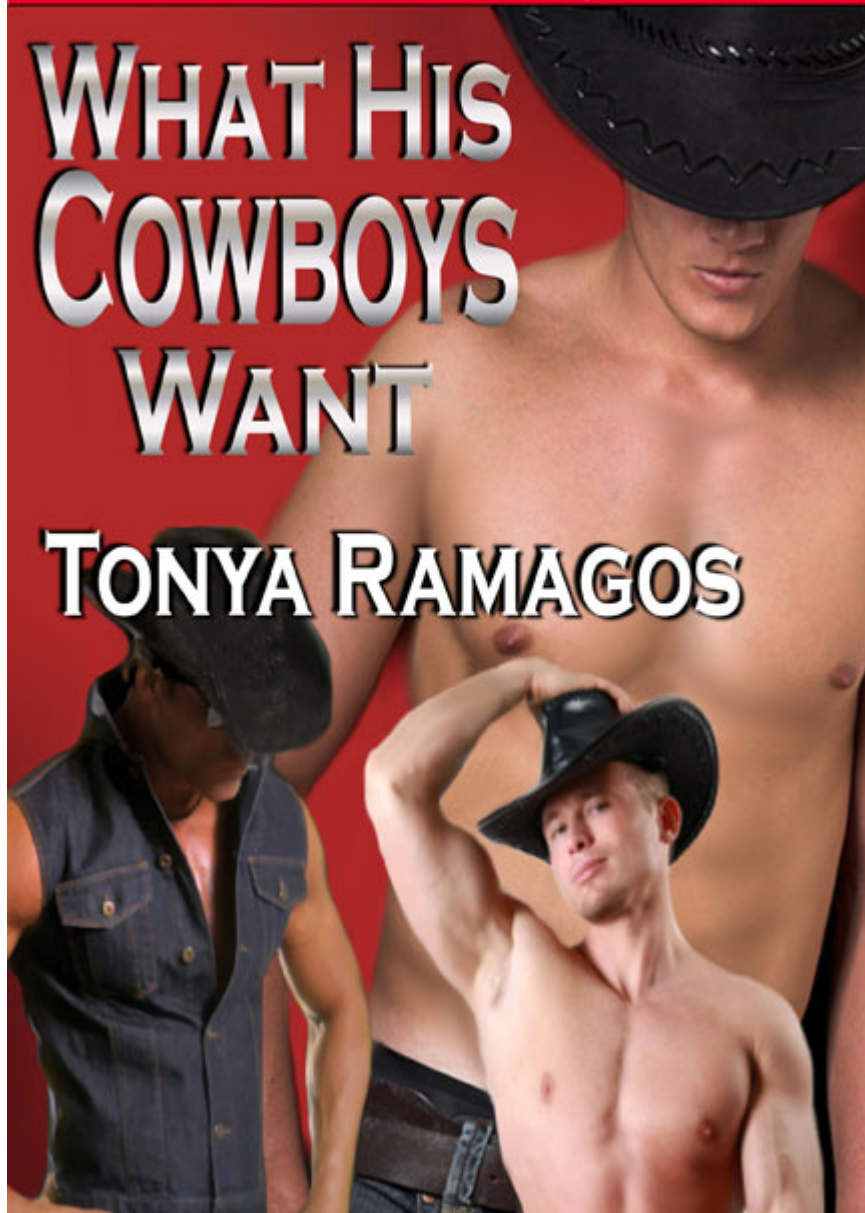


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WHAT HIS COWBOYS WANT

TONYA RAMAGOS



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Chapter 1

Sam shut the door of his super cab pick-up, hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his Wranglers and rocked back on the heels of his snakeskin boots as he scanned the parking lot. A single dimming street lamp and the flashing neon sign proclaiming the bar to be the Swingin' Sunset Saloon offered the only illumination to an otherwise pitch black night. Despite the rustic look of the ole Triple S, Sam knew the place to be relatively new. At least within the past three years. It had been that long since he'd last hung his hat in Sunset.

He adjusted said hat as he stepped away from his truck. The crunching of the gravel came as a welcome sound after his time pounding the New York City pavement in hard soled dress shoes. It worried him that he didn't miss the blaring horns and relentless curses, the rush and mayhem that accompanied the big city. It worried him more how he felt warmed by the faint sound of the country music drifting from inside, the quiet chatter and yee-haw's that bellowed out in a gleeful concoction, the slow and easy way life simply meandered along here.

He'd fallen back into that rhythm quickly enough, he mused as he strolled toward the door. He'd gone over eight hundred miles to get away from this place. Apparently it hadn't been far enough.

You made it for three years, partner.

And he wouldn't be back now if his sister wasn't getting married. Why in Sam's hell—and it *was* turning out to be his personal hell—did the girl wanna go and do that for, anyway? Sarah-Beth never could leave well enough alone. He'd had to watch her like a hawk when they were kids. Now, he'd been away only three years, and the goofy twit decided to get hitched to Rydel Stevens at the Lonely R Ranch.

Sam supposed Rydel wouldn't be lonely anymore come the wedding day. Next thing Sam knew, Sarah-Beth'd be knocked up with Sam's first nephew and turning the whole damned state of Tennessee upside down faster than a tumble weed in a tornado. She'd gotten off to a good start, turning the Yates family estate on its ear with the rehearsal dinner, the wedding plans, the friggin' decorations, and all the guests for a celebration still scheduled more than a week away!

Damn, he needed a drink. Which was why Sam found himself walking into the Swingin' Sunset Saloon. A drink? More like a bottle, he decided as the kicking country beat of Brooks & Dunn's "Boot Scootin' Boogie" greeted him over the clamber of partying conversation. A bottle of his favorite uncle with a couple of beers to chase down the burn and all his memories, fears, and that blasted wedding would cease to exist for a while. He could use a good binge, sleep it off in his truck, and return to the Yates estate bright eyed and bushy tailed by sunrise.

The idea of him arriving anywhere bushy tailed made him grin.

"That's some smile there, cowboy." The bartender was blond, tanned, dark eyed and female. She met his smile with a thousand watt one of her own that brought all sorts of suggestions to the table as clearly as the innuendo in her next words. "I'm Trixie. What's your pleasure, handsome?"

"Shot of Jack and a draft. Keep 'em coming." Sam settled on an empty barstool, his mouth already watering in delicious anticipation.

Trixie pursed her do-me red painted lips. "Ooo, that's the kind of order I get from troubled cowboys. Somethin' eating at you, darlin'?"

Sam shook his head. "I'm just looking for a good time."

"Are you now?" Trixie's gaze moved over his face, paused on his mouth, and she licked her lips. "If that's all you're after, I know where you can find a better time than what ole' Jack Daniels will show you."

Sam chuckled. "Thanks but that's not exactly the kind of fun I'm looking for tonight."

"Suit yourself." Trixie shrugged and gave his mouth another long stare then she blinked as if coming out of a trance. "I'll get that shot and brew." It took her less than a minute and she returned, sliding his drinks in front of him. She met his gaze, held it. "If you change your mind, cowboy, even after a few of these," she said as she tipped her chin at the shot, "you know, decide you're in the mood for a better time, the offer'll still be open."

Sam toasted her with the shot glass and knocked it back. He put the glass down in front of her for a refill. "I'll keep that in mind."

"You do that, hot stuff." She smiled, poured him another shot and moved to the next customer. Sam watched her, noted how she greeted the next guy with a friendly hello and a casual glance that held far less heat and promise than what she'd showed him. She was pretty, far different from the women who came on to him almost hourly back in New York. He figured another shot or two of Jack and he could probably see himself to swing her way for the night. Somehow he doubted it would be any true fun for either of them.

* * * *

Cord DeMoss leaned on his pool stick, watching as Trace lined up the next shot. With five balls left on the table to Cord's one plus the eight ball, Trace didn't stand a prayer of winning. But damn if it didn't make Cord feel like he'd been lassoed around the cock just watching the other man. Long and lean with muscles gained from a life reared on a cattle ranch, deep tanned skin and sun-streaked brown hair, Trace Tanner could turn the heads of most of the females and males in the

bar. But the man's eyes proved to be Cord's undoing. Eyes so light blue they almost faded to gray. Eyes that glanced up at him now and made his heart buck like a prize winning bull in his chest.

"If I make this shot, you have to do the sink full of dishes when we get back to the ranch." Trace's expression held all the intent of a tiger searching for his prey but Cord saw the twitch at the corner of his lips.

The dishes? Cord stifled a groan. Trace knew Cord loathed doing the dishes. He'd rather wrestle down an angry buffalo than wash a single plate or spoon. Why did Trace think Cord had chosen to live off take-out most of his adult life? Hell, Cord would spring for paper plates and plastic cups and utensils for his camper trailer when he ate at home before he'd wash a blasted dish!

Cord studied the shot. The only way to make the six ball in the corner pocket without sinking the eight ball would be to bank it. A skill Cord had taught Trace but Trace had yet to master. No way would he make it. "You miss and the mess is on you."

Trace's eyes glinted and, oh man, the way his lips tilted made Cord's balls tighten in response. He hadn't meant that the way Trace had obviously taken it but, *boy howdy*, he couldn't say it sounded like a bad idea.

Trace's gaze dropped pointedly to Cord's cock. "Only if you promise to lick it off."

Cord's mouth watered and he licked his lips before he could stop himself. Suddenly he hoped he lost. The thought of doing dishes never sounded so appetizing.

Trace chuckled at the heated expression Cord knew must be on his face. Trace shook his head, dropped his attention to the pool table, and concentrated on the shot. He missed by a mile. Cord gave a yee-haw and tipped his Stetson to the ceiling. Trace laughed, cursing a blue streak at the same time.

Cord circled the pool table and hooked a finger in the belt loop of Trace's jeans, yanking him against Cord. He leaned in and lowered his voice. "Looks like you'll be licking the mess off me, sweetie."

"Looks like." Trace melted against him but then his eyes fixed and locked on a point across the bar and he turned to a statue in Cord's arms.

"Baby, what is it?" Cord asked even as he followed Trace's gaze. He saw the cowboy at the bar, noted the city boy polish despite the hat, jeans and boots and felt his heart hit the dirt.

"Not what. Who," Trace corrected in a voice barely above a whisper. "That's Sly. Jumpin' horse feathers, I need a beer."

Cord's glass sat within reach on a nearby table. He grabbed for it and handed it to Trace. The man's hand shook as he brought the glass to his mouth and drank deep.

"Steadier now?" Cory asked.

Trace barked a humorous laugh. "No!"

Yeah, neither was Cord. He'd heard about Sly, knew of Trace's connection to the man, of his love for the other man. Cord also knew Sly had left things unsettled with Trace. The man had picked up and hauled ass on Trace without so much as a "kiss my ass" or a glance back. What Cord hadn't known was exactly who Sly was. Holy Christ!

Trace seemed to snap out of whatever trance the sight of his former lover had put him in. He turned to Cord, apology and regret and so many more undefined emotions in his eyes. "Wow! That was awful of me, babe. I'm sorry. I just..."

"You should go to him." Even as he said the words, Cord realized he was right. It was a gamble, sending the man he loved to the arms of a former lover. Cord might be taking the biggest risk of his life. If he was wrong, he could lose his man. He could lose his heart. But if he was right, the possibility of such a reward almost cancelled out the intense fear.

"I should what?" Trace sounded incredulous as he stared at Cord as though he'd sprouted bull horns and thought Trace to be the one holding the red cloth. Shock moved through his gorgeous face, followed by disbelief and finally something very akin to pain.

"You should talk to him, Trace. Take this opportunity to settle things between the two of you once and for all."

* * * *

Trace felt the burn of Cord's words like a branding iron to his chest. Cord wanted him to talk to Sly, to go to the other man, to settle things with him. The shock that settled in Trace as he stared into Cord's roughened, handsome face numbed a bit of the ache from the suggestion. The hard lines and angles only accentuated the man's dark eyes and even darker hair. Those eyes, usually dancing with a hint of danger and mystery, gazed at Trace now with a blankness that made it impossible for Trace to read his lover's thoughts.

"You want me to talk to him," Trace heard himself repeat dumbly.

"Trace, baby," Cord's strong arm slipped around Trace's waist and he pulled him closer, held him tighter. "It's eating you alive the way this guy left things between you, the way he up and left *you*."

Trace's throat constricted. The growing lump that formed in his throat made it hard to swallow but he managed. "I've made it that obvious, huh?" Damn, no wonder his relationship with Cord couldn't seem to find solid ground. To add insult to injury, he obviously kept bringing an old ghost into the mix. The idea of a mix brought on a fleeting thought that he wouldn't mind a threesome with men he loved as much as Cord and Samuel "Sly" Yates. He ruthlessly squashed the image that tried to form from that one. "I'm so sorry, babe."

Cord hooked a finger under Trace's chin, lifting his face when he bowed his head. "You have no reason to be sorry. It's not like I didn't bring my own ghost to this relationship."

That much was true. Trace wasn't the only one who'd been burned by a former lover. If Trace guessed correctly, Cord still held a torch for that lover, too, just as Trace did for Sly. Still...

"Yeah, but you don't rub my nose in your past shit." As a matter of fact, Cord had told him little about the man who'd shattered Cord's heart. Trace couldn't even find the man's name in his memory banks, much less the details of their relationship. God, somehow that made him feel even worse.

Cord chuckled and his eyes softened. A smile full of amusement unfolded on his shapely lips and lit his face. "You make it sound like I'm a puppy you've been attempting to house train."

"Only to do domestic chores," Trace managed to joke and forced a smile.

"Talk to him." Cord kissed the tip of Trace's nose even as Trace's smile faded. "You'll feel better when you do."

Would he? Already he felt worse than he had since he'd faced the fact a few months after Sly left that the man wasn't coming back. "What are you going to do?" Surely Cord didn't mean to stand here and watch as Trace went to another man. On the other hand, the thought of Cord leaving him here with Sly a mere few feet away both boggled and terrified Trace.

"I'm going home." Cord brushed his lips to Trace's this time, angling his head so the brims of their hats didn't collide. "Give you some space. I'll see you later."

Trace felt his mouth fall open as surprise delivered him another whammy.

Cord nipped Trace's bottom lip and then slowly eased back. The tenderness in the gesture, in Cord's expression, in the feel of Cord's arms around him brought tears to Trace's eyes. Sometimes Cord could be so loving and gentle. The other times, however, the occasions when his desires to be rough took over, tended to get in the way.

"Don't look so worried, Tray. I love you, baby. I just think this will be good for you, for us." His big hands dipped from Trace's waist

to cup his ass and he made a deep throated "Mmm" sound. "And when you get home I might have to pretend you made that shot after all so I can lick you all over."

When Cord's lips touched his this time, there was no featherlike brush involved. Cord claimed Trace's mouth, his tongue delving inside in a rough and erotic kiss that inflamed and possessed. His hands on Trace's ass gripped, pulling Trace's lower body firmly against him and leaving no doubt in Trace's mind of how aroused they both were by the time the kiss ended.

Cord edged back, letting Trace go. "I love you," he said again, the words breathless this time. Then he turned on his heels and walked away.

Trace stared after him, wonderment wrestling with the testosterone fogging his brain. His cock was so hard it ached and the sight of Cord's fine ass rambling off in a pair of well-worn Levi's didn't help to soften his erection. But the fear did. The fear and the confusion. He couldn't shake the sensation that he'd missed something. That entire exchange had bordered on Weirdville. Could Cord really be willing to risk his relationship with Trace? Was Trace willing to risk what he'd found with Cord no matter the ghosts hovering around them and the shaky ground they often walked?

Trace looked across the bar at the side profile of the man he'd once loved more than oxygen. It had been so long. Nearly three years since he'd last seen Sly outside of the images in his mind and the few photos he kept hidden away. Photos he hadn't showed to Cord. Why hadn't he shown him Sam's photos?

Sam, another thing he'd never shared with Cord. Sly's real name. Why? Not because Cord never dished out the details of his own failed relationship with his former lover. Trace wasn't that petty. Was it because it hurt too much to talk about Sly, to see a photo of him? It did, but apparently that hadn't stopped Trace from bringing the guy up enough for Cord to know how much Trace still loved Sly.

Maybe Cord was right. Maybe the time had come to settle things between him and Sly. Maybe Sly had changed and Trace would realize he didn't want the man anymore. Maybe he would realize the love he thought he still felt wasn't really love. Maybe he'd see that love had died when Sly left.

And maybe a herd of cattle will ride over the moon tonight.

Who was he kidding? He knew full well what he felt for Sly was a love no less strong than what he'd felt for the man the eighteen months, two weeks and three days they'd been lovers. It wasn't right to continue to feel so much for a man who'd moved states away while he gave his heart to a man who stayed right there on his ranch. It wasn't right, but he'd done it. Trace was Stetson-over-boots in love with Cord. He had no doubt in his mind or his heart about that and yet, Trace stared at Sly and knew he'd be drowning in pig slop if he attempted to convince himself he didn't still love the man.

But how could that be? Sly and Cord were so different they should've canceled each other out in Trace's life. By all rights, Trace shouldn't be able to love more than one man at a time. Time and distance should make love fade, cause it to die.

It was Trace's dumb luck that those particular rights turned out to be wrongs in his court.

* * * *

Sam motioned to Trixie for another shot even as he knocked back his third and heard the voice behind him. Slowly, he set the shot glass on the bar, his eyes closing to battle back the pain sizzling through him. The burn in his throat in no way compared to the fire that ignited in him at the sound of that voice and that name. Sly. Only Trace Tanner had ever called Sam that. It had been Trace's name for Sam, a play on his initials. S. L. Y. Samuel Louis Yates.

He'd had his own nickname for Trace as well. Taking his initials of T. N. T.—Trace Neil Tanner—and spinning it to the obvious but

fitting TNT. Fitting? Wasn't that the truth? They'd kid about Trace being Sam's personal dynamite and Sam being a sly dog. Then they'd laugh and often fall into each other's arms. But neither one of them laughed now.

Sam took a deep breath, pushed it out through pursed lips, and turned. The full effect of the dynamite he hadn't experienced in three years exploded as his gaze met Trace's. Oh God, he looked good. His brown hair streaked with blond from hours in the sun appeared longer than Sam remembered him keeping it. The silky smooth strands actually peeked from beneath his cowboy hat. He wore a solid white t-shirt tucked into a pair of faded blue jeans and both fit his outrageously well-toned body to dick-hardening perfection.

Sam gulped. It wasn't easy to do with his heart lodged somewhere around his Adam's apple. "Trace." He wanted to say more, knew he should, but what did one say to a man he'd left without a word? The stool to his right sat empty and he glanced at it. "Have a seat."

He supposed it was a start, but now what? This was exactly what he'd both hoped would happen tonight and feared more than his own death. Just seeing Trace again filled him with indescribable emotions. Apparently Trace had a similar reaction to seeing him. Trace hadn't taken his eyes off Sam. He still didn't, even as he moved onto the stool next to Sam.

Sam broke the spell they seemed to have fallen into. He looked away, catching Trixie's attention and held up two fingers, then put them down and held them up again. Two beers, two shots. Trixie nodded, her gaze flicking to Trace and then back to Sam. A keen understanding moved over her pretty face and a small smile toyed with the corners of her lips as she poured the drinks.

"Three can be a lot of fun too, cowboy." Trixie winked at Sam as she set the beers and shots in front of him and Trace. "I don't mind." She glanced at Trace, met Sam's gaze again, and wiggled her eyebrows before moving on down the bar.

"I must have missed something," Trace muttered.

Sam chuckled. "Be glad you did." He propped his elbows on the bar, the fingers of his left hand curled loosely around his glass. "You here alone?"

"I am now. You?"

Sam picked up the shot with his free hand and toasted Trace with it. "I had a date with Mr. Jack."

Trace glanced down at the shot sitting before him and shook his head. He pushed it to Sam. "I think I'll pass. Looks like you'll be needing a ride home. You go ahead with Mr. Jack. I'll drive you."

"To your place?" The question flew out of his mouth before he could stop it. Why, why, *why* would he ask such a thing?

Because going home with Trace was the one thing Sam wanted to do more than take his next breath and the last place he should go short of the cemetery to dig his own grave. On the other hand, going home with Trace would be digging his own grave so he figured them to be one in the same.

Trace's gaze on him sharpened. He stared at Sam for several long and torturous heartbeats then shook his head. It was an almost imperceptible gesture that Sam likely wouldn't have noticed if he hadn't been staring right back at Trace. "I wondered if you would come back for Sarah-Beth's wedding."

"I almost didn't." Sam noted the change of subject, the lack of Trace's response to his question. It was probably best. *Definitely* best. He drank the shot, slammed down the glass a bit more forcefully than he intended, and drank the second without thought or pause.

Trace eyed him closely. Sam saw the curiosity in the other man's eyes. He wondered why Sam almost missed his only sister's wedding. Could it be for fear of running into Trace?

Hell, yes! It was absolutely out of fear of running into a man he couldn't get out of his mind or his heart no matter how hard he tried. Still, he would rather Trace not know that so he quickly added, "Work. I wasn't sure I would be able to get away. I've been busy

lately. Lots of stuff going on. Vacation days are..." He shook his head and left the sentence hanging.

"You're happy in New York, then? You found what you wanted?" Trace drank, his gaze remaining transfixed on Sam over the rim of his mug.

"Not everything." Sam held that gaze and, for just a moment, he let all he felt show. All the years of missing Trace, all the love he still felt for the other man, all the hours of endlessly wishing, wanting, hoping. He knew he was playing with fire, but he didn't give a flying shit. He couldn't help himself.

"I guess no one place can hold it all, huh? I mean, that's why you left here, isn't it, because you couldn't find what you wanted?"

Trace finally looked away but not before Sam saw the hurt, a deep searing pain move through his expression. Sam looked into the now empty shot glass still in his hand. Yeah, that was why he'd left. He'd been unable to find all that he wanted in Sunset, all that he needed in Trace.

"I heard you bought the ranch." Sam chose to change the subject this time. He didn't want to go into it now, his reasons for leaving, the things he'd needed that Trace hadn't been able to give him, the things he hadn't been able to give Trace. He couldn't tell the man why he'd left without explanation or warning. God, he couldn't even look at him without remembering the way he tasted, salty and warm and scrumptious. The way he felt, silky and firm and steady. The way he used to touch Sam, with such tenderness and devotion.

"They offered it for a good price." Trace sipped his beer. "I heard you bought a big expensive condo in Manhattan."

Sam laughed but he couldn't say the action wasn't more to keep from crying because he certainly found nothing funny about the situation. He looked at what he'd given up for that big expensive condo in Manhattan and he couldn't help but wonder, was it worth it?

"Listen to us." He laughed again, dryly. "We're sitting here talking as if we've never—"

"Sly, don't." Trace cut him off. "Let's not go there, okay?"

Sam stared at him. He couldn't do it either, couldn't pretend they had never meant anything to each other, that they didn't *still* mean something to each other. Slowly, he nodded. "Then why come over here to talk to me, Trace? Where do you want to go?"

Chapter 2

Where did he want to go? That was such a loaded question and yet Trace had no idea how to answer. Home. The word stuck on the tip of his tongue, but Sly would no doubt misunderstand if Trace gave that particular response. Or would he?

Seeing Sly again felt worse than Trace ever thought it would be. The sound of his voice soothed the air like an FM radio DJ's voice with its smooth flowing deep timbre that tantalized even as it soothed. His expressive eyes looked so very haunted and torn even as they exuded such light and life in their hazel depths. His lips, *ah God*, those kissable lips. Trace found himself fixating on those lips now, remembering how they tasted as he slipped his tongue between them, how they felt on his flesh as Sly kissed and licked his way over Trace's body. He wanted to taste them again, to feel that again. Jesus save him!

Truth. There had to be truth between them, Trace decided. Maybe Sly had left him to flap around like dust in the wind but he felt certain Sly'd had his reasons. Although they'd been reasons he hadn't seen fit to explain to Trace. But Trace had been walking a tightrope then too, knowing things between them weren't right and holding back so very much he should've said, *wished* he'd said.

"I thought we could settle some unfinished business. Put the past behind us once and for all." Cord had used the same words, but coming from his own mouth they didn't sound quite right. They sounded so impersonal, so bland.

"We have unfinished business?" Sam cast him a sideways glance, one brow lifted. It was such a sexy look that Trace's mind tripped and stumbled over whatever he might have thought to say as response.

Sam was goading him. Why? He'd been the one to bring it up. How would he have finished his statement if Trace hadn't stopped him? They were sitting here talking as if they had never...what? Never been friends? Never been lovers? Never explored one another's bodies with their tongue until they both writhed and panted and grew delirious with need? Never spent hours in the dark of night lying together and talking until one of them fell asleep?

Trace ached all over because of the lost time, the tender memories even as his cock stiffened to the point of pain from the desires surging through his bloodstream to do it all again. Even if it ended the same as before, to simply have one more night with Sly, one more chance for what they'd shared, *oh God*.

Trace gritted his teeth. Maybe business had been the wrong word. It was definitely the wrong word. "You know we do," he barked. The feelings of needs swirling with the growing sensations of betrayal and indecision made his temper snap. The needs for what he'd once shared with this man, what he wanted to share again. The betrayal he felt for wanting those things from Sly when he had Cord waiting for him back at the ranch. The indecision made him angry because as badly as he loved Cord, he loved Sly, too. Cord had given him permission to settle this with Sly. Exactly how had Cord figured Trace would do that? By simply talking or something more?

"But maybe now isn't the time to talk after all." Trace stood, not sure what he intended to do, where he meant to go, but knowing he had to get out of this bar. "How about I drive you to the estate?"

"I'm not ready to leave." Sam shook his head as he stared into his beer mug, then picked it up and drank deep. "You go if you want. I don't need you to drive me, Trace. I'm a big boy. I can see myself back to the house."

Trace hesitated, took a deep breath. "Okay then. It was, um, nice seeing you again."

Sam chuckled sardonically at that. "Yeah, nice seeing you." He looked up at Trace and, oh God, those couldn't be tears glistening in his eyes. "Don't go, Trace."

Trace blinked. Was it possible Sly felt as confused as Trace by all of this? Was it possible he wanted to try again, that he wanted to see if what they'd shared, no matter how convoluted and screwed up it had been, remained between them?

"Stay and have another beer," Sam said.

He hadn't finished the other one. The mug still sat half full on the bar. Rather than point out the obvious, Trace shook his head. "This wasn't a good idea. I really should go."

Sam held his gaze for so long Trace nearly relented. Then he thought about Cord, about how much he loved him and how, despite the problems in that relationship, too, at least Cord was there for him. Cord hadn't left Trace for three years. *No, he just left you here with Sly for the night.* "Take care."

Trace turned and walked out of the bar. He stopped mere steps into the parking lot, spun around. He cast a murderous glare at the closing barroom door as if it were at fault for the misery in his life and yanked off his hat. He raked his fingers through his hair and started walking again, stopping once more when he realized his truck wasn't there. Cord had obviously taken it. It shouldn't have come as a surprise. They had ridden together. How else had he expected Cord to get home? But had Cord really expected Trace to leave with Sly? The notion of that sliced through Trace like a bullet from a single barrel shotgun. Had this night been Cord's way of telling Trace he wasn't happy in their relationship? That no matter how Trace tried to make it work with him, Cord was unsatisfied enough to call it quits?

Trace knew he wasn't giving Cord all that he needed, all that he wanted. Just as he'd been unable to give it all to Sly three years ago. Damn it, could he be destined to always love men he couldn't please?

He swore under his breath and absently scanned the parking lot. He recognized the black super cab Chevrolet as being Sly's even before his gaze landed on the New York plates. Still cursing, he walked to it and leaned against the front fender to wait. He couldn't leave Sly here even if he wanted to. Did he want to? Hell if he knew anymore. The man was drunk. That much Trace knew for absolute fact. No way could he let Sly drive back to the Yates estate some fifteen miles through the winding country back roads. It wasn't likely Sly would harm anyone else on the roads at this hour but he might very well kill himself.

Take care. They were the last words he'd spoken to Sly inside, and they reverberated through Trace's mind now. Sly had been right. They had been talking as if they hadn't meant a thing to one another. But what should they have said? I love you, I miss you, I can't live without you? Or maybe, I'm sorry I couldn't give you what you wanted, be who you wanted and it drove you away?

Music spilled out of the bar as the door opened—Travis Tritt's “*T-R-O-U-B-L-E*.” Trace almost laughed as the song registered at the same time Sly walked out of the bar. Yeah, Sly was trouble, no doubt, and Trace was through fighting it. Cord wanted him to fix things with Sly and Sly, well, Trace didn't know exactly what Sly wanted but Trace thought he had a good idea what would do for tonight. As for himself, he wanted it all but, since he couldn't have that, maybe for tonight he could at least give the men he loved what they wanted for quite possibly the first time in their relationships. He wasn't sure what being with Sly, what losing the man again would do to his own heart, but he'd worry about that when it happened.

Trace tussled down his thoughts and fears as ruthlessly as he did the cattle on his ranch and pushed himself off the fender of Sly's truck, ready and willing for whatever came next.

* * * *

Sam didn't have to be seeing double to know his date with Jack had hit him too hard and too fast to be facing Trace again. Yet, there he stood, leaning against Sam's truck looking drop-dead sexy as all get out. He'd filled out a bit since Sam left. He let his gaze glide over Trace in a way he hadn't allowed himself to do inside the bar. Alcohol plus desire equaled a whole less self-control. He wasn't drunk. Well, not completely shitfaced in any case. But he knew he'd be a lot less apt to flick the match on the sea of gasoline spreading between him and Trace if he'd been completely sober.

Trace straightened as Sam started walking his way. "I thought you weren't ready to go."

"I thought you had already gone," Sam countered. He didn't stop until he was barely an arm's reach from Trace. "Planning to sleep it off with me in the cab of my truck until morning?"

The idea of spooning with Trace on the bench seat of his truck nearly made Sam stumble and fall on his nose. Feeling that body clad in that tight t-shirt and even tighter pants, having that hard cock pressed to his backside, Trace's arm over his waist, his hand cupping Sam's cock through his jeans... The thought of doing anything at all until morning with this man he'd missed so badly almost made Sam cry.

Trace shrugged and closed the distance Sam had left between them by a half a step. "If that's where you want to spend the night. I was thinking more along the ways of the ranch."

Sam stared at him as his pulse pounded in his ears, drowning out all sound. Holy God, what was Trace offering? Dear sweet baby Jesus, could Sam allow himself to accept it, to accept *him*? "Your ranch?" he heard himself ask dumbly.

"No, I figured we'd pick one in the next county," Trace countered sarcastically. "Yes, my ranch, you fool."

"I'm not as drunk as you think I am." Or maybe he was because, oh cows bells, Sam seemed actually ready, willing, and extremely

able to take whatever Trace offered him tonight whether it be at Trace's ranch or some unknown spread of land in the next county.

"Good, then I won't have to worry about you puking on me." Trace took another half step toward Sam and Sam held up a hand.

"Trace, I don't want—"

"Me," Trace cut him off. "Yeah, I got that when you left. Except, you sure as hell seem to want me tonight." His arms moved around Sam's waist and he yanked Sam against his hard body.

Trace never made such a bold move before, never took control even in the smallest of ways, and Sam found himself stunned even as his pulse pounded loudly in his ears. It was heart attack time. Sam felt the pressure in his chest as clearly and painfully as he felt Trace's impossibly hard cock against his own groin.

"Thing is," Trace continued, his face but a breath from Sam's, "I never stopped wanting you."

His directness made Sam's head spin as much as the Jack Daniels. It squeezed at his balls like a vise, too, bringing on an insurmountable level of delirious pleased pain. The way Trace yanked him against his body, held him so tight Sam would have to use his muscles to break free, ramped Sam's desires to an almost insatiable altitude.

Sam's arms found their way around Trace's neck and he dipped his fingers in the hairs at Trace's nape. Silky smooth, his hair felt soft as a horse's mane just as Sam had remembered. He closed his eyes and allowed himself a moment to run his fingers through Trace's tresses, to revel in the feel of being this close to him after nearly thirty-six long and torturous months.

"My wanting you in return was never the issue," Sam whispered and opened his eyes to find Trace staring at him. Hope and confusion, and, *Jesus God*, love swirled in the gray depths of Trace's eyes and Sam felt himself break.

He'd always wanted Trace. Even before he knew for certain Trace was gay, he'd wanted him. Sam had come home after college graduation to the biggest party the Yates estate and Sunset, Tennessee

had seen in decades. His parents had invited damned near everyone in the county! Including Trace. And how did that old cliché go? Love at first sight. Sam had never believed in such a thing before until he spotted Trace.

No, loving Trace, wanting Trace had never been an issue. The more that Sam wanted had been his downfall and the cause of their demise. He hadn't wanted to be a small town cowboy all his life. He'd worked hard, gone to college and studied his ass off to be so much more. Still, that too hadn't been what really led to his disappearance. It had been the knowledge that what was missing in his relationship with Trace turned out to be something Trace couldn't give him. Not *wouldn't*. Trace had been willing to give him everything. But he'd been unable to give him the domination he craved because it simply wasn't in Trace's nature. And in wanting that from Trace, expecting it, wishing for it, he'd began to change Trace in ways that started to make the man into someone he wasn't.

Except, as Trace's mouth came down on his in a kiss so savage and claiming it took his breath away, Sam found himself wondering if he'd been wrong about the man he loved all along.

* * * *

Cord lay on the floor, his hands behind his head and a small roll of hay beneath it for support, his feet crossed at the ankles, his eyes transfixed on the ceiling when he heard it. For over an hour he'd been here in the moonlight, ignoring the occasional buzz of a mosquito, the trickle of sweat that slid down his temple, the parched feel that became more and more insistent in his mouth. He'd focused instead on listening to the distant chirps of the crickets, the croaks of the frogs, the various sounds the cattle made as they rustled in the pastures. Then he heard the tires crunching on the shell drive.

He'd come up here, in the loft above the barn a few yards from the main house, figuring if Trace managed to convince Sam to come

home with him, they'd need privacy. He'd even pulled Trace's truck around back so it wouldn't be seen from the drive, so Trace wouldn't know Cord was here when he came home.

And that was only part of the truth, Cord admitted to himself with a sigh as he heard first one truck door close and then the other. He had needed privacy, too. He needed the quiet and the solitude to think, to hope, and to pray. He closed his eyes at the barely audible deep throated chuckle that drifted to his ears on the wind and began that prayer.

Cord and his maker weren't strangers by any means, at least not when it came to Cord asking for help. As a rodeo rider, he did so each time he strapped himself to the back of a bull or a bucking horse. He altered that prayer to one of thanks eight seconds later when he dismounted that bull or horse, still alive and in one piece.

Tonight, however, his prayer was strictly of the asking variety. Pleading would probably be a better term, he reckoned. Any prayer that began with please, please, *please* sure sounded like begging to him. So he lodged the piece of straw he chewed in the corner of his mouth and started to beg. He moved his lips with the words he spoke for good measure just to be sure there was no misunderstanding between himself and the man upstairs.

"Please, God, let the men I love find each other again. Let 'em iron out their differences. Let 'em see how strong the love is remainin' between them and realize they'd be stupid to let it fall apart. Oh, and it surely would be really perfect, Lord, if they could do all this without forgetting about the mutual love I know they still feel for me. Amen."

It was a gamble. Something he'd stopped doing long ago when he'd nearly lost every dime to his name and the shirt on his back to boot. But he was gambling big now and, if he lost, the price to pay would be a helluva lot steeper than a bit of money and a stitch of clothing. The price would be his heart.

* * * *

His truck wasn't in the drive. Trace registered that fact and simultaneously felt the pain of the cattle prod stab him through. He hadn't wanted to believe Cord could be willing to let go of him so easily. Apparently he'd been wrong.

Trace knew in his heart Cord loved him even if Trace couldn't always make the other man happy. Sly could make Cord happy though. Maybe he should set Sly up with Cord.

The thought dashed through his mind like a NASCAR racer headed for the finish line. He couldn't deny the two men would likely be perfect for each other. What Sly had always wanted from Trace, what Cord wanted from him now were things each man could give the other and neither would be lacking. But where would that leave Trace? In love with two men he couldn't have.

"You're thinking again." Sly turned on Trace as the men met halfway at the front of Sly's truck and backed Trace against the front grill. "Let's not think."

His face stopped only a breath from Trace's and Trace couldn't help himself, he closed that breath and kissed Sly. A tender brush. A fleeting caress. Still, it sent slivers of pent-up desires raining through his body, tightening his balls and stiffening his cock.

"For now, for tonight, let's let it all go," Sly continued and kissed Trace back. "That's what you are after, isn't it? Because it's sure as hell what I'm after now." His hand pushed between their bodies, turning over to cup Trace's crotch.

Trace sucked in a surprised breath even as his cock flexed in response to Sly's touch. Could he do this? Oh, God, it felt so good to have Sly's hands on him again even through the material of his jeans. But could he do this? Could he go further?

He thought about Cord. Where had he gone? What was he doing now? How would Trace feel if this was Cord standing here in Sly's arms, with Cord's cock in Sly's hand right now? He didn't know. He couldn't even fathom the thought because he would've never walked

away from Cord the way Cord had walked away from him at the bar tonight.

Trace's anger and hurt came rushing back and he embraced it as firmly as he held Sly when his arms found their way around Sly's neck.

"Let's pretend nothing has changed, Tray."

Sly's breath smelled of the whisky he'd drunk by the shot back at the bar. He tasted of it, too, as he swept his tongue into Trace's mouth, licking Trace's teeth, his pallet and tangling with his tongue in a dance so achingly familiar it made Trace melt in the man's arms.

Pretend nothing has changed. Sly's words echoed in Trace's mind as he gave himself over to the full effects of Sly's kiss. How could he pretend nothing had changed between them after three long years had passed without a word? How could he pretend when his heart, or at least half of it, belong to another man? As Sly tipped his head, changing the angle of the kiss and taking it deeper, Trace found himself sliding into that alternate universe Sly pulled him toward.

Sly was drunk. Trace attempted to remind himself of that fact, attempted to backpedal in his mind, his loins, his heart. It didn't work. Drunk or not, the things Sly was saying, the things he was doing—his hand had tightened on Trace's cock and he was stroking, squeezing, making Trace's hip rock into Sly's hand—All the things he said and did mirrored so completely exactly what Trace wanted at that moment that he couldn't find it in himself to give a flying squirrel if Sly was drunker than Cooter Brown or as sober as a nun.

Sly eased away just enough to meet Trace's gaze. "I want this." He gave Trace's cock a semi-pressured squeeze that pulled a low groan from Trace's throat. Sly chuckled. "Mmm, God, I love that sound. I want this and I want you. Any way I can have you. Tonight. Right here. Right now."

"Let's get into the house," Trace whispered and started walking, leaving his reality in check at the grill of Sly's truck.

Chapter 3

Sam would've taken Trace right there against his truck. He almost did before he caught himself. The urge to whip the other man around in his arms, slam him against the grill, yank down his jeans and ram his cock in Trace's tightly amazing ass came over him so strong it made Sam's head spin. Usually, Sam preferred that kind of treatment from a lover, the kind of treatment Trace had never been able to give or cared to take.

That dirtiness in Sam, that twisted part of him, had driven him away from Trace and galloping for New York. He buried that part of himself deep tonight. He'd allowed himself to come this far, to push aside any senses of wrong, any doubts and future regrets. No way would he allow that piece of himself to fuck up this night.

His hands were on Trace's waist as he followed the other man inside the house. He booted the door closed then gently turned Trace to face him, drawing him close. But he stopped with his lips a fraction of an inch from touching Trace's. He let the moment linger for several heartbeats, loving the anticipation that built like a wall of hormones between them.

"I've missed you," he whispered. He hadn't meant to say it. It hurt to say it and, he knew as a mirroring pain swept through Trace's eyes, it hurt the other man just as much to hear it.

Trace closed his eyes, visibly swallowed, and then opened them again. "I've missed you, too."

Something was wrong. Sam felt it in the air around them, in the rigidity of Trace's body in his arms, in the tightness of Trace's voice.

Something was wrong and Sam didn't think it was all to do with the history between them.

"If this is going to be too hard for you..."

Trace rocked his hips against Sam's and Sam felt the man's marvelous erection pressing into his own. "Is that too hard for you?" Trace cut him off. A wicked gleam Sam had never seen washed away everything else in Trace's eyes.

Sam made a sound he couldn't say for sure he'd ever heard coming from his own lips and let his hands drop to Trace's ass. He held him closer, tighter, grinding his cock against Trace's, teasing them both. "Not even close, baby."

"Then let's start pretending."

Trace kissed him before he could say anything more. Pretending. It had been Sam's term but, when Trace said it, for some reason that word felt sharper than any arrow to the chest. Exactly what was Trace pretending? That nothing had changed between them or something far more?

Trace's hands tugged Sam's shirt from his jeans and slipped beneath, running up Sam's back and Sam forgot all about pretending. No way could he act as if the contact of Trace's skin on his skin felt anything short of testosterone pleasuring bliss. Sam bypassed Trace's mouth in favor of kissing his chin, dragging his tongue over the stubbly surface of Trace's jaw, and trailing down his neck.

Trace's head fell back, his calloused hands gripping Sam's shoulders beneath his shirt as Sam kissed and licked his way over Trace's neck and collarbone. Sam pushed the neckline of Trace's shirt aside with his nose, exposing more flesh to explore. Trace groaned.

It wasn't enough. To taste this small part of Trace wasn't enough for Sam's senses. He needed more now! He pulled at Trace's shirt, still unable to stop kissing and licking despite his growing desire for so much more. Trace seemed to sense his torment, or maybe Trace felt a torment of his own. Either way, the other man abandoned his exploration of Sam's back to yank off his own shirt and then did the

same with Sam's. Then Trace's hands smoothed over his flesh and, *oh God*, it felt so good. Sam let his own hands fall to his sides and stood there while Trace caressed him with his gaze, with his hands. He started at Sam's shoulders and glided over his pecs. Trace's palms felt rough, the calluses like tiny bits of sandpaper to Sam's sensitized nipples.

Trace paused there, the pads of his thumbs drawing lazy circles around and over Sam's nipples until Sam's body jerked from the maddening sensations. Electrified drops of ecstasy rained through him and he had to move, needed to touch, to hold. He started to lift his arms but Trace caught his forearms, pushing them back down.

"Don't touch me." Trace's voice sounded raspy and thick. "Not yet. Let me touch first. I need to feel you, to assure myself you're really here and not just a dream."

Tears welled in Sam's eyes and he looked at a place to the left of Trace's head, unable to meet the other man's gaze. Dear God, what were they doing? This night, this single act held the promise of ripping them both to shreds at this rate. He nodded but didn't speak. Then he moaned as Trace's hands closed over his pecs once more.

Trace didn't linger this time but slid his hands over Sam's abs, tickled his fingers down Sam's stomach. He actually laughed, a quick burst of breathless sound.

"Still ticklish, I see." Amusement rang in Trace's tone now, amusement that quickly turned to a sultry heat. "And I see working behind a desk hasn't harmed this perfect body of yours. Damn, baby, you look so fine."

His hands had made it to Sam's waist, the fingers dipping below the waistband of Sam's jeans, and Sam had to move. He caught Trace's wrists. "My turn. Then you can go there."

* * * *

Trace wanted to argue but the need in Sly's eyes made him bite back the words. He'd thought to try to please Sly his way, to give Sly what he'd never been able to give before. He'd seen the glint of excitement swirl with the challenge and excitement in Sly's expression at his order not to be touched yet and knew that at least had not changed. Sly still craved domination and no matter how strong he'd been, no matter how self assured or how desperately he tried, Trace was as dominant as a freaking poodle!

Sly's hands splayed on Trace's shoulders, sliding down to cover Trace's pecs just as Trace had done moments before to Sly. Trace liked to be pleased this way, an equal give and take. Tease for tease, heat for heat, pleasure for pleasure. And damn if Sly hadn't always been a pro at his end of the tease, the heat, and definitely the pleasure.

Trace stood still, shivering only when Sly's lips closed around one taut nipple. His tongue traced the pebbled surface, lapping at the tiny bead as he rolled it between his lips. Trace's eyes closed on the rapture of it even as his arms rose to Sly's shoulders. Submitting was something Trace had never been able to do either, at least not to the point of being a true submissive. His enjoyment when it came to sex fell somewhere in between the tenuous areas of being controlled and taking control. Still, he held himself in check, allowing himself only the feel of Sly's shoulders as Sly's mouth moved from his pecs. Sly trailed his tongue down Trace's abs and Trace realized he'd needed exactly this. He'd needed a moment to simply feel just as he'd touched. He'd needed a moment to lose himself in as Sly licked his way over Trace's torso. The moment sent Trace tumbling between the past and the present to where the worlds collided and there was only Sly and Trace.

Trace waited until Sly's tongue connected with the waistband of Trace's jeans before he reached for the button of Sly's pants. An equal give and take. They'd both explored equally to this point. *Time to move on.*

"We should probably take this upstairs." Even as he made the suggestion, Sly's fingers fumbled the button of Trace's pants free and his hand delved inside. Trace's mind went blank. The room tilted and he nearly melted to the bearskin rug beneath their feet.

Sly chuckled, his breath warm against Trace's abdomen. "I don't think you'll make it that far, cowboy. Unless you plan for me to carry you."

Trace felt the button of Sly's pants give in his fingers and pushed down Sly's zipper sliding his hand inside Sly's briefs to close around his cock in a firm grip. Sly's knees shook. "Now who's having trouble standing, Sly?"

Sly growled. "When did you get to be so wicked? Damn, Tray, you're killing me."

Trace didn't answer. He wasn't sure what to say. Silly as it seemed, he actually felt giddy at the idea that Sly thought he was wicked. He tightened his fingers around Sly's cock, loving the animalistic sound Sly made and then let him go.

Trace pulled his hand free, laughing now at the grunts of protest coming from Sly even as Sly began fondling Trace's cock. He stroked Trace slow and methodically, hampered by Trace's pants and boxers. Trace grew tired of having clothes between them. He shucked Sly's pants and boxers down his legs and then, *ah yes*, he could touch Sly the way he truly wanted to.

"Is anyone else home?" Sly kicked off his boots and wiggled out of his clothes all the while continuing his slow mind-numbing stroking of Trace's cock.

"Do you care?" Trace reached between Sly's legs with his free hand and grabbed him by the balls as his other hand moved up and down Sly's rock hard shaft. He didn't want to think if anyone was in the house. Sly would likely get off on someone walking in on them and, hell, if that someone turned out to be Cord, the other man would probably get off on it, too.

Sly's answered by pushing Trace's clothing to his ankles and spinning Trace around. He drew Trace back against his front. Sly's impressive cock stretched long and hard between their bodies. "I want to feel you. Right here. Right now. I don't give a horse's ass if the governor of Tennessee walks in on us."

His voice sounded tight, strained with lust and desire. Trace still heard that voice in his dreams. "Then what are you waiting for?" Trace turned his head and met Sly's gaze. His eyes softened unexpectedly and shimmered with tears. "I still love you, Trace. I never stopped loving you. I just want you to know that."

How was it possible a heart could break even as it swelled with happiness? Honesty. He hid so much from Sly right now the least he could do was be honest about this. "I love you, too, Sly. No matter how far you go or for how long you're gone, I'll never stop loving you."

Sly stared at him, obviously wanting to say more but not finding the words. Trace kissed him, delving his tongue into Sly's mouth, licking his way to a rapturous release that seemed just out of his grasp. But not out of Sly's.

Trace rocked his hips, thrusting his cock in Sly's hand, rubbing his ass against Sly's body. Then he slithered to the floor as Sly tugged him down. He felt Sly ease away, covering his cock with a condom he seemed to produce from out of nowhere before the warmth of his body was back against Trace's backside. Sly folded his body over Trace's, one arm around Trace's waist still holding onto his cock as Sly positioned his own cock at the opening of Trace's anus and pushed inside.

Ecstasy, sweet and intense, raced through Trace like a hot Tennessee wind. Sly entered him slowly, his dick inching past the tight ring of muscles just inside Trace's anus. Trace sucked a breath through clinched teeth at the sharp pain, the pure erotic pleasure. Trace closed his eyes, allowing his sense of touch to become paramount as pinpricks of sensations he couldn't define shot through

him to fall back like a rain of sharp arrows. Sly's cock rubbed at the sensitive walls of Trace's anus, his hands moving to Trace's hips, fingers digging into flesh and bone as Sly took his ass inch by glorious inch.

"Sam." Trace breathed his name, sighing as the passion mounted, as the release built to an explosive strength in his balls.

Behind him, he heard Sly's echoing sigh, felt the man's rigid control as he battled to keep the pace stable, tender, equal. Sly continued to fill him deeper and deeper until he felt almost certain he couldn't take anymore. He started to say so, started to tell Sly to stop, the pleasure was simply too much to form words, when he realized he didn't have to. Sly's lips cruised over the back of his shoulder, Sly's cock impossibly deep inside his ass.

"God, Tray, you feel..." Sly began but trailed off, pulled his hips back, and eased several rock hard inches out before gradually pushing in again. "So amazing. Your ass, the muscles as they close and clamp around my cock, Jesus, baby!"

The urge to let go came over Trace so fast and furious he had to fight to hold on. In that moment, with Sly's erotic words, his lips against his flesh, his body inside his, Trace nearly lost himself to the ejaculation that tightened his balls, thudded in his dick. "Please, Sly. I can't stop it. I'm going to..."

Sly reached around him again, catching Trace's cock in his hand and stroking in a pressured squeeze that any other time would've made Trace batshit, but right now, in the heat of the moment, with release knocking at the farm door, he groaned.

"Let go, babe. I'm right with you."

Trace thrust his hips back, drawing Sly's dick impossibly deep inside him, and he came in a blinding rush of light and passion that nearly tore his world apart. Sly was right there with him as he promised, grunting loudly in Trace's ear as he erupted.

Panting and spent, they collapsed, Sly on top of Trace, both men sprawled on the living room floor. Trace felt Sly's heart pounding

furiously against his back, the rapid beat in time with his own. Then Sly lifted his head, his lips brushing Trace's shoulder blade before he rolled off to spread out on his back at Trace's side.

The absence of his weight, of his warmth hit Trace in an instant and he lifted his head, turning to look at Sly. Sly reached for him, his fingers idly caressing Trace's arm.

"Wow! I can't get my breath." Sly chuckled. "That felt amazing."

Trace let a small smile unfold on his lips. "Yeah, it did. Hard to believe we really split up because of sex after a time like that." As soon as the words were out of his mouth he wished he could take them back. What a way to ruin an aftermath of something so fabulous.

* * * *

Sam stilled, his gaze locked with Trace's, his mind scrambling for words around the growing ache in his head. He no longer felt anywhere close to drunk. The effects of good ole' Jack had started to wear off during that incredible bout of sex. Now the dark side of the whisky was make itself known, proving to Sam he either should've stopped long before that last shot or found somewhere to sleep it off way before now. Sly opened his mouth but he wasn't sure what he intended to say. Before he could figure it out, Trace stopped him.

"Forget I said that. Okay?" Trace rolled to his side and took Sam's hand in his. "It *did* feel amazing. It's still amazing just being here with you again."

"It wasn't just the sex," Sam told him anyway because Trace had been right from the start, back at the bar. They *did* need to talk about why Sam had left. Except, how to explain something he'd never quite fully understood himself? "Sex with you was always...God, Trace, when I said it felt amazing just now that was a complete understatement."

"But it's not what you really like, what really gets you off." Trace's voice sounded small, quiet and he dropped his gaze.

Sam hooked a finger under Trace's chin. When Trace met his gaze again, Sam glanced down at his dick going soft in the used condom that still covered his length. "Looks to me like I got off just fine. But if you aren't quite sure of that we can try it again."

Trace smiled but it was quick, gone in an instant. "You know what I mean."

Sam sighed. "Yeah, I know. You're both right and wrong. I *do* really like the sex we just had, the way we just had sex. But yeah, I really get off having sex the, um, other way, too. I can't say that wasn't part of it, part of why I left. I'm a deviant, Trace."

"Because you like rough sex? That doesn't make you a deviant," Trace argued. "Lots of people like it rough. The whole BDSM thing gets a lot of people off."

"Just not you," Sam said gently.

Trace shook his head. "No, just not me. I'm starting to think I'm the abnormal one here. If I did, it would sure make things a whole lot easier."

Sam stared at him for a long moment before saying anything more. He wanted to ask what. What would it make easier? Trace's relationship with Sly? Or something far different? He was beginning to believe it was the latter. "I don't always have to have it that way. I just like it that way some of the time."

It was why things hadn't worked between him and the last man he'd been with, the man he'd dated for several months between Trace then and Trace now. Cord DeMoss had been the dominant the deviant side of Sam needed. But the tender side of Sam, the part only Trace had ever really managed to touch, had starved for attention.

Sam closed his eyes and rubbed at his temples. "And, like I said, it wasn't only the sex that, well, that made me run. It was the life. I've never wanted the ranch life. It's why I lit out of here as fast as I could, why I buried myself in college for so many years."

"Why you hauled ass to New York the first chance you got." Trace's tone made the question half statement.

"Not the first chance." Sam reached for him, needing to be closer again. "I'd intended to haul ass as soon as I woke from the graduation party."

"But you met me instead."

"But I met you." Sam leaned in, brushed his lips to Trace's. "I've never regretted that," he told Trace softly, seeing the sadness and guilt that moved through his lover's eyes. His lover? Christ. Could he really think of Trace that way again? "I never will."

"So the city pulled you away? The city and the sex."

It sounded so stupid when Trace put it like that but, yeah, it pretty much summed it up. Sam had given up this man he loved with all his heart for the big city lights and executive rush of New York and a few scarce months with a rodeo cowboy who fulfilled Sam's devious need for domination while leaving him aching for the gentleness of Trace.

Sam squinted his eyes and rested his forehead on Trace's. "I guess that about covers it."

"And now?" Trace whispered. But before Sam could reply, he asked, "Is your favorite uncle leaving you a surprise as he fades away?" Trace's lips twitched. "Want some aspirin?"

"Naw, aspirin is for morning. You now, then sleep." That was the only now Sam could consider tonight. He watched as Trace ingested his words, accepted those words as all either of them could promise for the night, and nodded.

"How about we take it to the bed this time?" Trace suggested as he pushed to his feet.

"Tray, is there someone else?" Sam didn't know what made him ask but, as he got to his own feet, holding his head to keep it from splitting as the pre-hangover headache built, he heard himself say the words.

Trace stopped and looked at him.

He sighed. "There is, was, has been."

Sam lifted a brow. "Pick one."

"I can't. Look, I don't really want to talk about him tonight. Do we really have to talk about him?"

Yes. The word stuck on the tip of Sam's tongue. Yes, they absolutely had to talk about this other guy. What the hell was Trace doing, cheating on this other guy with Sam? But what was Sam doing here with Trace? Where did he expect it to go after tonight?

"The bed is upstairs, I assume," Sam said, pushing aside all the questions, all the doubts, all the decisions at least for the rest of tonight. He held out his hand. "Lead the way, lover."

Chapter 4

Cord flipped the eggs in the skillet and muttered a curse when the faint burning scent reached his nose. He sidestepped to the toaster, leaned over to peer inside and forced up the lever, popping the toast into view. He winced.

"You're cooking," a surprised voice said behind him. "You can't cook."

Cord turned to find Trace leaning lazily against the kitchen doorframe, his arms crossed over his chest, his feet crossed at the ankles. He wore a pair of jeans with an unbuttoned denim work shirt. His feet were bare. He looked, Cord decided, a bit haggard, thoroughly used, utterly satisfied, and as uncertain as all get out. And despite all that he still managed to look incredibly sexy.

"I can see to eggs and toast." Cord glanced down at the toast he'd tossed on a saucer, noted the slightly charred edges, and winced again. "Usually."

"Better catch those eggs or they'll be in worse shape." Trace pushed away from the door and moved to the coffee pot on the counter. "Coffee, too? I'm impressed."

"Bite me," Cord mumbled as he divided the eggs in the pan onto the two plates with the toast. "I make a helluva pot of coffee."

"I can't deny that."

"Should I be splitting this among three?" Cord shot a glance over his shoulder in time to see Trace freeze, his coffee cup halfway to his lips. "Better give that a blow first. It's pretty hot."

Trace's gaze dropped to the cup. "Sly's still sleeping."

"Okay, two then." Cord walked to the table, set the plates in front of their usual sitting spots. He pulled out Trace's chair and looked at him. "Join me for breakfast?"

Cord wanted to squirm under Trace's penetrating gaze. Instead, he smiled and patiently waited. He needed to keep this morning after light. He knew Trace and Sam had been together last night, knew they had slept together in Trace and Cord's bed. The jealousy of that fact made him feel greener than the Christmas Grinch. But was it jealousy because Sam had Trace or the other way around?

It was decidedly both. He'd come to that conclusion just before dawn. That's when he'd made the decision to be here in the kitchen when Trace came down. Trace rose with the chickens but Cord knew enough about Sam to figure he'd sleep till almost noon. It would give him some time with Trace alone before the man went out to see to his ranch hands and do his own day's work on the spread. Unless Cord could convince him to take the day off.

"What's Sly stand for anyway?" Cord asked when Trace didn't move. "Sylvester?" He knew that wasn't it. Yet, it was the logical assumption one would make.

"His name is Samuel Louis Yates. It's a play on his initials." Trace shrugged. "A little nickname I used to call him. Still call him, apparently. He always called me TNT because of mine."

"Because you're dynamite." Cord grinned. "Clichéd and pansy, but fitting, nevertheless. Come on. Sit down and eat before it gets cold."

"Where did you go last night?" Trace asked as he took the seat. Cord noted the slight shake to the other man's hands as he put down his coffee cup. Was he scared? Nervous? "I didn't see my truck. It wasn't outside when I got home."

Cord sat down across from Trace and sipped his coffee, eyeing the other man over the rim. He was a bit nervous. And scared, too. Cord saw the two emotions swirling in Trace's so expressive eyes. "I parked the truck out back and slept in the barn."

"I slept with Sly." Trace blinked and looked marginally surprised that he blurted the information so casually.

Cord leaned back in his chair and slowly nodded. "I figured as much. Want to talk about it?"

Trace stared at him. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it without making a sound, and shook his head. He picked up a slice of toast and took a bite. "This isn't half bad." A small smile toyed with the edges of his lips.

Cord wanted to go to him, to pull him into his arms and kiss those half smiling lips. To stroke away the fear and nerves still clouding Trace's beautiful eyes. He knew he was at least half responsible for putting the fear and nerves there, maybe solely responsible seeing as he'd been the one to leave Trace to Sam. "You might want to tread cautiously with the eggs. I think a few bits of shell may have fallen in the mix."

Trace finished off the slice of toast and rubbed his forehead.

"Hangover?" Cord asked conversationally. "Want some ibuprofen?"

"No, I...it's...I barely had anything to drink last night. Sly was pounding down the Jack pretty hard. I took the designated driver roll instead."

Cord hid his surprise about Sam and his hit to the bottle of Jack Daniels. The man must've been on the edge to dive into the whisky that way. They'd knocked back many a beer when they'd been together, but Sam had never ventured to the hard stuff. It intrigued Cord as much as it concerned him that Sam had done so last night.

"You often do. I can't count the nights you've taken care of me that way, babe."

Trace shrugged. "I like taking care of...you." He looked away quick, then shook his head again and stood. He took his plate to the counter, his toast half eaten and his eggs untouched.

Cord watched him as he refilled his coffee cup in silence. He knew he should tell Trace about Sam/Sly, about his own past

relationship with the man, about his own love for him, but he couldn't find the words. Not yet. Trace was a strong man but when it came to emotions he tended to wear them on his sleeve. He seemed torn this morning, his heart in tatters over two men he loved and the position Cord had already put him in. Tossing out the truth before Trace had a chance to really think about it all would only ruin Cord's plan. He felt sure of it. First he needed to confront Sam.

"I know we need to talk," Trace told him slowly, softly. He turned to face Cord. "But can we do it later? I need, I don't know, air. I need a ride, the open land, time to think."

"Did you tell Sly about me last night?" Cord's pulse raced as he waited for Trace to answer. He didn't know if he wanted the two men he loved to talk about him or if he would prefer his name hadn't come up.

"He knows there's been someone in my life but, no, not exactly."

Cord nodded as he stood. "I can wait. It can wait."

Trace looked at him, his gaze dancing over Cord's face. He started to turn, but Cord caught him by the waist and pulled Trace to him.

"I can wait," Cord repeated. "But I want you to know that just because I walked away last night doesn't make it permanent. It doesn't mean I don't love you, Trace."

"Then why would you do it? Why would you send me to another man's arms?" Trace's voice cracked. Cord started to answer but Trace held a finger over his lips. "No. Don't answer right now. If you can wait to talk, I can wait for your answer." He stepped back, moving out of Cord's arms. "I love you, too, you know. What happened last night, it didn't change that."

Hearing that sent a rush of relief rushing through Cord so fast and furious Cord closed his eyes. "I know. What do you want me to tell Sly if he wakes before you get back?"

Trace gave a half laugh that sounded completely despondent and baffled. "Hell, I don't know. Pick something."

"I'll just tell him I'm your house boy." Cord grinned.

Trace laughed again as he turned and started to walk out. This time the sound rang with true humor. "Yeah, and while you're at it, call up ole George and see about buying that ocean front property he has in Arizona."

* * * *

Sam opened his eyes to pitch darkness. A drunken haze mixed with disorientation and made him lay still on his stomach, his mind working to put together his surroundings. He lay on a bed. He could piece together that much. But whose bed and where? And why was it so dark?

He started to push himself up when he met with resistance at both his wrists and ankles. "What the...?"

"Quiet." The voice was a firm, commanding baritone in Sam's ear. He felt the heat then, a body hard and long and definitely male leaning over his. "I have not given you permission to speak."

Arousal flared inside Sam with such a sudden force he actually shivered from head to toe from it. The reaction drew a low chuckle from the man and realization dawned in Sam's mind. Cord. *Dear heavenly father*. Cord had blindfolded him, tied him, and whispered the husky authoritative words in Sam's ear.

No. Not Cord. It couldn't be Cord. Despite the similarities in the tone of voice, it had to be another man, Trace's roommate, perhaps? Sam should stop this right now. He shouldn't let it continue. But the command, the realization that he'd been bound by a man who no doubt intended to do things to Sam he hadn't felt in far too long prevented him from calling a halt to the little game. He'd rather pretend it be a dream. He could fantasize this man was Cord after all. It had been so long since he'd last seen Cord, last been with the man this way. But it hadn't been that long since he'd dreamt of Cord, since he'd fantasized about exactly this. Resigned to the alternate world and

comforted by the memories, Sam relaxed into the moment and let his sleeping imagination take control.

"You were bad last night," Cord told him, his voice not sounding entirely displeased. "You did things you shouldn't have done."

Sam's mind raced. How could he know? But he didn't know, Sam realized in the next heartbeat. This had to be a dream. It was his own conscious putting those words into his fantasy Cord's mouth.

"You know what that means, don't you, my love slave?"

Sam didn't answer. He'd been told not to speak after all. The urge to say something in his own defense, the knowledge that if he did whatever punishment Cord planned for him would be worse, made his dick throb almost to the point of pain. God, it felt utterly delicious!

"Answer me, slave."

"Yes." Sam's voice cracked on the word. His throat felt thick and dry. Cord's hand fisted in the back of Sam's hair and the man yanked his head up. Slivers of pain radiated through Sam and settled in his aching balls.

"Yes, what?" Cord demanded.

"Yes, Master." Sam felt the other man lean in closer, felt the tip of Cord's tongue glide along the side of Sam's neck. He moaned.

"What does it mean?"

"I must be punished."

"Yes, you must."

Cord released his hold on Sam's head and Sam lay back on the pillow. Cord's hand slid down Sam's back, the touch so uncharacteristically tender for Cord that Sam writhed on the bed. When Cord's hand closed over his right butt cheek, Sam could stay silent no longer. "Please."

"Begging already?" Amusement rang in Cord's tone but it hardened almost instantly. "And speaking without permission."

The warmth of Cord's hand left Sam's ass, replaced a heartbeat later with the chill of something that felt like leather. A strap? A belt? *Oh God.*

"That's twice you've defied me. That definitely requires punishment."

Before Sam could think to speak, with or without permission, the chill of the leather turned to a stinging line of fire as Cord lifted the belt and brought it down hard across Sam's ass. Sam's body jerked involuntarily, arms and legs straining against the restraints. He cried out, shivered as the pain blurred to pleasure just before the belt came down hard for another smack.

"Keep still and quiet," Cord commanded. "You do not have my permission to move."

Sam's muscles tensed, fighting for control to obey as Cord spanked him hard and ruthlessly with the belt. Smack. Smack. *Smack*. By the time Cord tossed the belt to the floor with an audible click of the buckle to the hardwood and placed his palm over Sam's ass, his cheeks flamed from the pain, his cock so hard it felt like iron ready to shatter to bits.

Cord's hand caressed Sam's ass. "So red now, so warm." Cord leaned down, his tongue running along the crack of Sam's ass to dip inside the tight rim of his anus. "And so tasty." His hand glided up Sam's back until he leaned once again close to Sam's ear. "Did you enjoy your punishment, my love slave?"

"Yes, Master." Oh God, yes. His ass stung with an abandon he hadn't felt out of dreams for so long and he prayed he wouldn't wake before this imaginary Cord finished with him for the night.

"Do you want more?" There was a smile in Cord's voice that made Sam smile too despite himself.

"No, Master. Please."

"Please what? You may ask for what you want."

"I want to suck your cock, Master. I want to taste you." His request surprised Cord. Sam could tell by the man's hesitance.

"You want to suck me before I fuck you?"

"Yes, Master. Please."

Sam felt the bindings on his wrist ease enough to offer him a bit of movement. Then Cord's hand fisted in Sam's hair again and he yanked Sam's head back even as the mattress dipped. "On your elbows. Open your lips and suck me then."

Sam pushed himself to his elbows and opened his mouth but it was Cord who thrust his cock inside. Sam gagged on the first penetration, Cord's full length going down Sam's throat without warning or design. Then Cord's grip on Sam's hair loosened, allowing Sam to control the pace. He feasted, sliding his lips down the impressive length of Cord's cock, sucking hard and grazing the sensitive flesh with his teeth.

"Oh, yeah, that's it," Cord groaned. "Suck it, slave. Show me how good it tastes. Show me how bad you've missed it."

How bad he'd missed it. The words reverberated in Sam's head even as he swallowed Cord's dick down the back of his throat, angling his head to take the cock deeper still. How odd that this imaginary Cord would demand such a thing of him. How could Trace's roommate know how badly Sam missed sucking Cord's cock?

He couldn't, of course. Sam's mind had simply taken his pretend game to a different level, mixing reality with his drunken stupor and half-dream state again. He didn't want to realize that reality now. He liked the drunken stupor better, the image he'd allowed himself that Cord had control of him now and not some stranger who lived with Sam's former lover. Sam pushed it away and sank back into his pretend land where he had Cord's stiff cock in his mouth. His land where he hummed around it and delighted at the shivers he felt move through Cord's body to the hand still gripping Sam's hair.

"Damn, baby. It's been a long time since you sucked me like that. Ah, yeah. Take it deep one more time."

Sam drew back, letting Cord's cock nearly slip from his lips before he swallowed it back down. Cord grunted, shivered, and Sam felt the man's cock tremble in his mouth. It made Sam's cock tremble, too. The need to be touched, stroked, sucked battled with the desire in

his backside to be filled and fucked. His ass still stung from his punishment.

"That's enough." A hard yank to Sam's hair followed Cord's commanding words as Cord pulled his cock from Sam's mouth. Sam attempted to chase after it, not yet wanting to stop, not yet full of the salty-sweet taste of the pre-cum leaking from the delicious head. It made Cord laugh. "Hungry for that dick tonight, aren't you, slave?"

"Yes," Sam answered before he remembered he'd been ordered not to speak. He closed his mouth quick, not wanting to feel the burn of the belt against his ass again, knowing the next punishment Cord decided to deliver would likely make Sam come. He didn't want to come. Not until Cord had his cock in his hand or until Cord allowed him to sink his cock in Cord's anus.

"It's okay," Cord's voice turned as soothing as the touch he applied to Sam's shoulders, his spine, his lower back. "I'm not going to punish you this time. I'm going to fuck you instead. Is that what you want, slave?"

"Yes, Master," Sam answered quickly. Anticipation and elation made his pulse race even as his cock throbbed and his body started to slither uncontrollably beneath Cord's slowly grazing hands. "Please, Master."

"Push yourself to your knees," Cord ordered.

"Will you untie my ankles?" Sam waited for Cord's answer and when it didn't come he realized his mistake. He repeated his question. "Will you untie my ankles, Master?" It was part of their game, part of his complete submission to Cord. He was the slave and Cord his Master. Always in bed he addressed Cord as Master or paid the consequences.

"No. You have enough slack in the ropes to get into position. They will bite a little but I think you need that reminder of who is in charge tonight."

A consequence. Not completely unexpected. Sam knew it could've been far worse. Cord could have left him there, aching and begging

and tied to the bed without release. The man had done it to him before as punishment for forgetting his place.

Sam shifted, pulling his legs into his body, feeling the bite of the straps on his ankles. It would add to the pleasure, he knew. That slight abrasive pain would only compliment the vicious fucking he would receive. Cord's hands moved to Sam's hips as he settled in position between Sam's legs. Sam felt the other man's cock, insistent and rock-hard against his back entrance, and he held his breath, awaiting the blissful cacophony of sensations he knew would come with the intrusion. It turned out to be an intrusion he didn't get.

Cord reached around Sam's body and found Sam's cock. "Oh, yeah." Sam breathed a sigh as Cord's calloused fingers folded around his shaft. The fingers squeezed and Sam's eyes opened wide beneath the blindfold on the sudden pain like a vise to his dick.

"That's twice you've spoken without permission." Cord's voice was as rough as his squeeze, as the ties binding Sam's ankles. "Twice you've spoken without addressing me properly. Do you want me to punish you, slave?"

Yes. No. Oh, crap, Sam couldn't decide which answer he wanted to give. The punishments, while torturous and maddening, brought him to the brink of ecstasy every time, but to be fucked now, to be allowed release now...If he didn't do so soon his balls might fucking explode!

Cord laughed, a sound of amusement and pleasure. "You aren't sure what to say to that, are you, slave?"

"No, Master," Sam admitted through gritted teeth. Cord squeezed Sam's cock again, tightening even more and sending rapturous rushes of pain and pleasure rocketing through Sam's very being.

"Then I'll answer for you. You will get both punishment and pleasure for a start. I'm going to fuck you. I'm going to continue to stroke this magnificent dick of yours. You are not to come until I say you can. Do you understand, slave?"

Oh, God, that *was* punishment and pleasure of the worst and best kind. Unable to come until given permission, with an explosive ejaculation already knocking on the walls of his control, Sam didn't know if he could hold back. A hand connected hard and sharp on his ass and he jerked, the movement yanking his cock in Cord's hand. Double pain, insurmountable pleasure. Christ!

"Answer me, slave." Cord's tone left no room for argument or hesitation.

"Yes, Master." Sam said, the words on a pained rush of air. "Yes, I understand. I will not come without your permission, Master."

The pressure on his cock eased as Cord's grip loosened, as Cord used his other hand to hold his own cock, drawing tormenting circles around the rim of Sam's anus with the head. Then he plunged. Without warning or hesitation, Cord sheathed his cock in Sam's ass in a single and vicious thrust all the way to the hilt. His hand on Sam's shaft closed harder, tighter at the same time, and Sam teetered on the edge of explosion, a loud cry of pained pleasure ripping from his throat.

"Fuck, yeah." Cord growled, stopping with his dick buried as deep as it would go, obviously as overcome by the sheer pleasure as Sam. "Damn, that feels too good. Your punishment may not last long this time, slave. I don't think I can last."

Sam chuckled. He couldn't help it. Knowing he could make Cord, make his Master, lose control filled him with a rush of happiness and love.

Cord started to move, slowly at first but gaining in momentum and speed until he slammed into Sam, fucking him hard and fast without abandon or tenderness. Sam cried out, the feeling of being fucked so ferociously felt so intense he squeezed his eyes shut and rode on the pleasurable pain straight to oblivion. He needed to come, nearly did, to hell with the punishment he might get for disobeying a direct order. Then Cord's hand wrapped around his cock and rapidly began jerking Sam off.

"Come, now!"

Sam came. The release burst from the head of his cock with such force it felt ripped from him, leaving a tingle of white-hot rapture in its wake. He thrashed, the binds on his ankles digging into flesh. Cord's fingers on his hip bit into muscle as Sam bucked against Cord's cock and felt the other man's body shudder in its own climax. Then he heard Cord's animalistic roar accompany it.

"Damn, baby," Cord panted as Sam let his body go limp beneath the other man. "Are you trying to kill me?"

Sam smiled. "Me trying to kill you? You're the Master, remember?"

"Yeah." Cord brushed a kiss to Sam's temple just above the blindfold, gently pushing away the matted strands of Sam's hair with his fingertip. "And don't forget that."

Sam wouldn't forget, *couldn't* forget. No matter how he tried, Cord still controlled his dreams, his fantasies, and his submissive needs even after months of separation. And Sam knew as his imaginary Cord left him and he drifted into the most peaceful sleep he'd experienced in so very long, that Cord would always dominate that part of him just as Trace, with all his non-controlling ways, controlled Sam's tender side.

* * * *

"Whoa, boy." Trace pulled on the reins, bringing the horse to a stop at the top of his favorite cliff. He no longer rode on his own land but on that of the neighboring property. Still, he'd spent many a day at this spot peering down the rock face of jagged edges and naturally smooth surfaces to the stream of rushing water far below.

He did so now, settling on his horse and letting the sounds of the flowing water, of the distant birds and other wildlife permeate his mind in the hopes it would clear his thoughts. It didn't help any more than his trip into town, the time he'd spent gathering supplies he

needed for the ranch. He'd shared brief conversations with some of the town folk he'd encountered and the ranch hands who worked for him, too. He'd returned to the ranch and dove into work, busting his ass until high noon with few stops for breath and allowing himself no time to contemplate the events of the night before. Then he'd come here. Time to think. Time to empty his head and sort everything out.

Instead, confusion ran in a rowdy square dance in his head. He'd made such a mess of things last night. He'd cheated on Cord, kept the truth from Sly and put his heart on the line between two men who could skewer him emotionally. One already had once, he reminded himself and took off his Stetson as he lifted his face to the sky.

Clouds of silvery white speckled the clear blue for as far as the eye could see. Streaks of yellow cut through that baby blue, offering a warmth and comfort Trace wished he could feel through the chill in his veins.

He hadn't been angry. Cord knew Trace had slept with Sly last night and he hadn't seemed hurt by it in the least. He still loved Trace, or so he'd said before Trace left the kitchen that morning. Yet Trace had cheated on him, practically right there in front of him, and Cord hadn't said a friggin' word about it! And Sly, God, how would he feel when he found out that Cord wasn't a past lover or even a maybe lover, but one who lived on the ranch with Trace?

"Goddamned fucking mess," Trace muttered and slapped his hat back on his head. He tugged on the reins a bit more forcefully than he intended and his horse broke into a fast trot. Yeah, he'd no doubt allowed himself to fall into one gigantic pit of horse manure last night. There wasn't a water hose in the county that would clean this off.

Trouble was Trace had come to one decision through it all. He wanted them both. He'd never stopped loving Sly and had somehow managed to fall in love with Cord just as deeply. But with that decision came two realizations. One, he couldn't have them both. Two, even if he could have them, it wouldn't do him any good

because he couldn't give either of them what they wanted. It had to be the most fucked-up love triangle he'd ever witnessed. Too bad for him he had to be right in the middle. Too bad for him he had to be the point that would end up broken.

Resigned to the decision he knew he had to make, the one where he lost them both rather than getting what he truly wanted, he rode his horse faster toward the inevitable ending, toward the ranch house to tell both the men he loved it was over.

Chapter 5

Cord refused to allow himself to feel guilty for what he'd done with Sam shortly after Trace left the ranch that morning. What he'd done with Sam? More like what he'd done *to* Sam. Remembering each command, each touch, each lick, each thrust made his cock so hard he almost whimpered from the pain.

His grip tightened on the handle of the pool rake as he scooped the net along the top of the water, chasing the leaves across the swimming pool. Just as he'd been chasing love for so very long, he thought with a sigh. He'd found that love, too. First with Sam and then with Trace. Had he put it all in danger with the wager he'd made last night, with his actions this morning?

"You had to know," he told himself aloud. "Now you do." Oh yeah, he definitely knew.

After Trace walked out that morning, Cord had started to wonder for the first time since seeing Sam across the bar last night, if his feelings for the other man remained as strong as they had the day he'd left the rodeo grounds in New Jersey. The day he'd watched as Sam walked away seemingly confident in the knowledge that he and Cord wouldn't make it in a relationship because of Sam's continued love for a man he'd left behind in Tennessee. Cord met that same man and fell for him almost on sight mere months later in Sunset where Cord won the bull riding championship buckle. Cord hadn't had the slightest inkling before last night Trace was the same man who'd held Sam's heart.

"It's a small world after all," Cord sang under his breath. He raked a hand through his hair, lifted the rake from the pool and emptied the leaves he'd collected in the nearby trashcan.

So what had the things he'd done to Sam that morning in his and Trace's bed proved? Everything. Cord still loved Sam with every fiber of his being. He hadn't had to touch Sam to know that. He'd only had to enter that room and find the other man sprawled on his stomach fast asleep to know every ounce of love he'd ever felt for Sam in their short time together remained as strong as it had ever been.

And when he had finally touched Sam, *oh God in heaven*, the part of him he'd attempted to put to rest, to ignore since his last time with Sam awoke with such a devilish hunger he'd had no choice but to feed. Sam had wanted it, too. He'd starved for it as badly as Cord. Cord had no doubts in his mind about that. Sam's instantaneous response to him, the other man's eagerness to obey, offered all the proof Cord needed.

They would be perfect together, him, Sam and Trace—a love triangle of insurmountable pleasure and happiness. If only Cord could figure out how to approach Sam and Trace with the idea and make them see the truth the way he could. They could all have exactly what they wanted, the love each of them shared for one another, the varied sex craves they tended to deny themselves as sacrifice for the relationships they desired.

Cord tipped his head back to the sunny sky and said one of his many prayers for help, this time to give him the strength and guidance to follow through with the last stage of his plan.

* * * *

Sam opened his eyes and slammed them closed with an audible groan followed by a low string of curses as the sunlight blinded him. He rolled onto his back, one hand immediately coming up to shield his eyes as he slowly opened them once more.

The disorientation hit first. He took in the cream colored walls with cornflower blue trim, scenic landscapes and a deer head mounted and hung over an antique dresser topped with various bottles of lotions and colognes. A high-back armchair sat in the corner with what appeared to be a pair of jeans tossed over the side. Matching tables flanked the bed in which Sam lay alone, he noted, a ragged bible on top of one and a couple of aspirins next to a tall glass of water on the other.

Sam smiled at the aspirins. He rolled his eyes then narrowed them, even gave his head a little shake, checking for any sign that he needed those tiny offerings of relief. Surprisingly, he found he didn't. A clock on the table behind the water glass told him the time was nearing noon. No wonder his head felt normal. He'd slept away any semblance of the hangover. Slept it away alone.

Lowering his hand, he pushed himself up, leaned against the headboard, and thought back. He guessed he shouldn't have expected to wake next to Trace at almost twelve in the afternoon. The other man had likely gone out on the ranch to tend to the cattle and chores. Weird though, he thought as he reached for the water and took a sip. Why had a part of him expected to wake next to Cord DeMoss this morning?

"Because of the dream," he whispered and closed his eyes, remembering. And what a helluva dream it had been. His body still felt the ramifications of the spanking Cord had given him, of the sheer and almost brutal fucking he'd received. Just thinking about it made his dick hard.

Sam had passed out after making love to Trace a second time, the largest part of him more satisfied and sated than he'd been in so very long. He still felt that satisfaction this morning. Only it seemed compounded by the most eerie sense of rapture he'd ever experienced. Both parts of him, the parts he'd so long ago come to think of as his alter egos, the twisted and the sane, felt at rest. Both seemed elated

and calm in the aftermath of such a fantastic night of love and domination that he almost believed both had been real.

They *had* been real, he remembered with a sudden rush of heat. It hadn't been a dream about Cord, but a fantasy Sam had imposed over a real happening with some other man he believed to be Trace's roommate. And the time he'd spent with Trace had definitely been real. Sam hadn't been too skunked on Jack Daniels to know that he'd been with Trace last night. He'd woken in the man's bed, after all. Right back where he'd ran from three years before. Damnit all to hell!

Sam slid out of bed, discovered it was his jeans tossed over the arm of the chair in the corner, and pulled them on. He needed to find Trace, to talk about last night, to...what? He didn't have a fucking clue. He started down the stairs, his familiarity with the main house making it easy for him to find his way. He scanned each room as he passed. Not much had changed in the years he'd been gone except that it now belong to Trace. Trace had finally purchased it from his old man, his very senile, very incompetent old man.

Keeping his ears tuned for any sound of presence, Sam found the house silent as a tomb. In the kitchen, he discovered a half pot of coffee in the maker. It had grown cold but nothing thirty seconds in the microwave wouldn't fix. He poured a cup, nuked it and sipped as he continued his search for Trace.

What he found as he stepped through the back doors of the house onto the deck surrounding the pool made him drop the coffee cup as his temper snapped like a twig. "Son of a mother fucking bitch."

Cord's head snapped up and he turned to face Sam, his eyes unreadable and his lips slightly curved in a knowing smile. Sam sprinted across the deck and tackled Cord, sending them both tumbling into the pool, jeans, boots and all.

* * * *

Cord found himself pinned to the pool wall, Sam's hard body pressed against his and a strong forearm locked around his neck. Sam's mouth was at his ear. He heard the other man panting as his temper no doubt rocked him, battling with the adrenaline and controlling his actions.

Cord knew he shouldn't goad the man when he was so pissed but he couldn't stop himself from saying, "Damn baby, I thought a position like this leaned more toward your liking than mine. You know I would rather be on the dominant end."

"Fuck you, you sonuvabitch." Sam's voice sounded like sandpaper in Cord's ear. "I didn't know you would rather take a man while he's fucking sleeping."

"Sleeping?" Cord couldn't keep the disbelief from his voice. "You were..." No way had Sam been asleep through all of that. Sam had been so responsive, so eager, so willing. Still, sick bastard that Cord was, hearing that Sam still dreamed of him after all these months gave him hope.

Sam's arm jerked on Cord's neck and Cord closed his eyes, focusing on how to calm Sam rather than on the fact that the other man was very close to cutting off Cord's oxygen supply.

"What are you doing with Trace?"

"We've been together for months." Cord gasped the words. "We're partners, lovers. I met him the same way I met you, at a rodeo."

"Bullshit! Trace doesn't do rodeos."

"He did that one. Damnit, Sam, let go of me so we can talk about this." Sam didn't let go of him completely, but he loosened his hold around Cord's neck so Cord kept talking. "He sold a horse to one of the trainers at the rodeo. He owned the bull I rode that won me the championship. We all went out to celebrate afterward." Cord took a break and softened his voice. "I didn't know he was your Trace. Sam, you've gotta believe me, baby. I didn't know about your connection to him until I saw you at the bar last night."

Several rapid heartbeats passed and finally Sam let Cord go. Cord turned to face Sam, ignoring the way their bodies brushed as he met Sam's gaze. His eyes swirled with confusion, anger, disbelief and Cord knew he would do anything, say anything to make all of those emotions go away.

"Please, Sam, you have to believe me." How often had he ever said please? He'd always been the dominant, the one in control. He never begged, never asked nicely. He ordered. But not now. He'd do whatever it took to make Sam see, to make him understand, to set this right.

"You were there last night?" Sam's gaze searched Cord's face. "At the bar, you were there?"

Cord nodded. "I was with Trace." The pain that moved through Sam's face at that was unmistakable and heartbreaking. If Cord had harbored any doubts that Sam still felt the same love for Trace that Trace felt for him, that single flash of emotion erased them. "I was with him when he saw you. I, well, I backed off."

"You backed off," Sam repeated. "You sent him to me last night? Why? Why would you do that? Unless you don't love Trace at all. Unless it's just sex for you. Except..."

Cord watched as Sam made the connection, as realization set in and he understood. Cord didn't have to say anything. Sam said it all.

"Trace doesn't have a twisted side like..."

"Like we do," Cord supplied. He'd tried so hard in the few short months he'd been with Sam to make the other man understand Sam's desires to be dominated were not twisted. Cord had failed in that as he'd failed to hold onto the man he'd loved.

"He's too tender for you, too fragile."

"Trace is a lot tougher than you think," Cord said in Trace's defense. It was true. Trace was no pussy. He might not like either side of the role of domination or submission, but the man was one of the strongest individuals Cord had ever met. "And I do love him, you bastard." He pushed hard at Sam's shoulder, saw the other man wince

slightly from the blow, and felt good about it. How dare he suggest Cord only wanted to use Trace! He should consider himself lucky all Cord didn't do more than push him for that one. "It's not just sex with him. I would never use him that way. I love him with all my heart just like I still love you."

* * * *

Sam stared at Cord, unable to speak, barely able to breathe. He couldn't take it all in. His mind skipped and stumbled, fretted and boggled and yet the confusion that had gripped his thoughts almost since the moment he laid eyes on Trace last night at the bar continued to be the paramount driving force to his brain.

He shook his head and started to step back, but Cord's hand still on his shoulder stopped him. The other man didn't tighten his grip. His fingers didn't even push into Sam's skin. The mere feel of his hand there, of the skin-to-skin contact, of the warmth held Sam in place. And the look in Cord's eyes, that shimmering gaze told Sam everything Cord said was the God's honest truth.

"You love Trace." Hearing it, *saying* it made jealously slice through Sam with the pain of a blunt edged blade. Another man loved the man he loved. But did he feel jealous over Cord's love for Trace or over the knowledge that Trace no doubt felt the same love for Cord?

Cord's answered with a slow nod that never broke eye contact. After several breaths, he finally added, "With all my devious black heart."

Any other time, Sam would've smiled at that. Cord had often joked that he possessed the heart of a devil with his dominant streak and tendency to go for whatever he wanted with little regard to whatever or whoever got in his way. Sam had never quite agreed with that. Dominant though he may be, Cord's heart was far from devious or black. The man could love desperately and completely. Sam knew that for a fact because Cord had loved him that way in the time they'd

spent together. And Sam had loved him the same way. Still, they'd been unable to come to terms with the one aspect of their relationship that clashed, what gave them true pleasure between the sheets. God, what a freaking mess!

"Why did you really back off last night, Cord?" Sam couldn't quite believe Trace's non-submissive nature led Cord to push the other man to Sam's arms last night. Not if Cord truly loved Trace the way he said he did and, from simply looking into the man's eyes right now, that much Sam could believe. Cord *did* love Trace, possibly, *probably* as much as Sam loved Trace.

"I already told you—"

"What you told me is only half of it." Sam cut him off. He couldn't have done it. No way could he have sent the man he loved to someone else's arms the way Cord had done. No matter what the reason.

Cord sighed and leaned his head against the pool wall. His hand fell from Sam's shoulder and Sam actually missed that small contact despite the fact that they continued to stand close enough that simply breathing made their bodies brush.

"Do you have any idea what you did to Trace?" Cord lifted his head and met Sam's gaze but, where Sam expected to see anger, he saw compassion and understanding. "You left things between you so out of whack. Hell, you can't know the nights I've laid in bed with him and listened as he talked about you."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I love him and I knew, even with the love he still feels for you, there is room in his heart for me, too."

Sam's eyes misted and he closed them to prevent the tears from falling. It didn't work. He felt one slide down his cheek. "I know I hurt him leaving the way I did," he whispered.

"Hurt him? Christ, Sam, you fucking tore him apart!" Cord took a deep breath and touched Sam's cheek, skimming away the tear with his thumb. "I know why you left, why you probably felt you had to

go. Well, okay, maybe I don't know for certain because you never told me about it, about Trace, and you certainly never told Trace why you hauled ass. But I think I can guess. Knowing both of you the way I do makes it pretty obvious. Your career means a lot to you. Probably almost as much as Trace ever did. And you did...do...?"

Sam opened his eyes when Cord didn't go on. He knew what made Cord hesitate and he nodded. "Do."

"Do love Trace." Cord nodded, too. "I knew you did. You always have, even when we were together. You love Trace but you were afraid of changing him, afraid of hurting him."

Sam laughed humorously. "A lot of good that did, huh?"

Cord shrugged. "You feared hurting him the same way I do. The same way you feared hurting me. That's why you left me, too, remember?"

Sam shook his head. He remembered. How could he not? Walking away from Cord that day had been the second most difficult thing he'd ever done in his life. Walking away from Trace had, of course, been the first.

"Last night, if I had told Trace about my past with you, he would've been hurt again," Cord said, his voice low but certain. "To find out that you and I had a history, I don't think he couldn't have handled it."

"And you think finding out after what happened last night is going to hurt him less?" Sam doubted it. If anything, the other man would be more devastated.

"He'll still be hurt," Cord agreed after another long suffering sigh. "I took a gamble last night, Sam. A huge one. I knew Trace would need time with you. When you walked into that bar last night..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Seeing you again hit both of us right in the gut. But I think Trace took the worst of it."

"I didn't expect him to be there. He always preferred the pub closer to town." And hadn't he even searched the parking lot for

Trace's truck to make sure the man wasn't inside? "What does he drive these days?"

"A black Chevrolet a lot like yours but single cab. You'll know it's his because the tag reads TNT. I never quite got the significance of that until this morning."

Sam bit his lower lip. "It's what I always called him."

"Yeah, and you're Sly. I got that now. Pretty fitting names for the two of you. And Trace still prefers the pub just outside of town. I'm the one who wanted to go to the Swingin' Sunset Saloon last night."

"Regretting that now, I bet." Sam gave a half laugh that died when Cord's gaze turned more penetrating than before.

"Not a chance. If anything, I'm thanking my lucky stars I decided to push the issue last night."

"I couldn't have done it, you know," Sam admitted and gave into the urge to let his arms slid around Cord's waist. "Send the man I love into another man's arms, another man I knew my man loved, too."

"Even if you knew that man was me?" Cord asked, his eyes searching Sam's. "Even if you knew that other man loved him, too?"

Sam cocked his head. What was Cord getting at? Because Sam wasn't quite sure, he asked a question of his own. "What would you have done if Trace and I got back together last night?"

Cord lifted a brow. "You did, didn't you?"

"We slept together but, well, hell, I don't know where the fuck we stand now." Exasperated, Sam dropped his hands from Cord's waist and spun, the movement causing the water in the pool to ripple and splash along the wall. He slammed his fingers through his matted hair, and then raked the hand down his face to wipe off the water his jerky movements had left behind. He turned back to Cord. "You spoke to him this morning, right? Before..." He spoke to Trace before he'd come into the bedroom where Sam slept and dominated Sam to the biggest ejaculation he'd had since the last time they'd been together.

Cord's lips twitched, obviously reading Sam's mind. "You really slept though all of that?"

"No, damnit, I was awake. I just told myself I was dreaming because, well, I thought it was Trace's roommate, but it was you I saw in my mind, you I heard, you I felt."

"Good thing for you because it *was* me."

"Yeah, good thing for me. I didn't fuck Trace's roommate. I only fucked you."

"Not the first time that's happened and I hope it wasn't the last. As for Trace, I made him breakfast this morning. We talked. He left."

"You...breakfast?" Sam stammered and then shook his head. "Always a surprise with you. So what would you have done if he walked into that kitchen this morning and told you to hit the road? That he and I wanted to try it again?"

"I told you I took a huge gamble last night. I'm still gambling today. I've banked everything, my entire freaking *world* that if you two do decide to try again you won't leave me out of the relationship."

Sam stilled, stared. "What are you suggesting?" But as he glared at Cord, studied the man's eyes, the man's expression, Sam thought he already knew the answer to that question. And oh, holy God, the suggestion had both his heart and his cock filling with hope and aching with desires.

Chapter 6

The hooves of Trace's stallion hit the edge of the clearing just as Trace spotted the figures in the pool. He tugged on the reins, bringing the horse to a quick stop, hoping the brisk movement didn't attract attention. The figures were talking. He was too far away to hear them, too far away to even read lips, but not so far away that he couldn't recognize both men. Sly and Cord. Together in the pool.

Not just together, Trace noted as his heart slammed against his ribcage. They were *together*. Their bodies stood so close the water barely made it between them. As he watched, his breath lodged in his throat, Cord reached up and cupped the side of Sly's face. They exchanged more words Trace couldn't hear and then Sly turned from Cord only to turn back again.

Were they fighting? From the rigid set to Sly's shoulders and the jerky movements of his hands and head, Trace could only assume so. But what did they have to argue about? Him? That, too, would be the most likely assumption. Still, why fight in the pool?

Cord's lips twitched. Trace thought he imagined that part. He couldn't see each facial movement from this angle. But when Cord's sultry lips bloomed into a full-blown dazzling smile, there was no mistaking it.

"Guess they aren't fighting after all," Trace muttered to the horse, his hand idly stroking the stallion's silky mane. Cord said something more that seemed to make Sly freeze and then, no, the men were certainly not arguing now because Cord kissed Sly. *Kissed* Sly!

Trace's heart fell to his stomach with an almost audible splash that left him feeling wheezy and nauseated and in intense agony. Here

presented a scenario he hadn't considered. Except, hadn't he? Hadn't he thought on at least one occasion through the night that his men would be perfect for each other?

"No." His hands found the reins again, gripping them so tightly he felt his nails digging into his palms. "I won't lose them both. Damn it, I can't."

He'd come riding back to the main house as fast as he could with the full intention in mind to do exactly that. To tell both Sly and Cord it was over. He couldn't handle being torn apart by them, couldn't handle knowing despite how deeply he loved both men, he couldn't give them all they wanted, all they needed to be happy.

That had been before he'd seen them together, watched them melt into each other's arms. God, his own arms ached to hold them. Both of them! No way could he let them go. But which one did he keep?

"I want them both," he told his horse softly. "I want to be with them right there, right now. I want to be between them." He wanted it so badly he could almost feel it, their bodies on either side of his, their arms around him, their hands touching him.

"Give it up, Tanner." He shook his head at himself and sighed. He'd never heard himself make such a wistful, heart-wrenching sound. It stilled him, steadied his emotions until they fell into one: anger. He felt angry all right, at himself, at Sly, at Cord. "Why should you get what you want when you could never give either of them what they needed or deserved?"

* * * *

"I guess the house boy line worked after all."

Cord heard Trace's voice, angry, thick, hurt, even before he pulled away from Sam's lips. He could've sworn he actually heard the air horns blare signaling the start of the next rodeo round. Yeah, the next eight seconds could be the most important, most dangerous and most

rewarding seconds of his life all wrapped into one last bucking head-to-head.

"House boy?" Sam smirked as he drew back from Cord. "That'll be the day."

Cord narrowed his eyes at Sam, a look that appeared both playful and full of warning, and then both men averted their attention to Trace.

"Damn, he's amazing."

The heated longing in Sam's words made Cord shoot him another quick glance. He agreed, of course. Despite his own thrills of being the one in control, of being the one to issue the commands, Cord thought he would likely bow at Trace's feet if he assumed the role just now.

Trace stood at the edge of the pool, his hair mussed and matted from sweat, a ring left behind where his cowboy hat had sat most of the day. He wore the same work shirt and jeans he'd been wearing when Cord had seen him in the kitchen that morning though, sadly, he'd buttoned the shirt and tucked it into the jeans. His favorite pair of roughed up cowboy boots were on his feet, one poised almost as if he fought the urge to tap the toe on the concrete at Cord and Sam.

The expression on his boyishly handsome face made Cord reconsider his play-acting role. Trace's eyes bore into Cord and Sam in a way that brooked no room for argument. His lips set in a hard thin line, and he stood in a stance that told Cord Trace was ready and willing to take both he and Sam on any moment. Though taking them both on was precisely what Cord had in mind, fighting wasn't exactly the outcome he'd hoped for.

"He's pissed," Cord said, almost in a whisper. "And hurt."

"And gorgeous." Sam didn't look at Cord but kept his gaze on Trace. The sheer wicked gleam in his eyes had to be making Trace squirm inside. And sure enough, Cord bit back a grin when his own gaze dropped to Trace's crotch and he saw the superior hard-on growing behind Trace's zipper. "Join us?" Sam offered Trace a hand.

"We, uh, have a lot to talk about. Even more to tell you, to, um, explain."

"I won't argue with that." Trace crossed his arms over his broad chest rather than taking Sam's outstretched hand. "But I'm not exactly dressed for a swim."

"Neither were we." Cord moved away from Sam enough to allow Trace a view into the water at the jeans and boots both he and Sam still wore.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Sam winced at the vehemence in Trace's tone or maybe it was more the pain that laced the words that had the other man lowering his hand and closing his eyes.

"You said last night we needed to talk," Sam told Trace slowly. "You have no idea how right you were about that. *I* had no idea."

"None of us did," Cord put in. Sam did shoot him a look then and he amended, "Okay, I did. I knew but," he sighed, "Trace, look, I..."

"You knew." Trace's gaze turned to steel. He started to turn, to storm away but Cord caught his ankle.

"Trace, wait." Cord shot a compelling look to Sam. *Help me*, he started to say but he didn't need to. Sam already reached for Trace's other ankle.

"Don't you d—" Trace managed to get out before they yanked him into the pool. "You bastards!" He came up sputtering, raking his hair from his eyes with one hand and slapping the surface of the water with the other.

Cord laughed. He couldn't help it. One second he fought back the grin for all he was worth and the next he could hardly keep himself afloat from laughing so hard. Lucky for him they weren't so far into the deep end of the pool that he couldn't reach bottom.

His laughter was contagious. It took only a moment before Sam joined him and then, lo and behold, Trace actually laughed, too.

"You fucking crazy son of a bitches." Trace slapped at the water again. "You had no right to gang up on me like that."

"Oh, we're not ganging up on you yet, Tray." The sparkle in Sam's eyes and the promise in his tone was enough to make Cord and Trace stop laughing. Cord and Sam exchanged a glance and then lunged for Trace.

* * * *

Trace felt his body short circuit right along with his mind. He figured himself lucky not to feel the electric shock being half submerged in water. He saw them both coming for him, but he didn't think to move. And then he couldn't move because, *oh my God*, it happened. Electric shock fried every nerve and sense, igniting every pulse point in his body to supreme sensitivity as Cord's steel-like body closed in on one side of him as Sly's strong arms pulled Trace against his body on the other. He closed his eyes, afraid to believe, afraid to hope even when he knew what was happening was real. Except, exactly what *was* happening?

"I d-don't understand." Even as the admission left his lips, his arms moved of their own volition under the surface of the water, circling around both men's waists and holding on for dear life.

"There's something you need to know," Cord told him in what was quite possibly the gentlest voice Trace had ever heard him use. "Look at me, sweetie." Moist lips brushed lightly over Trace's closed lids. "Open your eyes."

Trace shook his head. He didn't want to. What if it all turned out to be a dream? What if he'd fallen off his horse in that brisk ride back to the ranch and hit his head, knocked himself out or even killed himself, and this was all some devilishly fantabulous dream?

It had to be a dream! Everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours had been so unreal it couldn't possibly be anything more than an illusion. But when Cord's lips moved from Trace's eyelids to his lips and Sly's lips grazed along the exposed skin at Trace's collar, it felt all too real.

Trace opened his eyes. The relief that slammed into him when he met first Cord's gaze and then Sly's hit with such force that he actually gasped from the pressure of it.

Cord didn't waste any time at getting to the point. "We know each other."

At first, his words didn't make sense. Know each other? Of course they knew each other. They'd been dating for months! They loved each other. Or at least Trace had believed they did. But then Cord's gaze flicked to Sly and Trace understood. They knew each other. As in Cord and Sly.

"We were involved," Sly said, his tone as soft and gentle as Cord's. He waited for Trace to look at him before he added, "Cord and I were lovers."

Trace rocked back as if he'd been physically struck. If not for Cord and Sly's arms around him, he likely would have fallen backward and sank to the bottom of the pool. "You were...I-I..." He couldn't say the word. It simply wouldn't come out. He tried but his lungs felt as if they might explode, as if he had fallen beneath the surface and taken in too much water only to resurface where there was no oxygen.

But he didn't have to repeat it because Sly nodded. When Trace turned his attention to Cord, the other man stared down at him with such compassion and unveiled fear that Trace knew what Sly said had to be the truth.

"You never told me." Trace wanted to pull away from Cord, to be furious with the man. He should be furious with him! He couldn't do either. His blood pumped so violently through his veins it made him lightheaded. All these months, never once had Cord even hinted... "As much as I talked about Sly, you said it yourself last night at the bar, I talked about him enough for you to know I still loved him."

"I never put two and two together. Sweetie, listen, what do you always call him? Sly," Cord answered his own question before Trace had the chance. "I didn't know who Sly was. Hell, I can't even

promise I would've put it together if you'd called him Sam, but I might have at least questioned you further. When he walked into the bar last night..." Cord paused, his gaze flicking to Sly once more and Trace saw not only the man's desperate need to make him understand but a deep love for Sly as well. "It nearly knocked me on my ass, especially when you told me who he was. That's when I finally realized Sly and Sam are one in the same."

"And you sent me to him." Trace heard the disbelief and pain in his own voice and felt an echoing of the latter in Cord's body when it trembled slightly against Trace.

"Because he hoped you would bring me to him," Sly said, drawing Trace's attention back to him.

He smiled, a slow tilt to his incredible lips that Trace felt all the way to his toes. His cock reacted to that smile but his heart stumbled most, wanting to dance with joy, threatening to crumble in sadness.

"So he could have you back," Trace whispered and nodded. "I can't tell you how many times since facing you again last night I've thought the two of you would be perfect for each other. I guess I was right."

"Not entirely," Cord put in. He moved around Trace until he stood beside Sly so Trace could see them both without feeling like a ping-pong ball. Trace wasn't sure if seeing them so close felt better or worse. God, they looked good together. Cord with his slightly taller, lankier build and Sly with his big city polish over his cowboy roots. The sight brought tears to Trace's eyes. "I hoped you would bring him to us."

"Rodeo cowboys, always taking one dangerous chance after another," Sly mumbled but affection rang in his tone and shone his expression. Affection for Cord.

"We do like to live on the edge," Cord agreed. "But the payoff can be out of this world. Did my chance pay off this time, Trace? Or did I get bucked off and kicked out of the rodeo?"

Trace started to speak but he closed his mouth, shook his head, and looked from Cord to Sly and back to Cord. He let go of them, dropping his hands to his sides as he tried to step back. The hold both men had on him felt unyielding. "Let me go."

They did, but not without a great deal of hesitation. Trace moved back two steps, the water sloshing around them in his haste to put even that much distance between them. He instantly regretted that distance because, even in the warm water of the pool, he felt chilled to the bone without the heat from their bodies.

"This is difficult for you to take in," Sly said softly. "It was for me, too. I was pissed as hell when I woke to find you gone and Cord out here at the pool."

"Bastard jumped me!" Cord scowled.

"Sounds like you deserved it," Trace muttered. "You're lucky he didn't break your nose."

"I thought about it," Sly grinned. "But he has such a handsome face."

"You were lovers," Trace brought them back to the point he couldn't quite comprehend. It was getting easier to say now, but the taste wasn't much better the second time around. "So what happened? How did you end up with me?" He focused on Cord but Sly answered.

"I fucked that one up, too." Sly rubbed the back of his neck, water droplets falling to his chest and cascading over his pecs drawing both the attention of Cord and Trace. "I left him just as I left you. For nearly the same reason," he laughed again and shook his head, "only the opposite."

"One extreme to the other," Trace said more to himself than to Sly or Cord as a dawning or understanding started to rise in his mind.

Sly nodded. "Precisely."

"You're the link, Trace," Cord said and closed the distance between them once more.

Trace's body molded to Cord's and almost instantly all the chill he'd felt left him, swept away by Cord's warmth. "I know you've been trying to give me everything I want. I know you tried to do the same for Sam."

"I failed both of you." Trace couldn't look at either man as the tears welled again.

"But that's just it, baby." Sly moved in, too, his arm going around Trace and pulling him close until they were all three back in the same position they had been before Trace moved away from them. "You didn't fail either of us. You're the one neither of us can live without."

"You're the center, the link," Cord said again. "You can give both of us the one thing we want but can't give each other."

"Cord saw it first." Sly's free hand found the back of Trace's neck, the fingers burying themselves in Trace's hair. It felt so good the way Sly's fingers played there that Trace heard himself moan, felt himself lean closer to Sly. "He understood it first. Last night at the bar, he realized you were the middle ground between us."

"I'm a pussy," Trace whispered.

"You're...normal, for lack of a better term," Cord corrected. Then he took a deep breath and rushed on. "I have a dominant streak. You know that. Just as I know that's a part of me you don't like."

"But Sly does." Trace slid his hand up Sly's bare back, loving the satiny feel of the man's flesh beneath his palm.

"Yes, I do." Was it possible Sly actually blushed with that confession? "I have a submissive streak that makes me like it. But that's a part of *me* that you don't like."

"But Cord does." Trace looked at Cord, let his other hand move up Cord's bare back and reveled in the feel of the play of muscles beneath his palm.

"I do." Cord started to grin, a slow and sexy as hell tilt to his lips that sparkled with wickedness. "We also really, really enjoy your tenderness. You bring us both a level of calm and peace."

"It's something we both need and we both want it to come from you," Sly added. He angled his head in front of Trace's, closing the distance between himself and Cord as well. "Will you do that for us, Trace? Will you be our center?"

"The three of us?" Trace said, dumbfounded. "You, both of you, want the three of us to have a-a relationship?"

"We do," Cord and Sly said in unison.

"It's one helluva idea, don't you think?" Sly grinned. "I would like to say it took me a bit to come around to Cord's way of thinking, but I can't. I like the idea too much. When I realized what he was suggesting..." He whistled. "To have both of you, how could a man refuse?"

"And this will work?" Trace couldn't help but still sound skeptical. He felt skeptical. He didn't want to but, God, could he really have everything he'd ever wanted, both of the men he'd ever wanted, and give them both what they wanted in return? It sounded too perfect, too magnificent to be true!

"You bet your sexy, tight ass it will." Cord's hand dropped to grip Trace's ass as he yanked him so hard against Cord's body that Trace lost all breath, all thought, all ideas he might have had of refusing or arguing further.

Trace tipped his head back, expecting Cord to kiss him but Sly's mouth closed over his. Sly pushed his tongue between Trace's slightly parted lips, dancing his way over Trace's tongue and devouring Trace's mouth with a tender and electrifying slowness that made Trace sizzle to his bones.

Sly pulled back only marginally and Cord's tongue joined the mix. It slid over Sly's tongue, dipped under Trace's, and turned the kiss from a gentle gallop through the meadow to a bucking rush thorough a river of rapids and churning desires.

Sly's arm curved more insistently around Trace's waist, his hand dropping to cup Trace's ass even as Cord's hand left Trace's ass for Sly's perusal to find its way to Trace's cock. Cord's hand closed over

Trace's package and squeezed. The soft, slight pressure drew a moan from Trace's throat and blew away his focus on the kiss the men shared like dust in the wind.

Cord's fingers fumbled with Trace's fly and then, "Ah, man. Oh, wow." Cord took Trace's rock-hard cock in his hand and stroked, slow and even pulls that made Trace suck a breath through his teeth as his head fell back.

Sly's lips nipped at Trace's jaw, his tongue trailing down the long exposed flesh of Trace's throat. But Cord's words made the desire in Trace morph to a rapturous need.

"He's so hard, Sam. One thing about it, our man has a helluva cock."

"Don't I know it." Sly growled as his hands joined his mouth, tugging at the buttons of Trace's shirt and pulling the clinging material from Trace's body.

"Shall we show him the benefits of being our center, slave?"

The use of the word slave made Trace lift his head only to find Sly had straightened, too. Trace watched as Cord and Sly studied each other and then Sly visibly swallowed and nodded.

"Yes, Master."

Trace stared in astonishment. Slave? Master? He didn't care for the whole dominant/submissive game for himself but to watch it unfold...*holy shit*, he'd never believed it could be such a turn-on. His cock flexed in Cord's hand and the other man glanced at him, met his gaze and Trace knew from the expression on Cord's face he could see the arousal swirling in Trace's own eyes.

"Take a deep breath." Somehow Trace knew the order had been intended for Sly and not himself. Maybe the purely dominant, don't-argue-with-me tone of Cord's voice gave it away. The other man had never spoken to Trace that way. "Then suck Trace's cock the way he likes it."

Trace's gaze flicked to Sly in surprise. They stood in the pool. Cord's fingers were still curled around Trace's erection. He felt hard

enough, aching enough that the mere thought of Sly's satiny lips in place of Cord's fingers made Trace ape shit but, to do that, Sly would have to go under the water.

Sly opened his mouth to say something but Cord cut him off with a curt question. "Did I give you permission to speak?"

Trace's eyes widened and still, the total compliance in Sly's expression, the sheer thrill he saw move through Sly's eyes, made an ecstatic stream of pulsing anticipation burst through Trace's cock and balls.

Sly shook his head.

"Then do what I told you to do."

Sly met Trace's gaze, a small smile playing at the edges of his lips. Trace had a split second to think the other man looked the happiest Trace had ever seen him before Sly took a deep breath and went under.

Chapter 7

Sam held his breath as he opened his mouth, spitting out the water even as he took in the wide, hard girth of Trace's cock. He sucked it down slowly, taking care to be gentle and pleasing to Trace. That had been his orders after all.

God, it felt so incredibly exhilarating to be here this way with these men. *His* men. When he'd left New York three days ago he never dreamed anything like this would ever happen. Who knew he would find everything he'd ever wanted back in Sunset, Tennessee after a lifetime of working to get out and three years of searching for his heart in all the wrong places?

Cord knew, Sam mused as reached up to cup Trace's balls in one hand, the fingers of his other hand curling around the base of Trace's cock as his lips moved up and down Trace's shaft. He could taste the man's pre-cum already, leaking from the tip of the head and coating Sam's pallet and tongue. Trace's body shivered and Sam smiled. His smile faded a second later when Cord's hand dove in the back of Sam's hair.

Would Cord stop Sam from devouring this delicious cock just when he was about to make Trace come? Trace's balls grew tight in Sam's hand and Sam knew the other man reached the point of climax. A few more licks, a gentle but pressured suck or two and Sam would be drinking far more than chlorinated pool water.

Sam started to jerk his head from Cord's grasp. He wanted to finish. He wanted to taste Trace's essence. He wanted the punishment he would receive from directly fighting against his Master's order. The conglomeration of all those wants nearly made him come! As it

was, his cock strained against the material of his jeans with such a force that it pinched him to aching. The slight pain only added to the pleasure.

His lungs began to burn, a low warning of his need for oxygen and he sucked a bit faster, a bit harder. He felt the slight resistance of Cord's grip on the back of his head, but he ignored it as he did the urge to breathe. Then he rolled Trace's balls in his hand, sucked down the full length of the man's cock and tasted his blessed, thick, salty-sweet release. He barely managed to swallow it all before Cord's hand fisted tighter and he yanked Sam to the surface.

Sam gulped in a breath only to have his mouth filled yet again, this time by Cord's tongue. Cord licked the inside of Sam's mouth, greedily tasting the remnants of Trace's come. Trace's quietly sighed, "Jesus, that's amazing," had Sam and Cord easing back to look at him.

Trace stared at them, wonder and satisfaction in his eyes. He lifted a hand and grazed the backs of his fingers down Sam's cheek. "Are you okay?"

Sam laughed. He couldn't help it. He saw the corners of Trace's mouth twitch, too, but the concern in his tone sounded genuine and overrode any impulse to smile. "I'm fine, Tray. More than fine. I'm fantastic!"

"That was, Christ, my knees are weak." Trace did smile then as his hand came to rest on Sam's shoulder for support. "I don't think you've ever sucked me off like that."

Sam turned serious. "Does it bother you that I had a little added excitement to make it happen?"

"Are you kidding? Watching the two of you is nearly as satisfying as that blowjob you just gave me."

"Satisfying enough to reward our Sam for his good behavior?" Cord asked and Sam's heart skipped and tripped and damned near raced out of his chest.

Trace's other hand came around Cord's neck and Sam saw Trace's fingers lightly caressing the other man's skin. It made him want to feel

that gentleness, too, made him want to give it. He didn't ask permission. With Trace, he didn't need it. He hooked a hand around Trace's neck and pulled the man in for a sweet, tender kiss that soothed his needs even as it heightened the ache in his cock.

Cord didn't interfere but waited until Sam pulled back before he spoke. "Trace, will you suck Sam's cock while I fuck him?"

Trace moaned, a low rumble of agreement. Sam saw Cord's phrasing pleased Trace, too. Cord asked Trace, not told him. Yes, this would work between the three of them. It would work exceptionally well.

"Only if I can fuck you next." The intently serious and thoroughly heated look Trace gave Cord made Sam moan.

"We should probably get out of the pool for this one," Sam suggested. "Maybe head for the house."

They made it as far as the lounge chair at the poolside before Cord attacked Sam from behind. Cord reached around Sam, catching his throbbing cock in his calloused hand and holding on as if Sam's cock were the only thing keeping Cord on top a bucking bull.

Sam cried out from the pained pleasure. Explosions of glorious white-hot ecstasy sparked in his vision as Cord guided him to sit on his knees on the lounge chair. His gaze met Trace's and he was surprised to see not concern in Trace's eyes but happiness and a wicked smile on his lips. He enjoyed seeing Sam in this position, venerable to Cord's command.

"I'm ready when you are, sweetie," Cord told Trace over Sam's shoulder. Trace nodded, brushed a tender kiss to Sam's lips and then lay down on his side on the lounge chair, effectively putting his mouth dead level with Sam's cock.

Sam felt Cord's dick pushing at his back entrance but Cord didn't thrust inside until Trace took Sam's cock in his mouth. Pain made Sam cry out. Pleasure made him rock back on Cord's dick, taking each viciously rapid thrust faster and harder. Ecstasy made him shudder in Trace's mouth, his balls gripping between his legs like

vises, the orgasm but a thought away. Everything stilled when Cord's heated breath whispered in his ear.

“Did you ask permission to come, slave?”

Sam shook his head, unable to speak. A hard pinch to his ass cheek and an even firmer squeeze to his balls jerked the word from him. “No. No, Master. May I please come?”

“Trace, are you ready for Sam to come for us?” Cord continued to squeeze as Sam's balls, even as he relentlessly thrust in Sam's ass, even as Trace continued to suck and blow and torment Sam's cock. Sam bit his lip, almost breaking the skin, in his effort to hold back the explosion building in his cock. It felt like an eternity before Trace answered and even then it wasn't with a word.

The other man gave a thumbs up. Sam saw it through the crack in his heavy lidded eyes and tried not to sigh with relief. If he did, Cord would no doubt deny his release longer simply to antagonize and torture Sam.

“Slave?” Cord made the name a question.

Sam managed to speak but barely. The bastard intended to draw this out as long as possible anyway. Damn Cord! And damn himself for getting such a demonic thrill out of this whole submission thing. “Yes, Master?”

“You may come when you're ready, Sam.”

Sam stopped fighting. The come juttled from his cock into Trace's mouth with such rocketing force Sam actually screamed with it. His body shook, his head spun, his muscles ceased and all the while Cord fucked him. It was a primal orgasm, an animalistic mating and, when Cord joined him seconds later, Sam thought he might die from the pleasure.

* * * *

When next they settled after another blissful and soul consuming climax, they stretched out in a pile in the middle of the kitchen floor.

Trace managed the strength to lift his head but only marginally. The past few hours had been the most confusing, thrilling and fulfilling of his life. His body felt spent and used and, *no way*, on the verge of being ready to go again.

"I'm going to have to get in better shape if this is how it's always going to be between us," he told Cord and Sam with a breathless laugh. After making love to Cord, he'd fallen limp on top of the other man, his arm stretched across him to rest on Sly's chest. Sly lay on Cord's opposite side, seemingly content in Cord's outstretched arm.

"You?" Sly laughed, too, a sound nearly as breathless as Trace's had been. "I've been sitting behind a desk for the last three years, remember?"

Trace remembered all too well. His smile faded as a part of the elation he'd been feeling since they'd come together in the pool turned to dread. "Can you really handle this?" His point-blank question made Sly lift his head, too.

Sly reached across Cord to cup the side of Trace's face. "Baby, I finally have everything I've ever wanted."

"That makes two of us," Cord chimed in, his arm squeezing tighter around Trace, pulling him closer still.

Trace looked at both of them and slowly nodded. "Three of us." He agreed, not saying the other thought to pop into his mind. He was finally able to give both his cowboys what they wanted. "But how will this work? I mean, you're on the road a lot," he said to Cord. "And you live in New York. I have this ranch."

"Which is the perfect spot for us to set up as a permanent home base," Sly cut him off, surprising Trace.

"You would be willing to live in Sunset again?"

"It'll be a helluva commute. I'll have to keep my condo in New York so I'll have a place to stay through the work week but, yeah, I would be willing to call Sunset my home again. I'll be wherever the two of you are. That's all that matters." Sly told him so seriously and sweetly it made Trace's throat close.

“We have our careers,” Cord said. “They may take us away for a while, but in the end we'll find our way back here.”

“Come here.” Sly sat up, reached for Trace, and when Trace curled into his arm, Cord sat up to be at Trace's other side. “I can promise you it will never take me three years to come back again. Hell, I'll be lucky to be able to stay away from three minutes.”

“Eight seconds for me,” Cord chimed in and they all laughed.

“Three minutes or eight seconds, I promise both of you I'll be right here,” Trace told them, kissing Sly and tugging at Cord's neck to join the kiss.

“Ready and waiting to give his cowboys what they want,” Sly finished and, together with Cord, kissed Trace back.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bestselling author Tonya Ramagos spends much of her time daydreaming about one plot or another. Give her a cup of French vanilla flavored coffee and a keyboard and she is at her happiest. When she isn't writing, thinking about writing, or plotting what to write, she can be found taking on the mother role with her two boys and the husband, too. She enjoys taking long walks on the nature trails near her home in Chattanooga, TN, playing computer games, swinging on the playground, dancing, and curling up with a good book.



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