

# One

**R**ANDI STERLING STEPPED OUT of the sunlight into the breeding barn. She breathed deep. Some people thought horses stunk or considered them large, frightening beasts to be avoided, but to Randi, a life without the scent of hay and horse would be colorless and flat.

Forget a shrink's couch. A horse beneath you, a beckoning trail and the squeak of saddle leather was far better therapy than trying to resolve if it was your mother's infidelities or your father's alcoholism—or, perhaps, both—that made you screwy.

In the center of the breeding room, six-figure Quarter Horse stallion Hesa Rebel Man, Rebel for short, pranced sideways until he hit the end of his rope, neck arched, ears up.

Randi's friend Kira came through the double doors and gave her a hug. "I'm here for you, but we're shorthanded at the restaurant so I can't stay long. Besides, you know Houston likes to keep these breedings private. I mean, I get that it's his ranch and all, but it's not like there's a bunch of equine voyeurs out there."

Kira's white-blond hair and St. Pauli Girl curves were hardly inconspicuous. Randi handed her a notebook and camera.

“Take these. If Houston gives you a hard time, I’ll say you’re here as my assistant. He can’t argue with that.”

Kira waved the notepad. “Journalists hardly need a Sherpa to schlep their stuff around.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re helping me carry my emotional baggage, and we all know how much that weighs.”

Kira swiveled her head. “I don’t see *her*. So far so good.”

“She’ll be here. Rebel’s her stallion, and you know how possessive she is. The good news is this is probably the last time I’ll have to watch her hang all over my ex. I’m starting to pack as soon as I’m done here.”

“That’s what you think. I know you’ve only been in San Diego six months, but it feels like I’ve known you forever. Which is why I’m not letting you leave.”

“That’s sweet, Kira, but there’s nothing worse than being a third wheel and watching the guy you thought you’d marry make out with his new wife.”

“It’s February. Why would anyone in their right mind leave Southern California for Colorado in the dead of winter?”

“Who says I’m in my right mind? Anyway, Colorado’s home.”

Kira clucked her tongue. “Forget about skipping town and focus on the horse. He’s the reason you’re here right now, remember?”

“How could I forget? *HorseWorld* magazine is my shot at the big time. Let’s go stand near the wash rack where we can get a better view.”

The breeding manager of Lucky Jack Performance Horses, gave the two of them a cursory nod before she handed Rebel’s lead rope over to his groom.

Randi leaned in. “Piper didn’t even do a double take on you, and there’s nothing she likes better than snitching to Houston. I think you’re in the clear.”

Kira tucked the notebook under her arm and applied a coat of her trademark red lipstick. The combination of bright red lips on milky-white skin made her look like a porcelain doll or an Austrian farmer’s daughter. She dropped the lipstick into her

bag. “Piper doesn’t notice anything unless it has four legs and a tail. Come to think of it, I’ve never seen her with a guy, only with stallions.”

“Hey, at least a horse will sometimes give you a warning snort before he bucks you off. Men are far harder to read.”

Houston Hill, the ranch’s owner, leaned against the wall, an unlit cigarette dangling from his lip. A stranger might think him relaxed, but anytime a stallion was present, Houston had his guard up. Most stable owners put maximum effort into absolving themselves of culpability, but Houston refused to shy away from duty—making him a guy Randi would have been proud to call her father-in-law, if things had turned out the way they were supposed to.

Houston’s eyes skimmed the room, landed on Kira, registered a question mark followed by a look of resignation when he saw Randi. He removed a fleck of tobacco from his tongue and pushed himself away from the wall.

Kira nodded at the group of strangers gathered in the breeding room. “Look at them. If I sold my restaurant and everything I own along with it, I wouldn’t come close to having the kind of money they do. Check out the hat. The silverbelly Stetson that guy has on. I bet it’s at least a five X. Why are they here, anyway?”

“Looking to breed their mares to Rebel, if they can convince Houston they’re worthy. How about the belt buckle on the tall one! Salad plate, anyone?”

The women wore True Religion jeans paired with tight Swarovski crystal-studded tops. Louis Vuitton bags swung heavy from their elbows, while waves of expensive perfume clashed with Rebel’s musky sweat. The couples conversed in church-like whispers, eyes glued to the stallion who danced in place, hooves tapping the floor, snorting and pawing and wanting to get on with the business at hand. The temperature in the room had to have gone up a good ten degrees.

Rebel’s mahogany coat gleamed. He sported a thick white blaze that zigzagged from underneath his forelock before split-

ting in two above his nostrils. Randi clicked her pen, hoping to capture the stallion's legendary charisma in a way that would differentiate her from the other journalists out there. When it came to horses, God *was* in the details. "His face marking reminds me of a Flying V."

"You mean the guitar?" Kira asked.

"Yep. Gibson. Electric."

Rebel bugled a whinny and all conversation stopped. Piper left Houston's side and crossed the room to take the lead rope from Rebel's groom.

Kira scratched her nose. "You're right about one thing. He's clearly ready to rock."

"That's clever. Mind if I steal it?"

"No charge. I'd be honored. What's your angle?"

"Business. Quarter Horse breeding is a high-priced, elite enterprise, but the horse is just doing what his hormones tell him to do, then we come along to manage and control it. People pay a lot of money to obtain the fastest and most athletic horses to annihilate the competition with style and grace, and it all starts here, in the breeding barn with the lust coming off Rebel's hide and the vibrations of his hooves galloping right up the readers' spines."

Kira snickered. "What are you writing? *General Horsepital?*"

"Whatever it takes. My job is to gather every relevant fact I can get my hands on, pick some brains, add colorful quotes and tidbits of human interest, put everything together in a cohesive format and deliver the polished article to *HorseWorld* by the deadline."

"Kind of like having Wolfgang Puck, Emeril and Gordon Ramsay all dining at my place on the same night."

Kira's restaurant, The Surf & Stirrup, was one of North San Diego County's most happening spots, known for its young and beautiful crowd, the best steaks in town and Kira's signature drinks, with beach and Western themes that went down easy to send you flying high.

“You’re a culinary star, Kira. If your rib eye doesn’t float their boats, your tequila sunsets will. If I can pull this off with half your grace and confidence, I’ll be in tight with *HorseWorld*.”

“You’ll do fine. ‘Fake it ’til you make it,’ remember?”

“I remember. Now, be a good assistant and hand me my camera.”

Randi reeled off shots: the fullness of Rebel’s shoulders and the sturdiness of his haunches, muscles made to start like a jackrabbit and stop on a dime—the epitome of the All-American Quarter Horse. Finished, she exchanged camera for pen and paper.

*All parts of Rebel’s conformation have been bred for generations to allow the breed to work long, hard days over rough terrain yet still have the stamina and agility necessary to catch, corner and cut a cow from the herd.* She lifted her pen, listened for a few seconds, kept writing. *From the rows of stables adjoining the breeding barn, horses kick the wooden panels of their stalls, the resounding thuds alternating with the stallion’s primal—*

A clatter of hoofbeats broke her thoughts. She looked up to see Rebel twist his neck, pin his ears and rear. His hooves paddled the air, barely missing the side of Piper’s head. Seconds later, he came crashing down. The rope, having slipped through Piper’s hands, had too much slack to hold him and Rebel hurled himself toward the spectators. The men grabbed their hats and the women clutched their purses, stumbling backward and flattening themselves against the wall.

Piper braced her legs and reeled in the lead, tightening the links laced through the halter. She had a body like a whippet, but she was tough as a Rottweiler. The stud shank bit the tender skin of Rebel’s nose and he skidded to a stop so fast it seemed he’d go down, yet somehow he managed to unscramble his legs and stay upright. He shook himself like a dog, then let loose an earsplitting neigh that rippled in waves down his neck and along his topline, slick with lather.

Houston wore a wide grin; everyone else looked like they’d

just wet their pants. “Damn horse reminds me of me.” He tugged on the belt loops of his Wranglers, hitching them over his narrow hips. “Rowdy and ready.”

“You think?” Piper’s tone made it clear she was not amused.

“Sure. Ask the wife. She’ll tell ya.”

“No thanks. I’ll take your word for it.”

Randi scribbled fast so as not to miss any more action: *A chain linked through the noseband helps control the stallion, protecting against injuries to horse and human.*

Houston took Rebel’s lead rope from Piper. “Where’s Stacey? We can’t wait all day for her to show up.”

Randi froze. Stacey wouldn’t come alone. Jaydee’d be tagging behind her like a lovesick puppy, calling her “sweet cheeks” and grabbing her butt every chance he got. Watching them frolic made Randi want to throw up.

Piper snapped a pair of rubber gloves over her fingers. She shrugged. “It’s not like she checks in with me. If I had to guess, I’d say she’s out getting her nails done.”

Houston led Rebel forward, giving the gathering a clear view of the stallion’s equipment.

“Wow!” Kira’s eyes went wide. “They don’t say ‘hung like a horse’ for nothin’.”

“Shh!” Randi looked around to see if anybody had overheard. “You’re supposed to be cool. Act like you see this sort of thing every day.”

Kira jerked her thumb. “Yeah? Look at *them*.”

One of the bejeweled women stood with her mouth hanging open. She elbowed another, who dropped her purse on the floor. The men sat poker-faced. No doubt it took some effort.

Houston held out a plastic tumbler filled with soapy water. As Piper took it from him, the stallion bared his teeth and went for her back. Houston’s fist slammed into his muzzle with a loud *smack*. Rebel jerked his head away with a grunt, giving Houston a look of surprise and newfound respect.

Houston wasn’t one to lose his temper. His movements were smooth and purposeful. Enough... yet not too much. Let

a twelve-hundred pound animal get the best of you and you wouldn't be in this business long.

Piper returned to her task, seemingly unfazed she'd almost lost a couple ribs. Pouring the water along the length of the horse's shaft she hummed as she rubbed the suds, as normally as if she was washing dinner dishes.

*Care is taken to make sure all necessary parts are free of dirt and debris that might contaminate the sample.*

The groom passed Houston a leather tube, about two feet long with a suitcase handle on the top.

"Okay," Houston said, "let's do this."

"You got it, Boss." Piper relaxed her grip on the rope and the stallion surged forward to straddle his conquest with an eye-opening squeal. The mare didn't protest, didn't move, didn't kick. "She" was a dummy, a phantom-breeding mount, a slanted pole wrapped in padding with a life-sized plastic horse head attached.

Houston grabbed hold of Rebel, guiding him into the hand-held tube. Houston widened his stance and braced himself against the dummy to hold the container in place.

*Doesn't seem to bother the stallion that what's on the receiving end isn't alive.*

Kira peered over Randi's shoulder. "Reminds me of a football player I knew in college," Kira said. "Now I understand why they don't use a real mare."

Randi smiled. "You're right. This way is cheaper and easier. No trailering costs or risk of injury to the mom-to-be. UPS delivery and the vet's turkey baster and you're in business."

Seconds later, it was over. Rebel's muscles went slack and he hung on top of the dummy mount, front legs dangling. He shook his head and backed off, landing with a thud on a thick rubber mat beneath his feet.

*Fire in the stallion's eyes dims. No more stamping of hooves or commanding calls. Day's work done and over in mere seconds.*

Kira broke the spell. "I need a cigarette."

“You don’t smoke.”

Kira opened her purse and Randi half expected her to pull out a pack of Marlboros, but her lipstick appeared instead and she applied a fresh coat. “What’s Rebel’s liquid gold go for these days?”

One of the Stetson men cocked an ear and turned to look at them. He took off his hat, ran his finger along the brim. “We came a long way to convince Houston our mare is deserving of his stud. I’d do just about whatever it took to get a colt by Rebel, but Houston’s already turned my nephew’s horse down.” The man cleared his throat and shifted his weight to the other foot. “Said her conformation wasn’t up to par. The boy was itchin’ to wring his neck.”

Randi tapped her pen against her shoulder. “Are you telling me Rebel’s sperm is worth killing for?”

“Could be.” He grimaced. “Don’t quote me.”

The door to the breeding barn rumbled open. Stacey Hill stood framed inside the doorway, sunlight glinting off her hair. Conversation stopped and the back of Randi’s neck prickled. Of course Stacey’d shown up. She was the type of owner who stuck her nose into every move her horse made. What he ate, how much he ate. Was he getting enough? Did he get his fly spray? Who left a sweat mark on his back?

“Speak of the devil,” Kira said. “A day late, but never a dollar short.”

The groom led Rebel down the barn aisle. Stacey stepped inside and held up her hands like she was checking for rain. “Houston? Why is Roberto taking my horse away?” She marched, stomping to a halt in front of the lab, a separate room housed inside the breeding barn, used to prepare the semen for shipment. Across the way, Houston faced the prospective clients, his back to Stacey. She raised her voice but didn’t approach Houston’s group. “You were supposed to wait for me. You seem to forget that stallion is *my* goddamn horse.”

Randi kept one eye on the developing drama and the other on the door, sure any second now Jaydee would arrive to rescue

his damsel—definitely in distress.

Kira touched Randi's arm. "It's getting late. I'd love to stay and watch the fireworks, and I promised to be here for you if Jaydee showed up, but I've gotta get back."

"Go. I'm fine. I'll fill you in later."

"Okay. Sorry. Call me." Kira waggled her fingers and slipped out the side door.

Houston excused himself and spun on his heels, rolling down the sleeves of his plaid flannel shirt as he strode toward Stacey while Randi moved in for a close-up of the woman who swiped Jaydee right out from under her naïve little nose.

Six months ago, after her then-boyfriend had begged her to move to California, she'd unknowingly bought herself a one-way ticket to a broken heart and rejection she'd never known the likes of. Kira would say the words sounded like a cheesy country song, but she didn't care. Cheesy country had its place.

A stack of bangles slid down Stacey's arm, tinkling like silver bells before they crashed into her Rolex. She plucked a stray curl from her mouth with a shellacked fingernail and glared at Houston. "I won't be treated this way."

What was it about Stacey that Jaydee found attractive? Randi imagined him stroking the goatee he could never quite grow, checking off items on a clipboard. Stacey's assets: Long shiny strawberry-blonde hair—check, overflowing C cup—check, a teensy waist—check, enough discretionary dough to shell out seven hundred bucks on the custom-made cowboy boots on her feet—check. Was it a combination of attributes or just one big thing? Perhaps it was her two big things.

Houston flung his arm to the side. "You see these people? Two of them came in from Tucson. Got up at four and drove seven, eight hours. Another couple flew in late last night from Miami. They made an effort to get here. We had a schedule. Not my fault if there was someplace else you wanted to be."

Stacey put her hands on her hips. "You were in control, Houston, not them. It was inexcusable for you to go ahead and collect from Rebel without me here. I told you I wanted to be a

hands-on owner, not just the chick who writes the checks.”

The door to the lab swung open. Piper stepped out, holding a small plastic cup with some milky liquid at the bottom. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of Stacey.

“How’s the motility?” Houston directed his question to Piper, lifting his chin to gaze over the top of Stacey’s head.

Stacey lengthened herself and squared her shoulders. “I’d appreciate it if you two didn’t act like I’m not standing right between you.”

Piper held up the container. “I checked them under the scope—suckers are swimming like Michael Phelps.”

Houston cracked his knuckles. “The shipment’s going to Johnny Collier up at the Double R, east of Santa Barbara. Address is in the computer. You’ve got about an hour before UPS comes.”

Piper smiled. “I’m all over it.”

Stacey’s lips quivered, and for a half a second Randi actually felt sorry for her. “You’ll regret you treated me this way, Houston. You’ve backed me into a corner. You’ll pay for this. Father-in-law or no father-in-law.”