

Chapter 5

“LOOKing UP at the world”



The last time he'd gotten out of this Texan-sized bed was a week ago. It was a better story than it deserved to be.

He'd memorized the intricacies of every crack in the ceiling and even counted all the lines and knots of the thick wooden beams. The cold hard floor had driven euphoria and reprieve into his red-hot spine like an army of miniature needles trying to locate the perfect place to take a stand, but without success, pulling out and starting all over again.

It'd been hours before they found him, and by then his body shook with spasm and tireless tension from repeatedly attempting to get up. Tears burned the white of his eyes as he fought the tsunami of frustration that came to the surface along with the feeling of helplessness.

He'd known better than to get on that horse and try to lasso a calf. His back had been a painful pest for years, but he thought it was under well under control. He had been dead wrong.

Ever since, he struggled every single day with the pain and the anger. You pretend not to have emotions, but you do.

“Hey, ya, Doc.”

The kid peeked around the frame of the doorway, afraid to enter the room. He couldn't blame him. The last time they'd spoken, he cursed the kid and blamed him for the whole predicament, accusing Gorilla of forcing him onto the horse. Honestly, though, it was no one else's fault. It was his fault; he'd gotten on the damn horse and knew better.

“It's okay, kid. Come in.”

“How are you feeling today? We are going to stay here another week with you and then I need to get back to my other job. Are you any better? Can I get you something?”

“No, unless you can go on some crazy adventure and find a cure or find a new 20-year-old back lying around. But kid, I’m ok. I’m taken care of, as well I can expect to be. Lydon has a new doctor coming in to see me tomorrow. A specialist. That scares me, though.”

“Yeah, Doc. I never knew you had an old back injury. We’d never guessed the way you crack that whip of yours. But everything’s made to be broken, Doc.”

“Don’t you think I know that kid?” His tone was dripping with sarcasm as his pitch shot straight up. “I’m too young to lie down. Too young to be looking up at the entire world from the floor instead of living in it standing upright on my own two feet.”

His remark snapped at the kid, probably harsher than any whip could. If his words had teeth, they would’ve taken his head clean off. Sarantos was in constant pain and that made him selfish and frustrated. He couldn’t think of anything else. He was not the same man he was a week ago.

“Applesauce, Doc. I meant nothing by it, just trying to chat with you a bit. I thought you might be lonely up here.”

He spoke like a child, speaking only in short sentences. “I know, kid. No one knew I had back issues. Because I didn’t want to make a spectacle out of it. I believe in just working hard. Not complaining. You couldn’t see the invisible pain I faced daily. No one can. But now you can. Now, it has beaten my ass down. I can’t enjoy life anymore. I hate everything!”



“Geez, Doc. That means you’ve been constantly fighting two enemies all this time, struggling by yourself. You should’ve shared the information with us. We care about you and you know that.”

“Nope. My ego, kid. It’s way up there and look where it got me. Go have fun kid and let me know what’s going on. The Baron said he’d wait until after his doc’s visit before we score the deal on The Lady. Keep your eyes and ears open.”

“Right. Sure. Chat later, Doc.”

The kid walked out, giving him some more free time to overindulge his self-pity. He wallowed in it. It had become a reflex. Sarantos watched the kid wave goodbye, strutting so easily, so carefree. There was no hint of pain in his face. It was effortless. He was jealous, like a bee seeing his hive and his honey being ripped away from him. It’s just not fair.

The Professor turned to stare out the window. Nothing worked for him. The big picture in the sky was a faded snapshot. Truthfully speaking. Drowning several times a day was his recurring routine, yet he somehow grew desperate enough to live as he kept wrestling himself out of the water before his lungs ran out of air. Another two seconds and nothing would bring him back to this hellish state of existence.

This had happened to him once before and he'd grabbed onto anything and anyone, taking them down with him. The world couldn't save someone not able to be saved, so the inevitable happened. They all sank together. He took everyone down with him.

Sarantos thought he'd overcome that dire emotional state of depression that flooded the memories of his past, of needing and wanting to use anyone and everyone to save himself, but the pain was too real. His mind was a maze and like water that swirls the drain, it fell downward because eventually, there was nowhere else it could go.

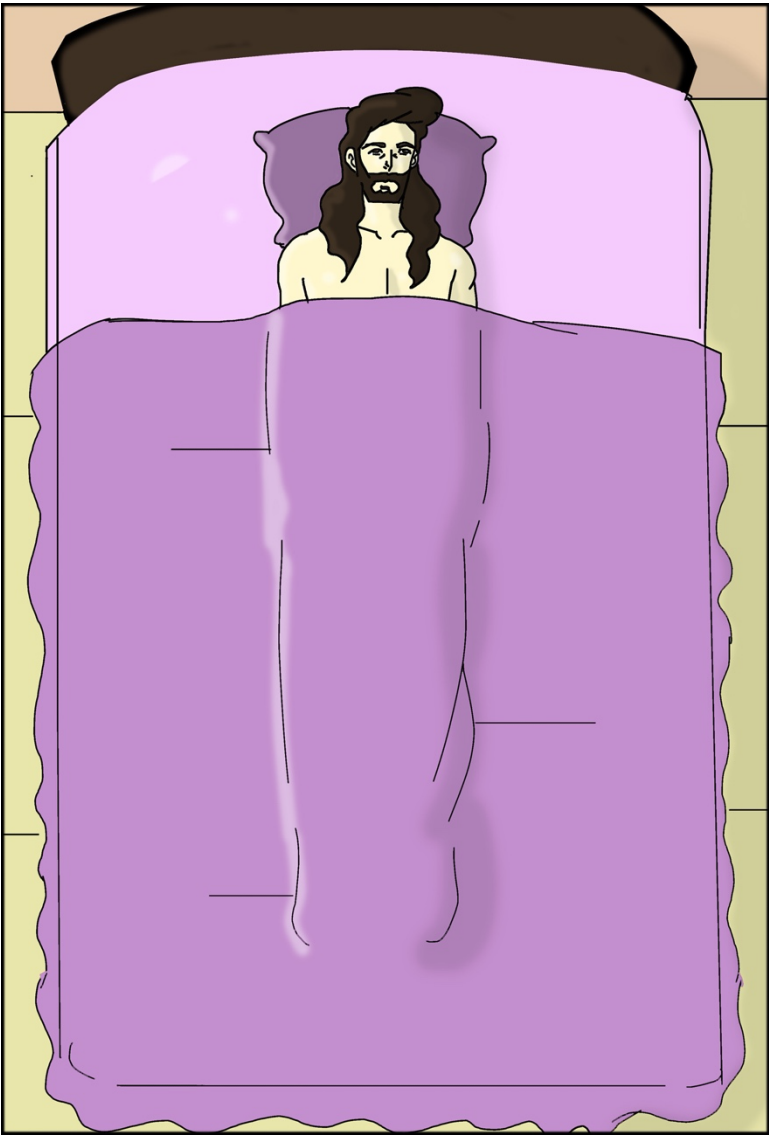
Determined not to bring anyone down with him this time, he eyeballed clouds rolling by to the right out the sizable window. He stared at the cluster of clouds for what seemed like hours. Were they trying to tell him something?

Eventually he got bored, so he looked away, sighing loudly as he awaited death.

His ears strained for noises, for any sign that others were out there moving about during the daytime. Nighttime would be a far different story. The noises might have hidden meanings at a different hour.

What was it he was hoping to hear, anyway? Why is no one saying absolutely anything? He looked at the clock. It felt

like he hadn't checked the time in a while, but it had only been 12 minutes. People weren't meant to be alone.



The sound of a vacuum broke through the sinister silence and made him smile instantly. He was not alone, after all, not abandoned like a shipwrecked survivor or a castaway. Once in a while, when he blessed to hear the clank of dishes, or of a chair being moved, it seemed like a symphony orchestra in full bloom to him. Weirdly, it made his heart happy. Neither of these sounds had done that before today.

The big longhorn clock ticked again loudly in his left ear, a cruel reminder he was still alive.

It was those simple sounds that saved him from death's nightmare and were sometimes a welcome distraction from the unrelenting pain.

The Professor then thought about another distraction he looked forward to every morning. Several large men came to the room at 6 AM and helped him move into a high-backed chair that had cowhide print on it, always so a young lady named Charmaine could change his sheets and gave him minty fresh towels.

She had a dainty gait, delightful freckles across her nose, and plump blonde braids that hung down to her shoulders from both sides of her ears. Her smile was toothy and genuine. She never talked, but grinned from ear to ear in his direction. She never seemed to be in a bad mood.

The Professor also consistently enjoyed his time afterwards with Bonnie. She was a thirty-year-old nurse who lived on the property in case the cowhands needed medical attention. Her thick black lashes and chunky black hair made her look exotic. With her hair pulled straight back, she usually wore white nurses' garb and a cute, tiny nurse hat. A large cross hung down from her neck, the end always comfortably hidden between her bosoms - unless she bent over, then it would fall helplessly out, sparkling in the sunlight's gleam with several bundles of diamonds set to either side of the cross. The Professor had a good heart but a dirty mind.

The exercises she forced him to do invariably helped, at least for a little while. He didn't like the idea.

Embarrassed at first, he soon learned it was a great and soothing ordeal. He'd sit in the warm, intoxicating tub and concentrate on the water's healing abilities, meditating in a way. She always used an earthy fragrance that reminded him of his mom's garden.

It was his first experience being bathed by a woman and he tried not to make it obvious how enjoyable it was. Maybe it was the companionship, maybe it was the testosterone? Her fingers were gentle, like a soft flower in a spring meadow. Had he not been in pain, it might've made him quite thrilled.

Sarantos felt like just a chore to all of them, though, no matter how hard they smiled. No one saw how much he

missed being normal. How could they? They had lives that evolved without him and burst out into the real world. He had no life outside this bedroom, more like a prison cell. He struggled to hold on to every breath, to make it mean something.



Even the sky didn't seem to care, nor did the bed he laid in all day. He played mind games with himself. The mornings were his favorite. They always seemed like a new beginning, like a chance to start fresh, to put the misery of the past behind. It was all he had.

His mind stopped running. He looked around the room, gathering his senses and getting back to the present moment. They'd just gotten him back into bed when the Baron came in with a short, slender man with a brown bag. The small man wore spectacles and had a greased down handlebar mustache.

He was sure it was the doctor because the nurse greeted him as Doc Friday.

There was no way to explain the enjoyment he felt with people around him. It was the highlight of his day, any time it happened.

The gruff Baron spoke first. "Well, cowboy, seems the Doc came a day earlier than expected. I think he brought you some happy pills, you know, muscle relaxers." He turned to the doctor and patted him hard on the little man's back, moving him forward two feet, causing him to lose his balance.

The Baron grabbed him swiftly, pulling him up and not letting him fall. "Woah," said the doctor.

"Sorry about that, Doc. I'm excited you're here. Let's get this rodeo started."

The doctor was soft-spoken, unlike the man who called him to his ranch.

The doctor and nurse got busy, and asked everyone else to leave the room. The doctor and Sarantos stared at other without breaking eye contact. There was a sadness behind both their eyes.



Sarantos thought the world had forgotten him. After all, he barely made a sound most minutes of the day. The only time they remembered him was mealtime and bath time. He didn't feel like he had any control over his life.

“So, Doc, from one Doc to another, can you help me? I’m just trying to break the pattern of pain, get over this hump. I’m desperate to go for a walk or even sit up in a chair, to feel a little more normal around people.”

“Yes, I understand. This isn’t what they say, a picnic, and you are a young man. I thought you’d be older.”

“I feel old right now, if that helps you cure me quicker.” He somehow mustered up a sense of humor from the back of his neck, probably the only place right now where the nerves were not on fire.

The doctor had him do range of motion movements and sat him up. He spoke with the nurse about his examination and progress so she could document on her clipboard.

The Professor suddenly laughed hysterically.

The doctor was puzzled. “Are you okay, Professor Sarantos?”

He nodded. Tears streamed down his cheeks. He couldn’t look at the doctor anymore. It was the name Friday. It got to him; lord knows why. It was the most he’d laughed in weeks.

The doctor frowned as his mustache rose and twitched, matching his brow movement. Sarantos couldn't stop. It was too much.



The doctor and nurse tried to calm him down unsuccessfully. His side ached more, and then his back went into a circus of spasm.

“Settle down, Professor,” Bonnie said and moved behind his chair to rub his shoulders. It helped. His back muscles

burned and screamed in agony a tad less. Sarantos didn't think things could get worse. He was wrong.

The doctor pulled out a needle, filled it with a clear liquid, pulled down his pants with the strength of one of his bathers and shot him in the thigh all within a few seconds.

It hurt like hell, but that was part of the plan the world had in place for him. While he was already in never-ending pain, any additional torture seemed unfair.

Within moments, a funny thing happened. He relaxed, and the pain eased its grip on his soul.

The big guy came in and they helped him back to bed.

As they eased him onto the comfortable mattress and crisp clean sheets, he giggled and was giddy like a grade school kid who got to miss a day of school. His mind searched his memories for hope.

The Professor had been too focused on his fear and anxiety. Multiply that by several days and he lost himself to those around him. It took him to a black tunnel that no exit. You're allowed to be mad about things when you struggle, but he went overboard.

He drifted off to sleep.

“Doc.” It was the kid’s voice that awakened him from a deep, restful sleep.

The first thing he noticed was minor pain. It had finally gotten better, and bearable, but was not completely gone.



He slowly opened his right eye and grinned. “Hi ya, cowboy.”

“Oh, Doc, it’s me Gorilla. What’d they do to you? Holy smoke. Are you drugged?”

The kid's voice was on the edge of panic and relief, rising several octaves.

“No, kid, nothing. I feel better. It was a joke; you know cowboy hat and all.”

The kid's eyes narrowed. He wasn't sure if he could trust the words of his Professor. “Sure, Doc.” Gorilla backed slowly towards the door.

“No, kid. I'm alright. Their doctor gave me a kill all the pain kind of muscle relaxant shot. That's all. I think I can move but I'll take it slow. Now help me up.”

Gorilla stopped in his tracks and grinned. “Don't think so. I'll get some professional help. I wouldn't want to re-injure you.”

Before he could say no, the kid was gone. He heard some cheering, and the doctor came into the room with the Baron.

“Well, that shot did the trick, then?” The doctor looked him over for the next five minutes and asked more questions regarding his current pain levels.

“I need out of this bed,” Sarantos finally said.

Their focus was still on him, but he didn’t care.

There was a week-long fight with fear, a struggle to breathe, and a struggle to stay alive, but now he wanted freedom.

“Chill out there, cowboy,” said Lydon.



He closed his eyes and laughed.

They grabbed both sides of his arms and the nurse swung his legs around and they all lifted together on the count of three. He was ecstatic when he sat up without the knifing pain pushing against his spine.

“Is it dinnertime yet?”

They all burst into laughter.

“Yes, I believe it could be. Gorilla, go let Eloise know we need to eat pronto and add one more dinner guest.”

The kid tipped his cowboy hat. “Will do, Baron. I’m on it.”

The nurse stayed behind with the big guy and helped him get dressed.

It felt good to be wearing actual clothes again. How long had it been?

One thing was for sure, he was no dang cowboy. Maybe in heart but not in body. He could still be active and go on a few adventures. There was no denying his limitations, though. In all likelihood, he would need surgery at some

point, but nothing would interfere with his adventures this calendar year.

At least he was here at the ranch when this back attack happened. The friendly nurse gave him a bottle of pink pills to use until his back strengthened. She worked with him slowly, showing him some exercises to strengthen him.

“I want you to be careful, and keep in mind you need to gradually strengthen it. Use caution and common sense if it feels strained. If it doesn’t feel right, then don’t do it! When you get home, see a back specialist as soon as you can.”

“Thanks.” He already had a physician and understood how the process worked. Common sense, but he lost it when he got here.

The two of them helped him down the stairs, but he felt pretty good now. They eased him into his dinner chair. He was loading as he took one long sniff of the fresh food.

The sun was on its way down, and the orange color played the room like a classical pianist. His heart felt alive again. He’d run out of buttons to push, yet now here he sat, upright and overjoyed once again.

Charlie came into the room with the blonde son, Simon. With a glance, Sarantos wondered what was going on there. Charlie grinned and shrieked when she saw him and ran to give him a kiss on the cheek.



“Professor, so chuffed to see you out and about again in the land of the living.” She hugged him, then sat down next to him.

The kid came in and sat down next to her. They kissed lightly. Simon must just be a cowboy friend. He was glad. Now that he wasn’t looking up at the world, he looked down at the floor for a moment. He hoped he could avoid another vacation down there.

Frankie, with his dishwater blonde curls and tanned skin, came and sat next to his brother. Then, Lydon and Abbie came in arm and arm, looking like they just got back from their honeymoon.

Lydon invited the doctor and nurse to join for dinner as a big ole’ Texan thank you for helping his friend.

The food arrived in short order and was a feast to behold. The Professor had grown to love their baked beans and mashed potatoes and every piece of meat they served. There was so much food that it’s overloaded and overwhelmed his senses. At one point, he had to loosen his belt buckle.

Sarantos could not remember ever eating so much. Once the meal and pleasant conversation ended and the table was cleared, the Baron stood up and pointed to the right.

“I have already deposited The Lady on top of my fireplace in the dining hall for those of you that hadn’t noticed. She is a beauty.”

Sarantos hadn’t noticed until he said it. Then the Baron handed him a check that made his eyes bulge. What back pain?

“I added a zero. Any man who can run that kind of adventure with chronic back pain has my respect and admiration. You deserve it, and I’m sure you’ll put it to good use.”

Sarantos nodded, holding back tears. “Thank you for everything. Thank you for your big Texas hospitality and your charming staff. I used to think every yellow brick road went nowhere except down the wrong road, but you’ve proved that to be untrue. Every yellow brick road here is paved with gold, my friend.”



They all laughed, shared stories of childhood confessions, teenage dreams and adult adventures continuing the conversation well into the night. Sometimes, you have to open your chest and show a bit more of your heart than you're comfortable doing...