor asked as the nurse popped a thermometer in his mouth.

"Mucking stalls," Peyton answered around the thermometer. It came out a lot like "fucking stalls" but that was how he felt about them. The nurse tutted at him and adjusted the thermometer to get it back under his tongue.

"So your muscles ache?" the doctor asked. "Anything else?"

Peyton debated, then decided not to throw Tex under the bus. The spanking had been unorthodox, but it'd done its job. He'd accomplished something difficult for the first time in a long time, and he was grateful to Tex for that.

“No, nothing else.”

“Excellent. Glad to hear it. Not all our clients weather their first punishment so well.”

“Um.” Peyton glanced between doctor and nurse as the nurse removed the thermometer and fastened on a blood pressure cuff. “Punishment?”

“I assume you were punished? Very few people get through their first day without doing something worth being punished for. And if they did, I suspect their trainers would just make something up.”

The doctor smirked at the nurse who smirked back.

“Your vitals look good,” the doctor continued as Peyton sat there gaping at him. “I’ll just check for bruising and you can be on your way.” He made a circular motion with his finger, asking Peyton to roll onto his stomach.

Peyton sucked in a breath. So they *did* know what Tex had done to him. This was really the program. This fucking ranch had brought him here to beat him. That wasn’t right. He would call a lawyer. He would call consumer protection. Well, no, he probably wouldn’t call anyone. That sounded like a lot of work. Bettina! That was it. He would call Bettina.

And then she would say I told you so. She would order a car to take him to the airport in Dallas, then pick him up at the other end and go on enabling his well-oiled slide into self-destruction courtesy of nothing worse than wishy-washiness.

The doctor made a circular motion again and Peyton rolled over, like he always did. He didn’t know what to do about The Bars and Stars or about Tex or about the rest of his life. All he knew was how to take the path of least resistance, which at this moment meant rolling over.

The nurse flipped up the back of his gown, exposing his ass for the doctor’s evaluation. Peyton hid his face in his arms and pretended this wasn’t happening.

“Hmm,” the doctor said. “Nice color, very even. Tex always does good work. Does this hurt?” He tapped Peyton’s right ass cheek lightly with a gloved hand.

Peyton shrieked. “What do you think?” he asked once he’d pulled himself back together.

“A little bruising on the right glute,” the doctor said to the nurse, who was typing his comments into a computer. Great, there was going to be a permanent record of his humiliation. “Make a note for Tex to tread lightly in that area for the next few days.”

“Um,” Peyton said, because that comment suggested he was going to be getting his ass beat on the regular, but the doctor ignored him to insert his thumbs into Peyton’s crack and separate his cheeks widely.

“No intra-gluteal marks. Sphincter appears untouched.”

“My sphincter was definitely untouched,” Peyton grumbled. “Is that supposed to be part of the program too?” Because Tex had sure acted like it wasn’t.

“In extreme cases, some trainers find it an effective spot for delivering punishment.”

“What?” Peyton scrambled back into a sitting position to hide his sphincter from any such possibility. “You don’t mean he’d... right on my...? Is that allowed? I’m not allowing that. No.”

The doctor shrugged. “Then I would advise you to follow the program. Punishment is the result of deviation.”

“But you said trainers make shit up.”

The nurse smirked again. Peyton wanted to smack the expression right off his face.

“Just a joke,” the doctor said reassuringly. “Everything Tex did was exactly to protocol, I’m sure. Let’s see. According to this, you showed up late, then attempted to leave without completing your assigned work. Is that correct?”

That was, unfortunately, correct.

“Then it sounds like punishment was warranted. And it was administered with the prescribed effectiveness. Patient is cleared for tomorrow,” he said to the nurse as he started to peel off his rubber gloves.

“Wait!”

The doctor turned back to him with a questioning look.

“I don’t think I’m cut out for physical labor. Couldn’t I get reassigned to another area, like, um, flower arranging? And those punishments. Corporal punishment isn’t really my speed. How about withholding dessert?”

“We don’t withhold food,” the doctor said sternly. “That would be cruel.” With that, he tossed his gloves into the receptacle with an elaborate layup move and left the room.

“You’ll be fine, dearie.” The nurse patted his naked knee. “You’ll adjust. Everyone does. And Tex is the dreamiest. I’d let him spank me any day.” He waggled his behind at Peyton, slapped it once, and then followed the doctor out.

Peyton got dressed slowly. He didn’t disagree about Tex’s general yumminess. If Tex were rutting into him and wanted to deliver the occasional swat, Peyton wouldn’t object. Admittedly, the sensation had been a weird sort of good. He’d very nearly gotten off on it. But now that his dick wasn’t hard, he couldn’t help feeling embarrassed and... victimized.

He shouldn’t have let Tex do that to him. If he were a stronger man, he wouldn’t have. He certainly shouldn’t have enjoyed it. Or cried either. It wasn’t like he’d been beaten with a two-by-four. Tex had only used his hand. Really, it must have stung Tex’s hand as much as Peyton’s ass, though Tex did have hands like leather. Strong and broad and commanding.

And now he was daydreaming about Tex’s hands, specifically about how they felt raining hellfire down on him. He wanted it again and also felt like he shouldn’t allow it again and especially felt like he would be happy to never muck out another stall. All that, and it was only day one.

The receptionist gave him a tube of cream to rub on his ass, which wouldn't do any good at all as far as he could tell, and reminded him he was due back in two days for a follow-up. Peyton didn't know whether to be impressed with the ranch's professionalism or appalled by their tactics. If the guy at the club had been clear about how the place worked, he never would have come.

Only one item remained on his schedule for the day and that was dinner, which he figured he could manage. Ambrose was already at the table when he arrived, eyeing a serving bowl like there might snakes hidden under the mashed potatoes.

"I'm supposed to be avoiding empty carbs," he said forlornly as Peyton slid into the chair next to him, trying not to wince. "Apparently potatoes contain very little in the way of actual nutrition."

"Tasty though," Peyton said, contrarily loading his plate with a heaping portion. He might have gotten his ass spanked but at least he was allowed to eat all the potatoes he wanted.

Ambrose reached for the platter of asparagus. "I can't afford any more mistakes today. Not after what happened at lunch."

Peyton had been in the process of forking a steak onto his plate, but he paused midway. "Rough afternoon?"

"You could say that." Ambrose shifted uneasily. "How about you?"

"Very rough. I, uh, had to be punished." He was hoping Ambrose would pony up some details about his own punishment, but he only nodded glumly. "What did they have you doing this morning?"

"Horse riding lessons."

Well, that wasn't fair. Peyton wanted to learn how to ride horses instead of cleaning up after them. He finished his meal as quickly as possible, then went back to his room and called Bettina to complain.

She listened to his rambling, whiny story about smelly hay and handsome cowboys, then said, “Wow, sounds like they worked you pretty hard today.”

He hadn’t told her about the spanking, though he wasn’t sure why not, so she only meant the actual physical labor Tex had put him through. But he’d definitely been worked. All over. She didn’t have to sound so surprised about it though, as if he’d never done a day of labor in his life.

“I’ve worked before, you know.”

“Have you? On what?”

“I work all the time. Forty hours a week.”

She laughed.

“Well, thirty.”

She was still laughing, he could tell.

“You’re in the building thirty hours a week, I’ll give you that. How much of that is work, I don’t know, but it’s definitely not *work* work. The most you exert yourself is taking out the recycling bin on Wednesdays, and that only requires exertion because of how many liquor bottles are in it. So I imagine you must be feeling pretty wiped out right now.”

Since she’d ended by saying something slightly sympathetic, he decided to ignore the taunting sarcasm that had come before it.

“I’m exhausted. Everything hurts. I can barely lift my arms.” Or sit.

“Take a bath, babe. Pamper yourself a little. After all, tomorrow is another day.”

Tomorrow was another day. And then another and another. Endless days, stretching out in front of him.

“What have I done, Bettina?”

“You know, I’m starting to think you did the exact right thing for a change. Stick it out, Peyton. You can do it.”

That made two people who believed in him—Bettina and Tex. Maybe someday he would be able to add himself to that list.

Chapter 6

The next day, Peyton made a point of being early. He would do his work—make Tex proud of him and Bettina proud of him and him proud of himself without any need for punishment. He would get the good feelings from yesterday without any of those squirrely feelings that were a mix of pain and desire, of feeling cared for but also admonished.

And if he didn't give Tex any reason to punish him, then maybe Tex would reward him. With a little cock, for example. Or a big cock, as the case might be. He had a feeling Tex carried a big one. The swagger gave him away. And Peyton remembered it being jammed up against his side while he'd been writhing over Tex's lap. That had been Tex's cock, hadn't it? Unless it'd just been his belt buckle. Tex did wear an oversized buckle, one made of brightly polished silver which was undoubtedly hard. But the dimensions didn't match up and Peyton knew a cock when he felt one.

So Tex was into him, and he was into Tex, and the two of them could spend the evening rolling around on the wide canopied bed in Peyton's room once they'd made it through whatever awful chore Tex had in store for him.

His resolve lasted less than fifteen minutes.

"I don't think so."

Horse manure was bad enough. He wasn't going anywhere near pig shit.

"Same deal as yesterday," Tex said. "Dirty straw out, clean straw in. It's a smaller area."

"But smellier. Also, there are pigs in there."

"They won't hurt you."

Peyton wasn't buying it. That mama pig was as tall as he was and quite a bit rounder.

"No."

Tex lifted his hat to scratch the top of his head, then resettled it more firmly. “I thought we’d made some progress yesterday, Peyton. You’re here to toughen your hide. And if you won’t do it yourself with hard work, then I’ll have to do it for you. Now, which would you rather?”

Peyton considered. “A blowjob,” he countered.

Tex goggled at him. “Was that an attempt at a bribe?”

“More like an offer. I blow you—and I’m good at it, I promise.” That was one skill he’d put some effort into learning. “—and we forget all this dirty business with the pigs and the punishment. You and I could have some fun over the next two weeks. What do you say, cowboy?”

Tex smiled at him, a full smile that warmed Peyton from head to toe with special emphasis on the area in the middle.

“Oh, we’re going to have some fun, all right. Leastwise, I am. Let’s go on up to your room.”

“Really?” He hadn’t expected that to work. “Yeah, okay. Let’s go.”

He practically dragged Tex to the guest house and up the stairs to his room. Wait until he told Ambrose he’d seduced his way out of this stinking program. He could inspire Ambrose to try it with his own trainer, who he’d mentioned was also damn cute. It could be blowjobs all the way around.

He opened the door to his room and gallantly allowed Tex to proceed him, then shut the door and leaned up against it. Tex went straight to the bed where he made a pretty picture sitting on it. His jeans might be a bit dusty for the yellow and white quilt, but Peyton wasn’t the one doing the laundry.

“Now that we’re alone, you can have your wicked way with me,” he purred as he sauntered over. “Your options aren’t limited to blowjobs, FYI.”

“Good, because I wasn’t planning on a blowjob.”

“Ooo,” Peyton hummed in approved. “What did you have in mind, cowboy?”

He dipped a finger into the V at the juncture of the undone snaps at the top of Tex's shirt. Yesterday, Tex had had his hands all over Peyton—well, mostly his ass—but Peyton hadn't had a chance to return the favor. He popped a few snaps, separating the fabric to reveal a delightfully furry chest. He wanted to get his face in there and rub it all over.

“Take off your pants and I'll show you,” Tex said.

“Going straight for the good stuff, huh? I do love a man who's resolute.” Unlike him. He presented Tex with his backside as he dropped his drawers, stepping first out of his jeans with a shimmy, then hooking his thumbs into the waistband of his jockstrap. “You want the jock on or off?”

“Doesn't look like it'll get in my way none.” Tex snapped one of the elastic straps framing Peyton's cheeks, making it twang painfully against skin still smarting from yesterday's beating.

Peyton gave an excited squeak. “Just tell me where you want me. I've got condoms and—”

His next squeak was more surprised than excited as he found himself unceremoniously draped across Tex's lap in much the same position he'd been in yesterday.

“Hey!”

“This is where I want you.”

The familiar flash of Tex's beefy palm had him howling right from the beginning. He tried to protest, but Tex wasn't having it.

“This is for refusing to do your work,” he announced as he laid down the law on Peyton's ass. “And this is for trying to bribe me with a blowjob,” he added some painfully loud minutes later. “I have a job to do, Peyton. I'm not a sex worker.”

“I didn't— Ow! Ow, ow, ow!” Peyton kicked his legs, trying to get his feet flat on the floor so he could push himself

up, but Tex had him tilted so far forward his head touched the ground and his feet didn't.

“The staff isn't allowed to fraternize with the clientele, but you just had to waggle your ass at me. Wearing a jockstrap on a ranch.” Tex slapped the top of one of Peyton's thighs, just below the elastic strap crossing it.

“Ow!” Peyton protested. Not an original thought, but that was fresh flesh Tex had just hit, and it somehow managed to sting even more than the already abused flesh, which had warmed up to the point he'd reached yesterday where the glow started to suffuse through his body.

“You deserve a spanking just for the jock,” Tex continued, applying his hand to the underside of Peyton's right ass cheek, almost like he was cupping it. “Trying to make me think about your ass when I have a job to do.”

Peyton turned his head to look up at Tex because, unless he was misreading that last comment, Tex had just suggested he found Peyton's ass attractive. But Tex raised his knee higher, causing Peyton to tip even farther forward so he couldn't see Tex's face, and went back to spanking the tops of his thighs.

“By God, Peyton, I'm going to make a man out of you if it's the last thing I do.”

Peyton's cock was currently making it pretty obvious that he was already a man, at least in a biological sense. The magic that somehow turned pain into pleasure was doing its work as the aching glow in his ass infused his cock and worked its way out through every limb. His skin felt electric—and not just where Tex was hitting it—and the harsh words falling down on him only ramped his desire higher.

Yes, he'd been a slacker again. Left to his own devices, he would fail every time. But Tex refused to leave him to his own devices. Tex cared enough to improve him. With his help, Peyton's lethargy and cowardice would burn to ashes, leaving him to rise like a phoenix.

He began to relish Tex's slaps to the fresher flesh of his upper thighs, which sparked brighter against the red throb of his arousal. He moaned as he humped Tex's lap, caught between wanting release and wanting this to never end. As long as he could feel Tex's palm against his cheeks, he had hope.

His mind flitted away to a warm, soft spot of utter abandon. Drool ran heedlessly from the corners of his mouth as he cradled his head in his arms, limp over Tex's lap, utterly content, utterly drained. He was crying, but so gently it was like a cleansing rain, and his cock throbbed like a heartbeat—no longer clamoring for release but content, like the rest of him, to be a hot, aching, formless need.

Tex wasn't hitting him anymore, he realized, though he had no idea when the spanking had stopped. Tex's motions were soothing now, like he was gentling a horse. He patted and stroked, cupped Peyton's ass with careful, healing hands.

"Back with me?" he asked, and Peyton nodded, though he couldn't say where he'd gone.

"You took that beautifully. You have your flaws, Peyton, but you... you make up for them. You're capable of so much. Do you understand that? Do you understand that I want you to be everything you can be?"

Peyton nodded again. He was far too tired to make real sense of Tex's words, but he understood the gist of them. He'd been forgiven. He would do better. Tex loved him.

In this sleepy, oddly satisfied state, he didn't question the word love. He could feel it too strongly. Tex wouldn't administer to him so thoroughly if he didn't care. Peyton struggled to get himself upright, wanting to kiss this beautiful man. But just like after the spanking in the barn, Tex only allowed so much.

"It's a job, Peyton," he said, sounding a little desperate as he held Peyton away from him.

Job. Not love. Not concern for his well-being or tender care administered with love. Only prescribed punishment, doled out according to the schedule.

This time, Peyton's tears weren't a release of pain. They were an *expression* of pain. He put a hand to his heart, staggering away from Tex to grope blindly for the jeans he'd discarded earlier.

"Peyton, wait." Tex jumped to his feet and chased after him, crashing into him and carrying them forward until Peyton was pressed against the wall. He struggled to get away from the crush of Tex plastered against his back.

"Stop, don't. You handled that punishment so well and just... don't, please. Don't... don't be mad at me."

Tex's last words were nearly a whisper. Peyton heard the pain in them, even as he felt Tex's erection separate his ass cheeks, the long weight of it lying perfectly along his crack.

"I want to," Tex whispered. "I want to so bad."

Peyton rotated in Tex's arms. He must look a mess. Red-faced, his skin blotchy from tears and marked by tracks of sweat and snot. Tex couldn't really want him. But when he gazed into Tex's eyes, he saw Tex did. The erection Tex was sporting was for *him*, just like the punishment had been for him. And he needed to give something back, even if Tex wasn't sure about taking it.

He sank to his knees, trailing his hands down Tex's denim-covered thighs until he came face to face with that beautiful bulge. He rubbed his cheek over it, relishing the soft abrasion of stone-washed denim and the hardness of the cock distending it. He swore he could smell Tex's groin, the manly aroma of pre-come mixed with musk.

As he undid the top button on Tex's jeans, he raised his eyes to check Tex's expression and found it impassive, as if Tex hadn't decided yet whether or not to allow what was about to happen. But he didn't say stop, so Peyton continued, easing

each button slowly and reverently from its slot, separating the denim to reveal the bright red of Tex's underwear.

Now the heat of Tex's cock was unmistakable, and the aroma was even stronger. Peyton nuzzled against cotton as red as his ass, huffing in the scent he'd come for. Briefly, he closed his eyes. Savoring for just a second. Anticipating. His ass was hot on his heels, and all the warmth that had already passed between them urged him on, but he took his time as he eased Tex's shorts under his balls to free his cock.

God, that was a nice cock. As big as he'd expected and so perfectly formed with a drop of pre-come at the tip and a slight stickiness to the head that told him this wasn't the first drop to have spilled. He licked over and around the head, sliding his tongue under the ridge of foreskin that hadn't fully retracted, savoring the muskier taste beneath it.

Tex's hands were fisted at his sides, which wasn't where Peyton wanted them, so he guided one into his hair. Tex got the memo fast, grasping two tight bunches of hair and using them to steer Peyton's mouth lower.

The bunched-up fabric of Tex's jeans cradled his balls, presenting them to Peyton's tongue like plump pearls. He sucked one into his mouth, moaning around it. He'd always enjoyed sucking cock, but there was a new dimension to it today. Tex had just spanked him, humiliated him. Hurt him and fixed him. And he was grateful and horny and absolutely smitten.

He'd never been smitten before. A relationship took too much commitment, required too much risk. But Tex was showing him how to be better, so he would start here.

"I love your cock," he said, not brave enough yet to stay I love *you*.

"Then show me." Tex pushed Peyton's face into his ball sack so tightly he couldn't breathe anything except man.

He opened his mouth and rose higher on his knees so he could swallow Tex more fully, wrapping Tex's cock up with

his tongue and lips, easing it all the way down his throat. He gave Tex the full treatment, showing him what a dedicated, hard-working Peyton could do.

Soon he had Tex moaning the way *he'd* been moaning while Tex was spanking him. Tex's knees buckled, that was how good a cocksucker he was. So he spun the two of them around until Tex's back was against the wall, giving Tex support, and sucked even harder, hollowing out his cheeks and working his tongue, using his hands to massage Tex's balls and echoing Tex's moans with his own.

Tex came with a shuddering groan, holding Peyton down on his cock until Peyton drank him dry. Then he sagged back against the wall. His eyes were hooded but not entirely closed. He looked down at Peyton with satisfied reverence, his thumb stroking idly over Peyton's cheekbone. Their eye contact was so intense, Peyton only needed to shove his hand into his jock to trigger his own orgasm. Come shot up over the shiny fabric and landed between Tex's feet.

"Shit," Tex said with a laugh. "That was not at all supposed to happen."

"I won't tell anyone."

Not the doctor. Not even Ambrose. It would be their secret because the two of them had something that went beyond The Bars and Stars. *Tex is it for me*, Peyton told himself. He was going to make this work.

Chapter 7

Peyton was an entirely different person. Bettina wouldn't recognize him. Sure, he had grumbled when Tex had hauled him up off his knees and escorted him back to the pig sty, but he'd done what had to be done. And he'd been doing it for more than a week now. Two thirds of his time at the ranch had gone by, and though he couldn't say he enjoyed the life of a ranch hand, he enjoying spending time at Tex's side, the two of them doing whatever chore needed to be done.

He could feel the muscles popping up in his forearms and back, and he'd developed a certain competency with the pitchfork. When Tex steered him toward a chore he'd never done before, he sucked in a deep breath and told himself not to panic, that he would be able to do it and that though he might be exhausted and achy by the end of the day, his soul would feel more good than his body did bad.

At lunch time, the two of them sat next to each other on fence rails or bales of hay with Tex teaching him how to tie knots or telling him about his years on the rodeo circuit, which was what he'd done before coming to The Bars and Stars. Peyton wished he could watch Tex break a bronc, especially if the bronc was him. But though he hinted at it, even outright suggested it, their physical relationship hadn't progressed beyond that day in his bedroom when he'd taken Tex's load after taking Tex's hand.

Tex often gave him a strong clap on the shoulder or a brisk swat on the ass. And he allowed Peyton to hug him at the end of every day, their sweaty, sore bodies making full contact as Peyton thanked him once again for not giving up on him. But there'd been no fucking, no blowjobs, not even any more spankings. He'd been too good to get spanked. And frankly he was sick of it.

He was only here for a few more days. On the plus side, he was going to make it. This program would be the first thing he'd finished since he'd sleepwalked his way through the easy

classes in college. But he worried all the gains he'd made would disappear once Tex and the threat of punishment were gone. He wanted to hang on to these feelings of accomplishment and success and, more than that, he wanted to hang on to Tex.

The morning he'd gone down on Tex in his bedroom, their connection had been as strong as the throb in his ass, and though the throb in his ass had faded, the connection was still there, warm between them. It was in every approving glance, in every word of praise, in the glow in Tex's eyes even when the rest of his expression settled into sterner lines.

But Tex wasn't fucking him, wasn't spanking him, and hadn't said a single word about what came next. Peyton couldn't live here at the ranch. He was at best a mediocre ranch hand and anyway this wasn't a true working ranch. And if they stayed here, Tex would be training other men, which probably meant spanking them. Peyton didn't care for the sound of that.

No, Tex would have to leave with him. They would build a new life, one in which Peyton would strive and succeed. But how was that going to happen? Dreaming had never been his problem. Making his dreams come true was.

As the days ticked away, he got more and more anxious. He yearned to nail down their future. He yearned to touch Tex sexually. He yearned for another spanking—for that fabulous, floaty feeling of letting go completely to emerge whole and new again. Working hard day after day next to the man he both lusted after and adored was incredible. But if he never did anything worth being punished for, then he never got to float.

Which was why he plopped himself down in the middle of the field where they were mending fences and refused to get up again.

"I need a nap." He rolled onto his stomach, presenting his ass for the spanking he hoped to entice.

"You're not five," Tex said, unimpressed and unmoved.

Peyton wiggled his hips against the ground, already firming up at the thought of what would come next. Then he realized that for what he truly wanted—which was Tex’s cock spearing between his red-stained ass cheeks—they were going to need lube and a condom. Which meant they couldn’t do this in a field.

“Think I’ll go on up to my room,” he said with an exaggerated yawn.

He jumped to his feet, not bothering to hide the bulge in his pants, and strolled casually toward the guest house. For a moment, it seemed like Tex might not follow him, but then Tex’s hard body crashed into his and Tex’s fists knotted in the hair at the back of his neck.

“You’re going to pay for this attitude.”

Peyton swallowed a moan as he shook his head, trying to free himself from Tex’s grip and loving the tug against his scalp as Tex refused to let go.

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“Oh, but that’s exactly what I am,” Tex hissed into his ear. “A fact you seem to have forgotten. For the next four days, I own this ass.”

Peyton tried to ignore the part about it only being for the next four days. Once Tex dipped his dick in Peyton’s ass, he would stop being so coy about their future. This couldn’t end here, not when Peyton could finally see his life as more than a series of pointless days. He would be firm and strong, like Tex. He would be determined, like Tex. Make plans and follow through on them, one plodding step at a time, no matter the effort involved. He would exercise the muscles Tex had helped him build, both physical and mental. But he needed Tex. No way he could do it alone.

As soon as they got inside his bedroom, Tex backed him up against the wall. Tex’s face was pure stone, and Peyton adored it. That face meant he would get everything he had coming to him. But first, he needed this—

He surged forward to capture Tex's mouth in their first kiss. Tex responded as if he'd needed a kiss as much as Peyton, cupping the back of his head and holding him still to plunder his mouth. Peyton sagged against him in relief, opening for him, allowing him in. Their groins ground together, hard cock to hard cock, as Peyton fumbled for Tex's fly, forgetting about spankings in the heat of the moment.

Fuck, Tex was hard. They'd wasted so many days not doing this. Peyton started to drop to his knees, eager to taste, but Tex kept him upright, pinning him against the wall with an irresistible hand to the center of his chest.

"This isn't sex."

Tex could call it whatever he wanted. Peyton was ready to get to it.

"You're here for improvement, for discipline. This is a program. I'm a trainer."

"Then stop talking and start training."

"Fucker."

"You think this is funny?"

Peyton thought it was glorious. He had one hand on Tex's cock, one hand on his own, and a grin as wide as Texas.

Tex shook him free. "Shuck your clothes. All of them."

Peyton jumped to comply. The more naked the better, as far as he was concerned. He'd worn a jock today, had worn one every day since that last blowjob, just in case, but he wriggled out of it too, letting his hard cock swing in front of him as a testament to how much he hungered for Tex's hands.

Tex, meanwhile, was starting to disrobe himself, which was a new and exciting development. They would fuck. Of course they would. Why else would Tex be pulling the belt free from his pants unless...?

Uh oh.

"You're, uh, not going to hit me with that, are you?"

Tex hadn't continued to strip, which was a disappointment in itself. His shirt and jeans were unbuttoned, courtesy of Peyton's eager hands, but they were still on and covered too much flesh. He folded his belt in half and smacked the double strip of leather against his palm.

"You don't think you deserve it? Lying down on the job, sassing me. *Kissing* me. I didn't give you permission to kiss me."

Tex had been kissing back, but Peyton decided not to point that out. He was in enough trouble as it was. He'd survived Tex's hand on more than one occasion, but a belt?

His hesitancy must have shown on his face because Tex came over to him, the belt still ominously swinging from his fist but with a softer expression on his face.

"I'll never give you more than you can handle, Peyton. I'm here to help you succeed, not make you fail. But someone got a little cocky and needs to be taught a lesson. You disrespected me on purpose. That doesn't earn you a reward, little cowboy."

"I don't know how to earn a reward," Peyton said petulantly. He'd been good for more than a week and gotten nothing for it. Well, he'd gotten Tex's approval and his own self-respect, but no sex or spankings.

"I'm going to show you how to earn a reward. Bend over." Tex spun him to face the dresser and pressed him down over it.

Full of trepidation, Peyton did as ordered. He couldn't imagine how vicious the bite of leather would be, but he did trust Tex not to give him more than he could handle and to guide him through handling it. So he pushed his ass back and braced for the whap of a belt.

What he got was Tex's hand—the broad, firm flesh with which he was already so well acquainted. And it hurt. He'd been remembering how spankings ended—the all-body glow

and the freeing release of tears. He'd forgotten how they started, which was with a smack and a sting and rising pain.

He opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again without uttering more than an involuntarily "oof" as the next blow landed. He'd asked for this spanking, so he wouldn't complain about it. He could push beyond the pain to that place of pleasure. Wasn't that what Tex had been teaching him all along? Effort led to satisfaction and peace. Happiness lay on the other side of fear, the side he'd never walked far enough to reach before.

So he clenched his fists, relaxed his ass, and took it. His face grew as red as his ass must be and his cock wilted. Tears stung the corners of his eyes, then dripped one at a time to the dresser. The sound of flesh meeting flesh filled the room, overpowering his stifled groans. He was beginning to think he wouldn't get there this time, that this punishment would be nothing except pain, when the glow started to spread. Tex had moved from the globes of his ass to the tops of his thighs, where the blows stung with extra viciousness, but the smacks sparked a new fire now.

He rocked his ass in time with Tex's swings, meeting each one as he searched out the euphoric high that could only be found at the juncture of pleasure and pain. His cock stiffened until it was fully hard and then beyond fully hard. It banged against the dresser with the impact of Tex's blows, leaving a smeary mess on the wood as he tried to fuck it.

He was like a rutting animal, being fucked by Tex's hand rather than Tex's cock. It pounded pleasure into him and through him. Pleasure came out of his mouth in the form of babbling words and out of his cock in the form of pre-come.

Tex paused, steadying him with a hand against his back as Peyton sobbed from need now rather than pain.

"I still owe you this."

The next wallop slashed across Peyton's ass like a brand, sharp and searing. The belt. Peyton imagined the stripe of hot

white it must have left behind, blazing in a line from cheek to cheek, even as Tex laid down another. He was screaming now, unsure where he was along the pain/pleasure spectrum.

Here. He was right here. So immediate and alive, so present. Tex was giving him the punishment he'd asked for, and it was awful and wonderful and exactly right. The last few blows cracked across the tops of his thighs, and then he was done for. He sagged, nearly fainting, into Tex's strong arms, which guided them both down to the floor.

"I love you," he said as he reached for the kisses he always needed after a spanking. "I love you, I love you. Thank you."

Tex didn't say anything, but he allowed Peyton to kiss him, even returned the kisses as Peyton pressed forward for more. He toppled Tex over and crawled on top of him. Tex's hands cupped his burning ass as he kissed and rutted and begged Tex to fuck him.

"Your ass is so hot," Tex whispered. "It would be so hot, to slide in there..."

Yes, yes. Need, need. He climbed to shaky feet, pulled open the drawer containing the condoms and lube, and bent over the dresser once more. His legs could barely hold him, but he trusted Tex not to let him fall.

Tex came to stand behind him. "Peyton."

"Please."

"Peyton. Come to bed, Peyton." Tex guided him to the bed. Did that mean Tex wasn't going to fuck him after all?

"Please," he begged, turning to meet Tex's gaze as Tex nudged him up onto the mattress.

"Just like that for me," Tex said, arranging him onto his knees in the center. "Just like that. Your ass is so beautiful. Never seen a prettier one." He bent down to kiss one cheek, then the other, before slipping away to collect the supplies.

Peyton pillowed his head in his arms and breathed out a sigh of relief. Then Tex's fingers were at his hole, and his breathing grew heavier. The rough scrape of Tex's work-hard skin reminded him of how the doctor had checked his hole after that first spanking. Could Tex really spank him there—between his cheeks? Suddenly he wanted it as much as he wanted Tex's cock between his cheeks. He tried to say so but Tex shushed him.

“Another time, little cowboy. You're fearless now, aren't you?”

He *felt* fearless. Tex was promising him another time. Everything clicked into place as perfectly as Tex's cock slid into his ass. He arched his back, moaning as the hard length filled him. His prostate sparked to life immediately, as if it'd been pre-warmed by that spanking. He was shameless under Tex's pounding, jerking his hips in the age-old motion of sex, milking Tex's cock, enjoying the rasp of the sheet against his own. His mouth leaked a litany of 'fuck me' and 'love you,' the two conjoined into a single sense of well-deserved bliss.

He'd earned this. He'd taken the spanking, taken even the belt, and now he took Tex's cock until Tex buried it deep inside him and came. Peyton was moaning and sobbing, fully feral, as Tex worked his cock with his hand. A few short jerks and he was coming too, his insides exploding outward like a gush of lava, as if far more than his balls had been emptied, leaving him both hollow and full.

Chapter 8

Peyton wasn't surprised when Tex gave him hardly five minutes of afterglow before telling him they had to get back to the field. Tex's lessons were always two-part. If you balked at doing your task the first time, you regretted having balked, but you still had to do it. Though in this case, Peyton couldn't say he regretted balking. He was going to have to be bad on purpose as a habit. But his ass ached and he had a major case of the sleepies as Tex hauled him to his feet and told him to get dressed.

"Can we come back after?" Peyton asked as he slowly reassembled himself into a makeshift cowboy.

"After what? You're not planning to misbehave again today, are you? I'm not sure how much more your ass can take."

"After we finish the fences. I'd still like to take that nap." He came up behind Tex and snuggled against his back to plant a kiss on his neck.

Tex moved away, sort of like he was fetching his boots was also sort of like he was avoiding Peyton's embrace.

"You can nap when we're done if you want. I'm working."

Peyton frowned. He hated those reminders that watching over him was Tex's job, not just a thing he did for love. "Okay, but I'm your client, so napping with me would be working."

"Sounds like fun, but I've got another client scheduled for later." Tex flexed his right hand. "Let's hope he doesn't need any punishment. I have a feeling it'd go worse for me than for him."

Tex smiled, but Peyton couldn't smile back.

"Another client *today*? I'm not the only one you're working with?"

“Of course not. Didn’t you ever wonder why I always let you leave by two? We don’t figure a tenderfoot can handle a whole day working on the range, so we do two shifts. Gives you a chance to see the doctor, talk to the other clients, take a nap even.”

Peyton crossed his arms over his chest. “You’re going to go see another man after you’re done with me?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“And you’re going to spank him?”

“If he needs it. I’m hoping he doesn’t.”

Peyton scowled to let Tex know he was entirely done with the attempts at humor. “And do you plan on fucking him?”

“Now, Peyton.” Tex put an arm around his shoulders, but Peyton shrugged it off.

“Don’t ‘now, Peyton’ me. Answer the question.”

“No, I’m not going to fuck him. I’m not supposed to be fucking the clients. You know I didn’t want to do this.”

“Oh, now you didn’t want to do it. Because you seemed pretty into it at the time. That was your cock in my ass, right? The stuff that ended up in the condom was come, not tears.”

“I’m not saying I didn’t enjoy it. Just that it was... regrettable.”

“Regrettable.” He would cry later, but for now he concentrated on being mad. “So I meant nothing to you. I’m a client. A job.”

“I tried to tell you—”

Peyton held up a hand to shut him up. Yes, Tex had tried to tell him. But he hadn’t wanted to believe it. He’d been going through a process of rebirth, and he’d fooled himself into thinking Tex actually gave a damn. But it turned out that for all Tex cared, Peyton could have been Ambrose with his eating problem or that guy from the club who’d wanted to quit smoking. All those wink-wink allusions the guy in the club

had made about not enjoying the process—he'd meant he'd gotten spanked. Everyone here was getting spanked. That was what made Ambrose fidgety at meals, was why doctor's appointments were standard practice. The clients got spanked, the trainers did the spanking, and he and Tex were nothing special to each other.

“Just go.”

He sat on the edge of his bed where the sheets were all bunched up from the epic fucking that had just gone down. Already he could feel his anger morphing into hurt. His lower lip trembled as he tried to hold it together until Tex got the hell out. But Tex didn't get out. He came and sat down next to him.

“I don't know what to say here.”

“Then go away like I told you to.”

Still, Tex didn't go.

“This is why I regret what happened between us. Not because I didn't like it. I liked it a lot.” Tex looked at his hands, which he had cupped in his lap. The right one was red, calluses starkly white against the chafed skin. “You're not just another client to me, Peyton. I want so badly for you to succeed, and the time we've spent together has been enjoyable. Really, really enjoyable. Even when you're being a brat.”

“So I'm not just a client?”

“No, you're not just a client. But you *are* a client. What we've had together, I hope it'll stick with you for the rest of your life in terms of changing how you approach challenges, but you'll be leaving in four days.”

“Come with me!” If that was all Tex was worried about, Peyton had already overcome that obstacle, at least in his head. “I make good money, and now that I'm going to have ambition and a work ethic, I'll make even better money. I'm not saying you'd be a kept man, but you'd have time to find a new job.”

Tex shook his head. “This is my job.”

“Spanking men?”

“Coaching men. Making them better people.”

“By spanking them.” And probably fucking them. Could he really believe Tex didn’t do this on the regular? No. He’d been naïve, and Tex’s attempt to comfort him was cold comfort, meaning nothing.

“I like my job, Peyton. I don’t know who I’d be without it. I can’t just leave here because you and I fucked around a little, even if I do think you’re cute and fun and have a great ass.”

Cute and fun with a great ass. That was him—just a pleasant little dalliance. He’d learned something about commitment over the last week and a half, but he’d been learning it alone.

“Get out of my room.”

Tex hesitated for a moment, then got to his feet. “Let’s get to that fence.”

“Fuck off with your fence. And don’t think you’re going to punish me for bailing on it. You’re never touching this ass again.”

He glared at Tex until Tex understood that all the determination he’d developed during his time at The Bars and Stars was being applied to saying no. His time here was over. He was going home.

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As he waited outside the gate to The Bars and Stars for the Lyft he’d summoned, he wished he hadn’t brought quite so much luggage. He’d barely used any of it. The jocks had turned out to be useful, but the dance clothes, the bathing suits, even his skin care supplies. None of it had so much as been unpacked. What he’d actually worn—t-shirts and the same pair of practical jeans, all of which was absolutely filthy now—could have fit in a single bag.

Well, at least the suitcase made a convenient place to sit. When you were half an hour from the nearest town, and the nearest town was a combination gas station/convenience store plus the shuttered remains of a Blockbuster, it took a while for a car service to show up, giving him plenty of time to ruminate over that scene with Tex.

He'd been such a dupe. A dreamer, like always, and, as usual, his dreams had amounted to nothing. Sure, he'd built some muscle, but he hadn't built a life. You didn't become a whole new person because you spent two weeks on a dude ranch playing at being a cowboy. And no one except an impractical loser fell in love with someone he was paying.

He regretted the money he'd spent on this place. Regretted the time too. He could have gone to San Marco, fucked a half dozen different guys. Laid in the sun and drunk fruity cocktails served by fruity waiters. Then he would be going back to work rested and tan instead of beat up and worn down. His muscles ached, his ass ached, and his heart ached. He just wanted to go home and forget the whole thing.

Finally, the picture of a car on his phone became an actual car in front of him. He heaved his bags into the trunk, vaguely noticing how much easier they were to manage today than they'd been the day he arrived. Being strong would feel good if he weren't still so weak where it counted.

"The airport?" the driver confirmed as they pulled away from the gate.

Peyton nodded, then immediately got out his phone so the driver wouldn't think they were going to talk all the way to the airport. He spent the drive maneuvering through the ticketing system until he managed to secure a standby seat on the last flight out of Dallas, then called Bettina. Might as well admit now how bad an idea this had been, save him from having to do it when he got back.

"Peyton, my God. I was about to send out a posse. You haven't so much as texted in a week."

“Been busy.”

“Roping horses and riding broncos?”

“Something like that. I’m on my way home now though.”

“You are?” Bettina paused for a moment like she was checking something, then said, “I don’t have you on my calendar until Saturday.”

“Yeah, well.”

He suddenly didn’t know if he could tell her. He always told her everything. She knew exactly how useless he was, how much of a quitter, how entirely hopeless. She knew his track record with men too. Easy come, easy go. If a guy got demanding, he cut them free. And he never demanded anything in return because what would be the point? Even if he asked, he wouldn’t get it. Bettina wouldn’t be surprised he’d had a fling or that the fling had ended or even that the fling had been inadvisable. She certainly wouldn’t be surprised he’d bailed early.

“Just tell me what time you land,” she said without waiting for him to explain.

He could imagine her planner open in front of her, how neatly printed all the appointments would be, everything square and managed down to fifteen-minute intervals. He imagined her running a tidy line through the entry she’d made for picking him up on Saturday. But no, she wouldn’t have to strike it out. She would simply erase it. She would have known better than to use pen on anything involving him.

“Peyton?” she asked, and he saw her pencil hovering, ready to write down his new arrival information. She would be outside the terminal, ready to rescue him, as always. She had never expected otherwise. And had he? Had he *really*?

He gave her his flight details, just to get her off the phone. Tears threatened as he contemplated the futility of life stretching out in front of him. Back home, he would be himself again. Chores would go unfinished, ambitions unrealized. And he would never again know the white-hot pleasure of being

punished for failing himself because failing himself would be par for the course.

Failing himself. Failing himself.

He tapped his fingers on his knee as the words ticked through his mind. That was what he'd doing all these years, wasn't it? Not failing his parents or Bettina or Tex. Failing *himself*. Bettina let him get away with it, like his parents had, like his boss did. Tex hadn't let him get away with it, but either way, it came down to the same thing. The person he'd been failing was first and foremost himself.

He'd enjoyed being punished, having the regret burned out of him. But equally as much he'd enjoyed the days he hadn't needed punishment, when he'd been doing what he was supposed to do and doing it well. Working next to Tex, pulling his own weight, seeing the job done—all of that had been as good as the spankings. And all of that had been the real point, which was what Tex had been trying to teach him, what he'd gone to The Bars and Stars to learn.

He could do it. He had mettle, determination, spirit, and though his efforts might not always meet with success, he felt better for having tried and owning up to where he'd fallen short. Giving up was easy but the hangover sucked. Working was hard, but you sure slept well after.

“Hey, can you turn around?”

“What?” The driver glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

“I want to go back. To the ranch, not the airport.”

“We're like half an hour from the airport,” the driver said in bewilderment. “Do you know how much it's going to cost you to turn around?”

“I don't care. There's something back there I've got to finish.”

The driver pulled off at the next exit and parked in the lot for a fast-food restaurant. They were back in civilization now

—the buildings dense with nothing except concrete and asphalt in every direction.

“I don’t even know how to do this,” the driver said. So the two of them puzzled over the app until they figured out how to stop the current ride and start a new one. Back to The Bars and Stars. Back to the work he’d left undone.

## Chapter 9

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At least he hadn't formally checked out of his room. In his typical slink-away-in-the-dark manner, he'd packed his bags and left without dotting all the i's. But that meant he had a place to go when he finished mending the fences a painstaking six hours later.

The sun was setting as he twisted together the last strands of wire on the far side of the ranch's property. If he'd been with Tex, they would have had horses, and the ride home would have been filled with conversation and laughter and appreciation for the purpling scenery around them. Instead, he trudged back across the field alone and on foot, his boots dragging through the long grass.

He arrived at the dining hall to find empty tables and a single waiter sweeping out the corners of the room. The waiter kindly rustled him up a hunk of cheese and a loaf of bread, which he was tempted to gnaw on as he walked from dining hall to guest house. Off to his right, voices sang. Tuesdays were bonfire days, complete with hokey songs and s'mores, but he didn't have the energy to camp it up tonight. He wanted a bath, a meal, and a bed. He didn't even care in which order.

When he'd asked his Lyft driver to turn around, he'd had two goals. First, to finish the task he'd been assigned, which he'd done. And second, to hunt down Tex and talk him into giving the two of them a try. If he couldn't change Tex's mind, then he would manage without Tex. Somehow. But he was going to finish his time at the ranch, and he wasn't giving up on Tex without a fight.

Tex might reject him—probably would, given that he already had—but Peyton figured he could make a pretty compelling argument. Aside from the issue of living on opposite sides of the country, the two of them were perfect for each other. Tex was a top, he was a bottom. They were physically attracted to each other, and the sex was through-the-roof hot. They made a good team. Tex liked to give orders and

Peyton didn't mind taking them. Tex had good outdoor skills and Peyton knew his way around a city. But most importantly, Peyton needed discipline and Tex liked to hand it out.

It was silly to let the fact that they'd started as trainer and client get in the way of the relationship they'd been developing, which Peyton was pretty sure had actually been a relationship, despite Tex's denial. Maybe Tex got afraid sometimes too. So Peyton was going to give him a talking-to, tell Tex they owed it to themselves to try, which was a lesson he'd learned from none other than Tex himself.

But he would have to do all that tomorrow. The flight of stairs up to his room had never seemed so steep or the hallway so endlessly long. By the time he inserted his key into the lock, he almost didn't have enough strength left to turn it.

"Peyton!"

He let out a shriek at the unexpected greeting. Bread and cheese went flying as he raised his arms to fend off the surprise intruder.

"Whoa, there," Tex said, holding up his own hands in response. "I know you're mad at me, but I didn't expect you to throw bread at me."

"What are you even doing here?" Peyton rescued the wrapped baguette from the floor, then pointed it at Tex in mock threat. "How did you get in my room?"

"I knocked, but you didn't answer. I thought you were in here ignoring me so I convinced the front desk to let me have the spare key."

"If I was ignoring you, you should have stayed ignored."

"I s'pose." Tex shuffled his feet shyly. "But I wanted to talk to you, and I was afraid you'd leave before I had the chance."

"I *did* leave." He walked wearily to the bed so he could take off his boots. "But I came back."

“Then where’ve you been?” Tex asked as he helped Peyton strip off his boots, which Peyton appreciated. He could barely sit up straight. “I’ve been waiting here for hours.”

“Yeah, well, it was a long job.”

“What was?” Tex stacked the boots tidily next to each other.

“Mending that fence. That was my chore for the day, right? Mend the fence. Well, I did it.”

“By yourself?” Tex whistled. “That’s a lot of fence.”

“You’re telling me.” He’d been too tired to bother feeling proud, but the feeling suffused him now as Tex stood over him, looking down at him with admiration. “I didn’t even take a dinner break,” he said, bragging a little.

“Is that what this is?” Tex picked up the baguette. “You get in the shower. I’ll be back with some real grub.” He opened the door, started to walk through it, then changed his mind and came back for the key. “So you can’t keep me out. I’m going to take care of you, but then we’re going to talk.”

Only Tex’s imminent return and the promise of food gave Peyton the strength to get up and into the shower where the hot water went a long way toward reviving him. By the time he came out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel, Tex had returned with a complete picnic lunch, hamper and all.

“The chicken’s cold,” Tex said as he unpacked the hamper onto the little round table in the corner of the room, “but fried chicken is best cold, if you ask me. And I’ve got cole slaw, potato salad. Even pie for dessert.”

Peyton tucked in without bothering to get dressed first. He didn’t have anything Tex hadn’t seen, and from the way Tex was looking at him, Tex was hungrier for him than he was for chicken.

“I can’t believe you went back to the field.”

“Why not? It’s what you taught me. Finish the job. Keep going even when it’s hard. It might hurt, but it’s worth it in the

end.”

His fingers were raw from handling barbed wire all afternoon and his ass throbbed from the whipping Tex had laid down on him earlier, but he felt pretty good. The fact that Tex had been in his room waiting for him suggested the effort he'd made in returning to the ranch would be rewarded with more than just a boost to his self-esteem.

“What were you doing in my room, Tex? Besides breaking and entering.”

“Told you I wanted to talk to you.”

“Uh huh.” He didn't intend to make this easy on Tex. Tex had never made anything easy on him. “About the fence?”

“No, not about the fence, you shithead. About us.”

“So there's an us now? I'm not just your client?”

“You know you mean more to me than that. I'm not looking to lose you, but I don't know how to walk away from the ranch either.”

“Told you I can take care of us both for a bit. You're not too proud for that, are you? If we're going to be partners, I want to be equal partners. You've given me hope I can make something of myself in the future. Can't I give something back?”

“It ain't that.”

“Too much city for you?” He had to admit it was hard to imagine Tex at a desk job, but there were other options. “Listen, it's not ranching, but we do have farms back east. I live in an apartment in the city, but we could change that. Buy a house out in a rural area, maybe even start a farm of our own. I don't mind commuting.”

“That sounds like it'd work all right. Thank you.”

Peyton served himself a piece of the pie Tex had brought. Cherry.

Tex was sitting at the table with him, not eating anything, just toying with the lid of the Tupperware container the chicken had been packed in. He'd agreed with Peyton's plan about the house and the farm, but Peyton could see that whatever the underlying issue was, it hadn't been resolved.

Maybe Tex wanted an open relationship. Peyton had never been in one that *wasn't* open. That would have required more commitment than he'd ever been capable of, but he wanted that level of commitment now. Him and Tex, partners all the way. They would raise chickens, keep a horse. If Peyton applied himself at work, there would be bonuses and raises, enough to support a whole barnyard full of animals. They could sell cured bacon, though Tex would have to do the slaughtering. Peyton could clean out a pig sty, but he hadn't worked himself up to killing anything yet.

Then he realized he was daydreaming, living in an imaginary future instead of doing the work that needed to be done in the present. He gave himself a mental shake, put down his fork, and said, "What's the real issue? It's not like you to pussy-foot around, so come out with it. Don't be afraid."

"I'm not afraid," Tex said with a scowl, but he was so focused on tinkering with the Tupperware lid that Peyton didn't believe him. Peyton took the lid away from him and replaced it with his hand.

"What?"

"I've done a lot of jobs in my life, and been with a lot of men, but it wasn't until I came here that I figured out how to meld the two halves of my whole. I don't want to lose that, but I don't want to lose you either."

"So be a personal trainer. Or a motivational speaker. I feel like you can inspire people to do better without applying your hand to their ass."

Tex scowled harder.

"Ooooh. That's what you like. Not the ranching, not the inspiring. The spanking."

Tex turned his face away, but Peyton took his chin in hand and turned it back. “The only way out is through, Tex. Bite the bullet.”

“Yes, damn you. I like the spanking. That crack of flesh against flesh and seeing the skin pink up, then turn red. It gets me so fucking hard.” He reached down to adjust himself, like even talking about it was having an effect.

Peyton let go of Tex’s chin and picked up his fork. Now that he understood what Tex’s issue was, he could go back to his pie. Because Tex’s issue wasn’t an issue at all. It was part of what made them so good together.

“See, that right there is why you gotta leave the ranch,” he said, pointing his fork at the bulge in Tex’s jeans. “I don’t like the idea of you getting your jollies whaling on other men’s asses. You’re going to have to limit yourself to my ass.”

Tex’s mouth dropped open. “I’m... limit, did you say?”

“Yes, limit. As in my ass is the only one you’ll be putting your hands on. But you *will* be putting your hands on it. And your cock in it,” he added, just so they were clear.

Tex waved off that last sentence. He would have expected their relationship to involve plenty of fucking, but it seemed he’d imagined the disciplinary part of their relationship would end when they left the ranch.

“Were you really going to come home with me, even if it meant giving up spankings?”

“I was going to try.” Tex swallowed. “You’re really going to let me spank you?”

“I’m going to beg you to spank me, cowboy. Any time I’m slacking, and maybe sometimes when I’m not. You’ve changed me, Tex, but this changed person needs you. I was going to try to keep up with the program without you, which is why I went to the field to finish what I’d started, but I honestly don’t know if I have it in me.”

“You do,” Tex insisted. “Give yourself some credit, Peyton. I’ve worked you harder than I ever worked another man. Both out there and down here.” He leaned forward to pinch Peyton’s ass where it met the chair. “You’ve taken everything I’ve given you, and I have no doubt you can do anything you set your mind to. But I won’t say no to providing a little extra motivation. Wish I could provide some right now.”

Tex squeezed his bulge. Peyton pretended to jab it with his fork.

“My ass can’t handle any extra motivation tonight. But I do have a mouth.” He forked the last bite of pie into it, chewed thoroughly, and then opened wide.

Tex threw back his head and laughed. “Life with you is going to be a wild ride, Peyton. Now shut your trap and come to bed. It’s my turn to do some sucking.”

As it turned out, they both did their share of sucking. And kissing and hugging and petting and cooing. Unleashed from his role of trainer, Tex had a surprisingly sweet side, one Peyton knew he was going to enjoy. But every time his ass scraped against the sheets, he remembered how much he enjoyed Tex’s less sweet side too.

The two of them were drifting off to sleep, wrapped around each other for the first time, when Peyton’s phone rang.

“Shit!”

“What?” Tex asked drowsily.

“Bettina. I never told her I wasn’t showing up tonight after all.”

He texted a long, humble mea culpa, promised Bettina to tell her the whole story tomorrow, then crawled back into bed.

“You were on the way to the airport?” Tex asked with horror in his voice. “I really almost lost you?”

“Luckily someone taught me not to quit.” He gifted his mentor with a lingering kiss. “I’m never going to quit you, Tex. And that’s a promise.”

## Epilogue

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“The dishes can wait until morning,” Peyton protested.

He and Tex had spent the entire day knocking off chores around the farm, then they’d cooked dinner together in their giant farmhouse kitchen and polished off every drop. Now he didn’t feel like being responsible. A full day of watching Tex’s ass as Tex stretched and turned and bent in those 501 jeans had his mind on other things.

“It’ll take fifteen minutes, and then it’ll be done.”

“You do it.” Peyton tilted his chair onto its back legs, like he was twelve. “I’ll wait here.”

“Put all four feet of that chair on the floor, Peyton Alexander Mahoney, and get your ass in the kitchen before I take a wooden spoon to it.”

Well, that was an offer he couldn’t refuse. He tipped back farther—dangerously far—feeling the precise moment when he’d gone too far and gravity took over. But Tex was there to keep him from hitting the floor, as always. Tex had him on his feet and smashed face first into the wall so fast he didn’t even see it coming. He made a sound somewhere between a yelp and a purr as Tex’s hard chest pressed against his back and his even harder cock humped against his ass.

“Are you gonna listen to me, or are looking to get your ass beat?”

Oh, he was looking to get his ass beat. He ground it back as he offered up some sassy backtalk like it was foreplay.

“All right then.” Tex manhandled him over to the table and gave him a rough push. “Drop those drawers and assume the position.”

Peyton reached for his fly as Tex left the room, passing through the swinging door into the kitchen. He came back with a wooden spoon, which Peyton should have expected. Tex

didn't make idle threats. If he said he was going to beat Peyton's ass with a wooden spoon, Peyton couldn't act surprised when a wooden spoon showed up. And, man, that was going to hurt like a sonuvabitch. Why was his mouth always writing checks his ass would have to cash?

"How come I'm not looking at a bare heinie?" Tex asked as he thwapped the spoon against his palm.

Peyton rushed to get his pants down, exposing the jock he'd slipped on after their post-chores shower. Tex took a moment to run his fingers under the straps, tracing all the way around them where they framed his cheeks.

"You've got the sweetest ass, little cowboy. Shame I've gotta fuck it up."

Peyton moaned, eager for it. His flesh was pure creamy beige right now, not a mark on it. The two of them had been working so hard they'd barely had time for fun. But tonight was going to be fun, and they deserved it.

Tex tapped the bowl of the spoon against his ass cheek, letting him know it was there. He would warm Peyton up by hand first. He always did, and it was the part they both liked best. So solid and warm and intimate, a feast of sensation. The smart slapping sound, the blooming heat, the rising color, which Peyton got to see when Tex spanked him in front of the bedroom mirror they'd positioned for exactly that purpose. He loved watching himself turn from beige to pink to red and then sometimes on to purple. Tonight was going to be a purple night for sure.

"Put that dick under the table," Tex ordered.

"What?" Peyton asked, all innocence.

He'd tried to position himself so his cock would be sandwiched between his body and the table to give it a little friction, but Tex made him tilt it down where it wouldn't have anything except a sharp edge to rub against. Tex knew from experience that if he got too much friction during a spanking he could come from that alone. Once he got into the floaty

headspace where every sensation felt like a good one, he could come from almost anything. But Tex, the heartless bastard, always made him wait until the post-spanking fuck.

“You deserve extra for trying to get away with that,” Tex said as he delivered the first wallop.

The first one was always a surprise, as if Peyton’s ass had forgotten it liked this, and he yelped when it landed. He would have argued the question of whether or not he deserved extra except that the entire concept of “extra” was a game. Tex spanked him until he couldn’t take anymore, until he was so far gone he would beg for what he couldn’t handle. How Tex knew exactly where that line was, he wasn’t sure, but he could trust Tex to find it. So he gritted his teeth, clenched his cheeks against the sting, and waited for pain to become pleasure.

Tex grunted with his swings, putting his whole arm into them once he’d gotten Peyton warmed up. He was tall and lean and hard and handsome and entirely Peyton’s, devoting himself to keeping Peyton in line with a thoroughness that could only be described as love.

As Peyton’s ass started to warm, becoming rosy red all over, the blows melded into a continuous flow of hot pleasure. He bucked, pushing back, moaning into his hands as he humped the sharp edge of the table. He was hard and dripping, caught in ecstasy, when Tex switched from hand to spoon.

“Ah!” He jumped about a mile at the sharp crack, which was so much more focused and unyielding than Tex’s palm.

“Hold your position,” Tex ordered, pressing him back down to the table with a rough hand. Tex swung the spoon again, and Peyton keened as the pain of it bloomed bright enough to dispel his pleasure haze. It was so vivid like this, so immediate. White-hot and searing, the spoon rat-a-tatted across his cheeks and then to the tops of his thighs.

He jerked against the table, legs twitching with the rhythm Tex set. Tap, tap, tap. Tex wasn’t putting the full strength of

his arm into it, but he didn't need to. Against the already burning flesh, every tap was an agony of pleasure.

“Separate your cheeks for me.”

“What?”

He was barely conscious. Words didn't make sense. But Tex guided his hands to his ass cheeks until he understood he was supposed to pull them apart.

Expecting the familiar slide of Tex's cock, he relaxed against the table, half-blissed out, half disappointed. He'd been heading toward something bigger, but could he really take more? Could he? He'd made a puddle of drool on the table and a puddle of pre-come on the floor. Maybe it was time to fuck.

But Tex didn't fuck him. Tex laid the spoon right between his cheeks, flicking it into his crack with the speed of a slingshot. He yowled, taken by surprise as newborn skin flared to life. His knees gave out on him, and he slid backward off the table to be caught in Tex's arms.

“Too much?” Tex asked. “Or can you take more for me?”

He thought about the pain. Then he thought about that higher feeling he'd been chasing. Then he looked into Tex's loving eyes and knew Tex wouldn't give him more than he could handle.

“I'm not quitting.”

Tex dipped his head to press their lips together, then positioned him back over the table. “Spread your cheeks, Peyton.”

He reached back with shaking hands and separated the burning cheeks of his ass to expose the tender flesh of his crack. The spoon flicked again and again, hitting first one side, then the other, then landing square in the middle, right on his hole. He cried into the tablecloth, soaking it with his tears until the space between his ass cheeks was as red-hot as the cheeks themselves, until he was nothing but fire. And then the fire

was gone and he was ash and he was still crying but what was between his cheeks was Tex's tongue rather than a spoon.

He writhed, begging for Tex's cock, desperately trying to get a hand on his own, until Tex relented and stood up. He unbuttoned his 501 jeans with one hand as he caressed Peyton's flanks with the other.

"You're beautiful like this, Peyton. Makes me feel like the luckiest man in the world."

They were both lucky men, but right at that moment Peyton was more about motion than words.

"Fuck me already, damn you."

Tex laughed and poked the head of his cock up against his hole. Tex's cock was damp with pre-come, and Peyton's hole had been pretty well lubed with spit, so Tex managed to work himself in there without too much wriggling.

"Your hole is so hot," he said as he slid slowly in and out. "It's gonna take me about thirty seconds to come, you've got me so worked up."

"Make *me* come, you asshole," Peyton grumbled, so Tex got going, really driving into him, every thrust a fresh assault.

"Touch me," he insisted, but he couldn't hold out long enough for Tex to do it, just started spurting onto the dining room floor. It felt like his guts were exploding out of his cock, he came so hard—everything spasming, including Tex in his ass.

"Told you," Tex mumbled as he clenched Peyton's hips.

The warmth of his release had Peyton spasming again. He loved feeling the hot rush of Tex's come fill him, especially after a spanking. He was warm inside and out, and limp from head to toe. His knees buckled again and Tex managed to get them both down to the floor without any injuries.

The two of them often ended up cuddled on the floor after one of their sessions, but Tex knew how to make the floor

comfortable. He cradled Peyton, rocking him and cooing to him as if he were bottle feeding a motherless calf.

Climax achieved, Peyton let himself float. He was weightless, bodiless, trusting entirely to Tex to keep him anchored.

“There’s my little cowboy,” Tex said when he finally stirred. “Knew you could take it.”

“Heartless bastard. I won’t be able to shit for a week without thinking about you.”

Tex threw back his head and laughed. “God, I love you, Peyton. Thanks for not giving up on me when I was being a mule-headed fool.”

“Thanks for not giving up on me when I was being a gutless wonder.”

“You’ve got more guts than most people, which I ought to know seeing as I’m intimately acquainted with them.”

Peyton groaned. “That’s awful.” He gave Tex a playful smack on the shoulder, but Tex caught his hand and kissed it, then kissed him.

“Ready for those dishes?”

“Oh, come on. You don’t really expect me to do the dishes after that.”

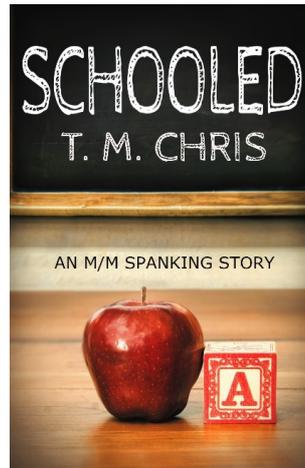
But of course Tex expected him to do the dishes. When had Tex ever let him get away with not finishing the job? Tonight was no exception, spoon or no spoon.

He climbed to his feet, then reached down to pull Tex to his. Together they walked into the kitchen, where a stack of Happily Ever After was waiting to be washed.

~~The End~~

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## Schooled

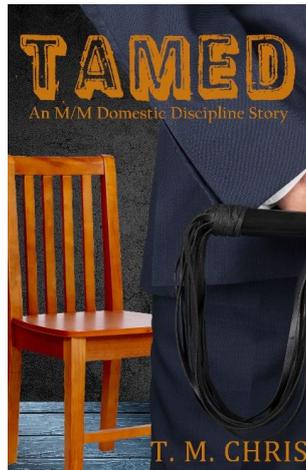


Yet another failed assignment has Kelvin desperate enough to do anything to pass his college psychiatry class—even participate in a study as strange as this one. Signing up for the study means extra credit, and his professor thinks it might help him get his life together too. But can corporal punishment really solve his executive dysfunction issues?

Grant is pretty good-looking for a man his age. Kelvin would be happy to consider dating him, but he's not sure about letting Grant discipline him. Does Grant really have a secret that will unlock Kelvin's success? And could that secret be contained in his long slim fingers and surprisingly strong hands? Kelvin trusts himself to the scientific process in an attempt to find out.

*This hot and heavy M/M spanking novella includes a happy ending.*

## Tamed



*Jake's too big for most Doms to handle, until Eduardo comes along to tame him.*

Jake is his own worst enemy, an ex-Marine struggling to meet everyday challenges now that he no longer has the externally imposed discipline of the service. He longs to submit, but needs a master who can make him do it, and he's developed a reputation for fighting back that has Doms giving him a wide berth.

Eduardo knows a bit about taming wild animals, and Jake definitely needs to be tamed. It'll take a loving hand and firm discipline to turn a rebellious brat set on destroying his life into a lover and partner.

*Tamed is an M/M domestic discipline novella*

## Owned

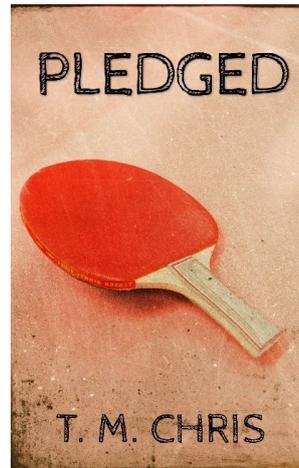


Liam should never have sassed his best friend Kurt's father that way, not when he knows how discipline is handled in the Santino household. Now Liam's got two problems: Mr. Santino's belt and Kurt's bare hand. Or rather, he's got one problem: the fact that all this old-fashioned discipline is making him hornier than hell.

Kurt's determined to make Liam stop perving on his dad. Liam just needs one more punishment. Can the two college students work out an arrangement that satisfies all their desires?

*This novella (approximately 15,000 words) features lots of spankings with various implements and a HEA ending.*

## Pledged



Yet another failed assignment has Kelvin desperate enough to do anything to pass his college psychiatry class—even participate in a study as strange as this one. Signing up for the study means extra credit, and his professor thinks it might help him get his life together too. But can corporal punishment really solve his executive dysfunction issues?

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*This hot and heavy M/M spanking novella includes a happy ending.*