

ROMANCE UNBOUND PUBLISHING



TEXAS SURRENDER
CLAIRE THOMPSON

Romance Unbound Publishing

Presents

Texas Surrender

by

Claire Thompson

Edited by J. L. Reeves

Cover Design by Kelly Shorten

ISBN 1449580696

EAN-13 978-1449580698

Copyright 2009 Claire Thompson

All rights reserved

Dedicated to my dear friends, Jean and Rhyss, for their endless talent, patience and insight in helping me make this a better book, and to Jen, a wonderful reader and friend, who gave it its title!

Chapter 1

"I think Macy's gonna foal today or tomorrow. She's restless as hell. You got the fresh bedding ready for her, Avery?" Charlie called from outside. Before Avery could answer, Charlie let out a loud groan and then cried weakly, "Oh...dear god..."

Alarmed, Avery dropped the saddle he'd been oiling and ran out of the tack room. Charlie was standing by the paddock fence, a currycomb in his hand. But instead of grooming Kassie, he was clutching her mane and sagging against her, his face gray as wet ash.

"Charlie, what is it? What's the matter?" Avery hurried over to his boss, prying his clenched fingers from the agitated horse and gently helping the older man to sit down on the ground, not too close to the horse. Kassie snorted and flared her nostrils, tossing her mane and pulling against the rope.

Avery didn't have time to calm the mare, focused instead on Charlie. He lifted the hat from Charlie's head and pulled a rag from his back pocket to wipe at the sweat beading on Charlie's brow. He reached for the phone Charlie kept clipped to his belt and punched in 9-1-1.

Turning away so as not to alarm Charlie, he spoke in a low voice into the phone. "This is Avery Dalton over at the Circle R Ranch off County Road 38. I think Charlie Reed is havin' a heart attack. Send an ambulance, quick!"

Charlie was sweating profusely now, his hand clutching at his shirt, his breath coming in shallow, rapid gasps. Trying to keep the panic from his voice, Avery urged, "Just hang on, Charlie. Take it easy. Help is comin'."

He ran back into the tack room and grabbed a saddle blanket. Hurrying back to Charlie, he spread the blanket on the ground and helped the slumping man ease his head down onto it.

"It's okay. Just try to relax. The ambulance is on the way."

Charlie's eyes were glazed and unfocused, his breath slowing. *Don't die, don't die, oh god, please don't die.* Avery knew the mechanics of CPR, but it had been several years since he'd taken the training course.

"Hurry, hurry, god damn it," he muttered under his breath. He stood uncertainly, trying to decide if he could haul Charlie out to the truck and get him into town faster than waiting for the paramedics to arrive.

Kassie snorted and pawed the ground, whinnying softly. At the same time, Charlie's eyes rolled back and his mouth fell slack. "No," Avery cried urgently. "No."

He could hear the ambulance siren as he knelt over the unconscious man and jerked open his denim work shirt, the armpits and front of which were soaked with sweat. He placed the palm of his hand flat on Charlie's chest and pressed in a pumping motion, trying desperately to stay calm.

Charlie didn't move. With trembling hands, Avery tilted Charlie's head back and lifted his chin. Pinching Charlie's nostrils shut, he took a deep breath and leaned over, sealing Charlie's mouth with his. He pushed breath into Charlie's lungs, feverishly praying that it wasn't too late.

~*~

JD was just tying his apron into place when he was approached by the chief chef of the Manhattan restaurant where they both worked. JD could tell by the frown on his face that something was wrong. When his boss told him to follow him into his office, he was sure of it.

Once seated, the older man launched in without preamble. "I'm sorry, JD, but we're going to have to let you go. Effective immediately."

"Excuse me?" Phillip could not be firing him. He must have heard wrong.

Phillip smiled sadly and shook his head. "You've done a great job as my sous-chef. It isn't about you at all. We just can't afford an extra chef right now." He stroked his jawls, as if trying to come up with the right way to say what he had to say.

"It's Andre," he said at last. "He wants this kept confidential – you know how the vultures will leap on any bad news and use it against us. But between you and me, Andre's bitten off more than he can chew with this new restaurant. The rent is eating him alive and the taxes are even worse. Until we get ourselves on better footing, we're cutting back everything we can."

"Who knows. Maybe in a few months? A year at most? We would want you back, definitely. But for now..." Phillip shrugged helplessly, holding up his palms in surrender.

Surely Phillip knew in this economy nobody was hiring sous-chefs, even ones trained at the Le Cordon Bleu. At least at the moment, JD would be lucky to get a job as a short-order cook at some diner in Queens.

He'd been hired eight months before at the French restaurant, which had just opened to rave reviews by some of the toughest food critics in the city. In a flurry of excitement, they'd quickly staffed up, but as often happened in the big city, diners were fickle, always eager to try something new.

JD was only one step below Phillip Stark, the chef de cuisine, whose culinary masterpieces JD oversaw the preparation of. After years of training and working for peanuts, he had finally made it – or so he'd thought.

Phillip pulled an envelope from beneath his apron and handed it to JD. "Your last paycheck, plus two weeks extra." JD stared with disbelief at the envelope, half-expecting it to crumble between his fingers, falling like stale bread crumbs to the floor. The years of struggle, of barely making it, holed up in some shit apartment, working his ass off to pay his way through Le Cordon Bleu had come to this.

He'd traded in the wide, open skies of the East Texas prairie for the cold, gray city in winter, and the muggy heat of a New York summer encased in concrete and glass. He'd put up with the rampant snobbery and condescension because he didn't come from the right background or speak with the right accent. He'd endured jibes about his Texas twang and his cowboy boots, and if the truth be known, felt more comfortable sharing a cigarette with the dish washers and bus boys in the back alley of the restaurant than debating which wine went with caramelized salmon with cherry mango salsa.

"I'm sorry," Phillip said again. "I'll give you the best references, I promise. You're young. You'll bounce back."

Young – yeah, right. And youth didn't pay the fucking bills. He was thirty-two, unemployed, living in a one-room apartment he shared with roaches and rats. He had savings but they were sacrosanct – never to be touched until "someday" when he opened his own restaurant.

That prospect was receding even farther now in his dreams. JD walked along the crowded streets toward the subway, his mood growing ever darker as he pondered his souring fate. Instead of getting off at his stop, he kept going.

At least he had Tommy.

He'd stop and see his sub boy. Tommy worked from his home and with any luck he'd be there, clacking away at his computer. Tommy was a hardcore masochist. JD had pressed his sensual envelope as far as he dared, and had yet to find Tommy's limits.

They'd been lovers for the past few months. While JD enjoyed their BDSM play, something held him back from taking it to the next level. Their connection was intense, but remained primarily sexual. If JD took ownership of a sub, he wanted it to be for keeps. It had to mean something, something more than just hot sex and kinky games.

JD had a key to Tommy's apartment so when he came over to play, Tommy could be waiting, kneeling and naked on the floor, his leather wrists cuffs clipped behind his back, ball gag in place. JD's cock hardened at that image as he walked down the stairs to Tommy's basement apartment.

He knocked lightly and waited, not wanting to just barge in unannounced. He knew, though, how absorbed Tommy could get when working and so after a minute he slipped the key into the lock and opened the door.

Tommy wasn't at his computer desk. JD opened his mouth to announce his arrival, but was stopped by a sound he knew well coming from the bedroom. It was the slap of leather against skin, accompanied by muffled groans.

Moving toward the bedroom door, JD pushed it open and stood, transfixed by what he saw. *His boy*, his personal sub boy who had told him over and over he was the only one, indeed had begged JD to collar him as proof of their exclusive relationship, stood naked, fingers laced behind his neck, a bright red ball gag stuffed into his mouth, a matching red blindfold over his eyes.

Clover clamps were attached to his nipples, a length of rope added to the chain and looped around Tommy's balls, which were purple from the strain. A man JD didn't recognize was standing fully clothed just behind Tommy, a heavy black leather flogger in his hand.

Once the shock of the moment released him, JD demanded, "Who the fuck're you?"

The man looked up and Tommy startled and jerked, gurgling against his ball gag. The man pulled the blindfold from Tommy's eyes. "You know this dude?" Tommy nodded, his eyes on JD, his expression pleading.

"Take the gag off him. Now," JD ordered and the mystery man obeyed.

Drool still sliding down his chin, Tommy blurted, "Oh, JD! I can explain! I'm so sorry. You aren't supposed to be here now. This was just a one-time thing, I swear."

The other guy was scowling. "What the fuck?" he interrupted. "Does this guy own you? You said you were free. What the hell?" Turning toward JD, the man opened his hands and held them out in supplication. "Sorry, man. I picked him up at Gertie's. He said he was looking for a real man. I didn't know he was your boy."

"He's not mine," JD replied with a calm he didn't feel. "In fact, he's all yours. Take him."

JD cut off Tommy's protests with a shake of his head. "I don't share, Tommy. I thought you knew that." Removing the key from his keychain, he tossed it onto the bed. Ignoring Tommy's pleas for him to wait, he walked back out into the August heat.

What could possibly happen to make the day any worse?

His cell phone began to ring. Without even looking to see who it was, JD answered with a surly growl. "Yeah."

"JD? It's Mom. I have real bad news about Uncle Charlie, baby."

~*~

So, that's the famous chef, Avery thought.

JD Reed was surrounded by his family – Charlie and LuAnn’s only daughter, Jane, Jane’s husband and their two kids up from Houston, plus Charlie’s brother and his wife, and their daughter, JD Reed’s sister. Charlie’s brother had his arm around LuAnn, who was sniffing into a white lace handkerchief.

That morning at the funeral was the first chance Avery had to lay eyes on JD, and he found he couldn’t stop staring at him. When Charlie and LuAnn had talked about their nephew, the chef, Avery had envisioned someone short and fat, wearing a big white hat, like the guy on the can of ravioli. This guy looked nothing like that.

He was broad-shouldered with thick blond hair and brown eyes the color of a sorrel chestnut mare. Despite the fact they were standing at a graveside, Avery, his head lowered, gazed at JD Reed from beneath his lashes, imagining that tall lean body without the covering of his fancy black suit. He shifted the Stetson he held in his hands to cover the press of his rising cock against his fly.

Avery didn’t announce his sexual orientation, but he didn’t try to hide it either. Charlie had treated him with a “don’t ask, don’t tell” kind of attitude, while LuAnn was pretty much oblivious, as far as he could tell.

Sometimes he daydreamed about having an actual partner – someone to come home to, someone to share his life with, but mostly he was content. When he got too lonesome, he’d make the eighty mile drive over to Dallas and find a guy to spend the night with. It wasn’t an ideal arrangement, but it had worked out okay so far.

The casket was lowered, the dirt shoveled and amens murmured. As Avery watched, a wave of nearly paralyzing sadness washed over him. Charlie was gone. He wouldn’t be coming back from a horse show in a few days. He wouldn’t be there the next morning, already at work, no matter how early Avery got there. Never again would Avery hear his gruff bark of a laugh, or watch him calm a skittish horse, or feel the hard pat on his shoulder when he told Avery he’d done good.

What would happen now, now that Charlie was gone? He’d been the first person to treat Avery like he mattered. He was the first person to really trust Avery, despite knowing about his troubled past. He never judged Avery by his education or lack of it, or the fact he wasn’t hooked up with “a nice girl by now”, his mother’s constant lament before she died. He recognized Avery shared his love of horses, and was willing to work hard, and that, for Charlie Reed, had been enough.

Avery blinked away tears as the dirt covered the casket, and turned away. LuAnn and her family piled into their cars to head back to the house. Avery walked back toward his old pickup truck and followed the procession.

He turned back, tipping his hat one last time to Charlie Reed.

At the house, neighbors and family swarmed, carrying plates piled high with food and talking in the hushed, muted tones saved for events like these. Casserole dishes and

platters covered every available surface and the press of people around him seemed to be sucking all the oxygen out of the place.

"I better tend to the horses," Avery said, when he finally managed to get close enough to LuAnn to speak to her. "See how Macy and the colt are getting on." He vastly preferred the company of horses to people, and to top it off, he felt like he was going jump out of his skin, which was itching against the cheap polyester of his Sunday suit.

LuAnn, distracted by the hovering crowd of women patting her and clucking sympathetically, nodded and waved vaguely toward him. The nephew, who stood near his aunt holding a bottle of beer, glanced toward Avery. Their eyes met and Avery felt a strange clench in his gut. The guy gave a barely perceptible nod, his mouth curving in the barest hint of a smile.

A kind of recognition passed between them, a knowledge that needed no words. Avery knew as those brown eyes raked his body like he owned him, that the nephew was receiving the same telepathic message.

He's gay.

It took a sheer act of will to break the contact between them, but somehow Avery managed to turn away. Who cared if the guy was gay? He was just passing through, a city boy with soft hands who would never look twice at the hired hand. A day or two of comforting the aunt and scoping out his uncle's will and the guy would be long gone. Meanwhile, Avery had a horse ranch to run, and no one to help him do it.

He walked down the long path that led from the main house toward the stables, pulling off the confining suit jacket and tie as he went. He'd just check on Macy before riding the tractor over to his cabin, located at the southern edge of the hundred acre ranch, secluded behind a copse of tall pines.

The ranch offered breeding and stud service, plus boarding. Two men could manage the average twelve to fifteen or so horses usually in the stable, but it was definitely too much work for one to handle alone. Avery hoped LuAnn didn't drag her heels on getting him help.

He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off as he entered the stable, which was cool in comparison to the hot August sun. "Hey, Macy, how you doin'? How's little Smokey?" If only Charlie could have hung on long enough to meet the new colt.

Four days prior, while life was ebbing from Charlie Reed, a new life was starting in the stall. Macy foaled a long-legged, wobbly colt who struggled to stand and plopped down again, only to try again and this time succeed.

Now Smokey was nursing at the mare's teat. Macy looked over at the sound of Avery's voice and gave a toss of her head, as if to say, "My boy is doin' fine." Avery smiled, much relieved that the funeral service was over and he could get back to the

tasks at hand. He would bury the sadness of losing Charlie by throwing himself into his work. The horses needed him – that's what Charlie would have reminded him, and it was true.

They needed to hire a new hand before too long. George Harlan was looking for a permanent position. He was in his forties and knew his way around a ranch as well as anyone. Avery had always liked him, and felt bad when the ranch he'd been working at for so many years had shut down. It would feel good too, he couldn't deny it, to be the boss at last, the one in control.

He handed Macy a small apple he'd snatched from a fruit bowl in LuAnn's kitchen, patted her nose and turned to go.

"New colt?"

Avery was startled by the sound of a man's voice. He looked up to see the nephew standing at the door, his jacket slung over his shoulder, his tie gone and several buttons of his fancy striped shirt open at the throat.

"Yeah," Avery replied tersely, aware his mouth was suddenly dry.

The man entered the stable and looked around. "Boy, this place brings back memories. I spent some of the best summers of my life on this ranch."

Avery didn't reply. He kept his body averted, not certain if the erection that had again leaped to life in the guy's presence was showing. He wished he hadn't taken off his shirt.

The guy stepped closer, so close Avery could smell his cologne. He extended his hand. "I'm JD Reed. Charlie and LuAnn's nephew."

They shook, and Avery filed away the fact JD's hands weren't as soft as he'd expected, though nowhere near as tough and calloused as his own. "Avery Dalton."

"It's nice to meet you," JD said, without a trace of the New York accent Avery had been expecting. He looked Avery slowly up and down, and again a kind of thrill surged its way through Avery's gut. There was something powerful in JD's gaze. Something disconcerting that left Avery feeling unsure of himself.

To cover his confusion, Avery drawled, "Like what you see?"

JD nodded slowly, a smile lifting one side of his mouth. "I sure do. Those are some tattoos. You into the pain?"

"Pardon?" Avery turned away, flustered by the question. *Was he into the pain?* What did that even mean?

He was very proud of his tattoos – the pure black Arabian horse rearing high on his right bicep and an Apache bow and arrow on his left. A stylized scorpion perched on the back of his neck, the tip of its curled stinger stained red. Out of sight on his hip coiled a diamond-backed rattlesnake, its silver tongue forking toward his groin.

JD's question was like a key turning in the lock of a door Avery had never dared acknowledge, much less open. Though he prided himself on his ability to take the inking needle like a man, he realized that until this moment he'd never consciously admitted there was more to it than that.

"You heard me. I asked if you get off on the pain. You know, like a sexual thing."

JD moved closer, so close Avery could smell the sweat beneath the cologne. There was a coiled tension in JD's demeanor, something raw and dangerous that both attracted and frightened Avery. His cock lengthened in his jeans, ignoring his mind's dictate to cut it out. He stepped back, nonplussed and embarrassed, the tips of his ears burning.

Hoping his swagger would fool the Yankee, he lifted the corner of his mouth in a sneer. "I have no idea what the hell you're talkin' about." For emphasis, he spat onto the clay floor. "Sorry I can't stay and chitchat, but I got a ranch to run. See ya' 'round."

He'd meant to walk away after that parting remark, but JD fixed him with a stare that kept him rooted to the spot. He had the disquieting feeling JD could see right into his head, and he didn't like it, not one bit. What the hell was going on? He needed to get away. He needed time to think.

Finally JD broke the spell. "Sure thing, Ave. We'll talk later."

Not if I can help it, we won't. Avery had to order his legs to walk, not run, aware of the man's eyes following him, his soft chuckle like a victory cry in the face of Avery's confused retreat.

Chapter 2

"Excuse me, ma'am, we got to talk." As Avery climbed the porch steps, he lifted his hat and wiped his forehead with the bandana he kept tucked in his back pocket. It was only the day after the funeral but it was going on a week since Charlie had died, and there was just too much to do on the hundred-acre ranch for one man to handle.

Charlie had been a workhorse up to the day he died, but even with the two of them working fulltime, they'd had plenty to do to keep the ranch running smoothly and all fourteen horses properly exercised and cared for. At present Avery was just managing the basics, keeping the stalls mucked and the horses watered, fed and groomed.

On top of that, a hay delivery was expected next week, and there were several sections of fencing that needed mending. Avery wanted to spend more time with Macy and her foal, but so far he'd barely had time for more than a quick check in the morning and again at night. There was a man coming by later in the week who wanted to buy one of the yearlings, and Kassie was coming into heat.

LuAnn looked up from her newspaper with a distracted air. "What? Oh, 'morning Avery."

"'Mornin', ma'am," Avery replied automatically. He leaned against the porch post and said again, "We got to talk. I know it's soon to bring this up, and no disrespect intended, but the ranch needs runnin'. We got to get another hand on board. I have someone in mind, actually."

"Well, isn't that a coincidence?" LuAnn peered up at him. "I do, too. I've asked my nephew if he'll stay a spell and help out while we get our bearings."

"Your *nephew*!" Avery blurted before he could stop himself. "From New York City?"

"He's not from New York City, silly. He's from Texas. His family is from Midland, and he spent many a summer on this very ranch, mucking stalls and riding the trails. He'll be perfect. I'm not saying it's permanent, just till I can figure out what I'm doing. I'm sure you understand."

Avery didn't, but he bit his tongue. What was she thinking? Riding a horse on a trail as a kid and shoveling horse shit did not qualify you to run a ranch. And what was the pecking order? Was Avery expected to take orders from that greenhorn?

"JD's excited about the opportunity," LuAnn went on. "He's, uh, between jobs at the moment so the timing couldn't be better. The clean country air will do him good."

He's not afraid of hard work and he's willing to learn. It'll be nice for me to have family here. JD was always a good boy."

"Yes, ma'am," Avery replied, his heart tapping too fast in his chest as he turned away. As annoyed as he was at the prospect of having to train some Yankee greenhorn, he couldn't deny the sudden rush of lust that gripped his cock and balls like fingers at the thought of seeing JD Reed again.

Which was just plain ridiculous, as he'd already promised himself to have nothing to do with the guy.

~*~

JD pulled on the old pair of scuffed cowboy boots LuAnn had provided him from Uncle Charlie's closet. Though JD was taller than Charlie, the boots fit fine. He pushed the legs of his jeans down over them and stood, taking stock of himself in the mirror.

He thought over the conversation with his aunt the night before. "JD, honey, what would you think of staying down and helping out around here till I figure out what's what? You were always good with horses when you were a kid and I'd feel better having family around."

JD's initial impulse was to refuse. It had been years since he'd been on a ranch, and while working in a restaurant kitchen could be grueling, it wasn't the same as the hard physical labor taking care of horses entailed.

On the other hand, it wasn't as if he had any prospects in New York at the moment. He had no job; he had no lover. It had been at once sad and freeing to realize he really didn't miss Tommy at all, except for the regular kink and sex.

LuAnn added, "I'm not talking forever. Just a few weeks while I figure out what I want to do with this place. I know Avery would appreciate the help."

JD had his doubts about that, but he held his tongue. He was familiar with the Texas country boy mentality; aware the ranch hand might be less than thrilled to have the family nephew thrust upon him. But it wasn't like JD had anything else going on. And if he were honest, it wasn't only to help his aunt that he'd agreed to stay. His cock got hard at the memory of the bulging package between Avery's legs when JD had honed in on the almost sexual thrill Avery got from being tattooed.

He'd been half joking in his remarks, that is, until he saw the response in Avery's widening eyes, flushing skin and instant erection. He'd definitely hit a nerve, and it was a nerve he liked hitting. He wasn't yet sure if the guy was consciously aware of his own kink yet.

Though JD took the lead in the BDSM dance, he well understood the fierce rush one could experience from being pushed hard and taken to the edge. It wasn't about abuse or being put down—quite the opposite. It was about being tough enough to take it like a man.

JD had never been attracted to the scraping, timid boys who lived to kiss the tops of his feet with their tears of submissive gratitude. He wanted a real man. A Texas cowboy, in fact, would fit the bill just fine.

JD could tell by his hard body and calloused hands that Avery was a man who didn't shy away from pushing himself hard and tackling tough jobs. How would he handle a full body flogging or the cut of the cane? Would he get off on being hog tied, his cock and balls exposed for erotic torture while a cock was rammed down his throat?

Of course, JD knew he might be totally off base. Yes, Avery was definitely gay, at least that much was established, but a hard-on when talking about tattoo needles didn't mean he was a full-fledged bottom just itching for the right man to come along and order him to his knees.

"JD, you up there, honey? Avery's ready to show you around."

JD took the stairs two at a time, buttoning his denim work shirt as he went. LuAnn was standing in the front hall, looking small and older than her fifty-eight years. She gestured toward the front door. "Avery's outside."

Out on the porch, Avery slouched, his face partially obscured by the cowboy hat tilted low over his forehead. He had one foot up against the porch railing, the very picture of a cowboy in repose.

He straightened up when JD approached, disapproval radiating from him like a shimmering mirage. With a grunt, he turned and moved down the porch stairs, looking back with a scowl. "You comin'?"

No hello, no welcome, no nothing. JD shrugged. He enjoyed a challenge, and this guy was going to be one, no question about it.

They walked down the gently sloping hill from the house to the stables, Avery slightly ahead of JD, who made no effort to catch up. Avery was wearing a black T-shirt that hugged his broad shoulders and strained at his bulging biceps. JD liked watching Avery's ass move, and his cock stirred at a fantasy of pushing the cowboy down right there on the dirt road and taking him then and there.

JD followed him into the main pen, letting the gate latch click shut behind him. "How many horses we got on the ranch these days?" he asked, mainly to make conversation.

With a slight toss of his head, Avery answered, "We got fourteen horses right now. The General is our breedin' stallion. We got four mares, two geldings, two fillies and three yearlings. Plus Smokey, here." He gestured toward Macy's stall where the colt was greedily sucking its mother's teat.

Avery turned toward the pair, his features softening into a gentle smile that made him look suddenly very young. "How old are you?" JD asked without thinking.

The scowl returned as Avery faced him, though it didn't diminish how good looking the cowboy was. He had black eyes set in a tanned, angular face with prominent cheekbones and several days' dark stubble over a firm jaw. His nose was snub, which made him look younger than perhaps he was, and his hair was black and straight, shaggy and in need of a cut. He wasn't tall, maybe only five foot, nine, but every inch of that appeared to be solid muscle.

"I'm old enough to know better," Avery snapped.

"Yeah? And just what do you know?" JD rejoined.

"I know I've got a ranch to run, and no time to stand around chit-chattin'. So I'll just ask you straight out—you have much experience workin' around horses?"

JD shrugged. "Some, I guess. I spent a bunch of summers here when I was a teenager. I rode a lot. I helped out some. I'm sure I can learn quick. I mean, how hard can it be?"

Avery shook his head, not replying. He walked past two horses to the last stall, in which stood a regal looking animal, with large bones, a well defined neck and a beautiful coat of pure white, her mane silver in the slanting sunlight.

"Kassie's in heat," Avery said. "I'm gonna mate her and the General today, if she'll cooperate." JD looked at the mare, who was pawing anxiously at the dirt, her tail flicking and eyes rolling.

"She looks agitated."

"Yeah. Normally she's sweet as can be. Till the PMS gets her."

"PMS? Horses get that?"

"Pouty Mare Syndrome."

JD laughed. "So what's the procedure? You just put 'em in a pen and let nature take its course?"

"Sometimes we do, but not with Kassie. She's a kicker. She 'bout killed the General the last time he tried to mount her. The union was, uh, not successful."

"So you're going to tie her down? Force her to submit?" JD said the words lightly, but he was watching Avery carefully for any reaction to the purposefully provocative words.

Avery angled his body away. "Somethin' like that," he replied, his voice devoid of emotion. He entered Kassie's stall, approaching her slowly, his voice soothing and calm. He stroked her mane with one hand, while slipping the halter over her nose with the other.

Gently, he led the skittish mare out of the stall. "You can muck her stall while she's in the matin' pen. You *do* know how to muck a stall, don't you? Everythin' you need's

in the tack room.” He gestured toward the side building that was attached to the stable and, without waiting for a reply, walked out, leading Kassie behind him.

JD knew this was his first test. He headed toward the tool shed, where he retrieved a pitchfork, a stable broom, a shovel and a wheelbarrow. He found some work gloves and put them on.

He could see by the patterns in the bedding that Kassie was restless — it was mostly pushed to the walls, the center nearly bare of straw. Working quickly, he scooped out the soiled bedding and manure, pushing the clean straw to one side. The wheelbarrow was nearly full by the time he was done.

Wheeling it to the manure pile, he saw Avery leading a bay stallion from the stable on the other side of the mating pen. He was a beautiful animal, with a coat of dark mahogany, his mane and tail black.

Kassie was standing by the fence, and upon closer inspection, JD saw she was tethered there, her back legs hobbled with rope. She was pawing the dirt with her front hooves, turning back to gaze balefully at the General as he was led into the pen.

JD hurried back inside, eager to finish the stall before the action started. Retrieving fresh straw, he scattered it on the clay floor, blending it with what clean bedding remained.

He glanced at the wheelbarrow, telling himself he’d hose it down and put away the cleaning equipment later. He strode toward the mating pen, moving to stand beside Avery, who was leaning against the outside of fence.

“Hey,” JD said.

Avery grunted a greeting without turning to look at him. He was focused on the horses. The General was sniffing at Kassie’s tail. She tossed her silver mane and whinnied as she pulled against her restraints.

All at once the bay reared up on his hind legs, his huge, erect cock pointing like a divining rod toward the tethered mare. Falling against her, he maneuvered himself to enter her while she jerked and shimmied beneath him in a futile effort to dislodge him.

Leaning his long, powerfully-muscled neck over hers, he bit down, and Kassie stilled. Both men watched the stallion’s thrusting movements. JD glanced sidelong at Avery, wondering what it would be like to bind his ankles to the fence like Kassie’s, pulling the rope up between his legs and using it like a bridle to rein him in while he fucked him standing up.

JD moved closer to Avery, so close their shoulders were touching. Avery didn’t move away. JD could feel the electricity shooting between them like a lightning storm. If he’d dared, he would have pulled Avery close then and there and yanked down his jeans.

Instead, his eyes fixed on the mating animals, he said softly, "Imagine it, Avery. Imagine being tied down like that and taken hard. What's that like, do you ever wonder? What would it feel like to be bound, helpless in your restraints while someone used you for his pleasure?"

He knew he was going over the line with a man he barely knew, but his gut told him Avery would respond, based on his reaction to the pain comment the night before. For his part, JD's cock was itching for attention and the image of Avery, kneeling right there and then to service him, only made it harder. He couldn't help the smile that curled onto his lips when he glanced down at Avery's crotch, which left no question as to the effect his questions had had upon him.

Or maybe it was the effect of watching the General, who was thrusting hard into the helpless mare. No question, the scene was a primal one, the dominant animal taking what he wanted because he could.

The stallion finally let go his grip on the mare's neck and lifted his head, shaking his mane as his body shuddered in orgasmic release. He pulled back, balancing a moment on his hind legs before falling to all fours.

As if coming out of a trance, Avery lifted himself from his leaning posture against the fence and turned toward JD. His eyes flashed. "Let's get one thing clear. I'd appreciate it if, for the few days you're here, you keep your dirty little thoughts to yourself."

JD felt as if he'd been slapped. Avery's cock was still clearly erect, its thick, hard outline pressing against the faded denim of his jeans, and JD was absolutely sure this was a direct result of their interaction. Yet his expression was hard, his tone angry.

The guy was lying, but was it just to JD, or to himself as well?

Recovering himself, JD grinned, letting his gaze sweep in a slow, sultry movement over Avery's body, resting on the bulge between his legs. "Your mouth," he quipped, "is saying, 'no, no, no,' but your body is saying 'yes, yes, yes.'"

Avery turned abruptly away. "I got a ranch to run. Make yourself useful and take Kassie back to her stall."

Chapter 3

What the fuck was that guy's problem, anyway? Who the hell did he think he was? Avery lay on his bed, his cock in his fist. *Imagine being tied down like that and taken hard. What's that like, do you ever wonder? What would it feel like to be bound, helpless in your restraints while someone used you for his pleasure?*

Before his mind had even properly processed the words, his cock had sprung to attention, shooting painfully erect in a matter of seconds. How had JD clued into him so quickly? Did he have some kind of secret code tattooed on his forehead? JD's comments the day before about pain as a sexual thing had electrified him in a similar way. Just what the hell was going on?

The odd thing was, he'd never put it all together, not the way JD seemed to. Yeah, he'd admit he loved a good, hard ass fucking, a big cock rammed into him without so much as a 'by your leave'. He loved when the guy behind him – it had never been about who it was, just what he did – grabbed him by the hair, pulling his head back to hold him still while he fucked him hard and fast. He could practically come just from being fucked like that, without anyone even touching his cock.

He liked to give as hard as he got, though if he were completely honest, while he loved the power play, it didn't carry quite the same charge as being roughly taken himself.

What would it be like to be tied down, as JD had suggested? To be physically restrained, unable to move, his ass cheeks splayed wide, a fat cock pushing its way in...

Avery moaned, pumping his cock. He imagined Jack, his occasional fuck buddy who worked on an oil rig in the Gulf and called Avery when he was in Dallas for a quick, hot fuck. What would Jack think of being tied down so you were...what were JD's words... *helpless in your restraints while someone used you for his pleasure.*

Jack was forgotten, JD's brown eyes staring into his, his blond hair falling over his forehead, that smart-ass grin on his face that Avery wanted to wipe off in the worst way...No fucking way would he ever let that pompous prick tie him down. If anything, he'd be the one Avery would shove in the dirt, his pants to his knees while Avery fucked him until he squealed like a girl...

He came in his hand, his heart thumping, his breath ragged. The night was hot, the small air-conditioning unit in his window barely up to the task of cooling the one-room cabin, especially not the loft where he slept. He lay quietly a while, letting the sheen of sweat dry on his naked body. Moonlight lit the room, his room, his special place.

Everything in the place, every stick of furniture, every picture on the wall or memento on the shelves, belonged to him and him alone.

When he'd got the job three years before, he was still staying at his mother's apartment in town, though the cancer had finally got her six months before. He had come to hate staying there, everything in the over-crowded, over-decorated apartment a reminder that she was gone. Not to mention he really couldn't afford the rent on a two-bedroom place. At first grief, and then inertia had kept him there.

When he'd seen the old cabin at the end of the property, and asked Charlie if he could rent it, Charlie had laughed.

"That old place? It doesn't even have running water. It hasn't been used for decades, except by mice nesting in the rafters in the winter. Rent it? Hell, you can stay for free."

There was a working well near the cabin, and the electric lines weren't too far away. He'd bartered with a plumber and an electrician to get the place livable. For the first six months, he'd actually used the old outhouse nearby to do his business, but Charlie had had a septic tank put in, once he'd seen that Avery was working out on the job.

It was this cabin, *his* cabin, that defined him, more than his job on the ranch, more than anything else he'd managed to accomplish in his short, not very productive life.

What would happen now, now that Charlie was gone? Did he stand to lose not only his job, but his home, if LuAnn sold the ranch to someone else?

Avery grabbed a pillow and hugged it to himself, refusing to dwell on the possibility of losing what he'd worked so hard to attain. Closing his eyes, he listened to the song of the cicadas, crickets and bullfrogs over the faint gurgle of the creek outside his window as he drifted toward sleep.

The next morning when he arrived at the stable, Avery frowned at the wheelbarrow JD had left by the stalls, unwashed and not put away. True, he'd put him through his paces the day before, setting him to mucking stalls and stacking hay bales to make room for the delivery in two day's time. The guy had reeked of horse shit and sweat by the time he'd stumbled back to the big house. He'd signed on for this, so he could damn well do as he was told.

He had already let all but Daisy and Jamie out to pasture, and was just turning to hose down the wheelbarrow when he saw JD coming down the path. He was walking slowly and looked a little stiff. Probably the first day's real labor the guy had done in his privileged life.

Avery pretended not to notice him, though he couldn't deny he looked damn good in his denim work shirt, this one with the sleeves cut off at the shoulders, revealing pale but strongly muscled arms. The city boy was probably wearing sunscreen to protect his precious skin, Avery thought with a snort.

When JD entered the paddock, Avery pointed to the dirty wheelbarrow. "You forgot to wash this down. We run a clean ranch here. It's just as important to clean up after as it is to do a job."

"Oh, sorry 'bout that," JD said lightly. "Won't happen again, *boss*." He placed a slight emphasis on the word boss, painfully reminding Avery that, while he might be giving the orders for now, he certainly wasn't JD's boss, nor would he ever be.

"I have to ride out and mend a section of the back fence this mornin'."

"Need help with that?"

Avery shook his head. "No. I have other plans for you. Daisy's been limpin' a little. Before we let her out to pasture I want to make sure she's okay. You know how to clean a horse's hooves, right?"

"Vaguely. I know the idea is to remove any packed manure and small stones and stuff. I had a dream about you last night. Want to hear it?"

"No," Avery said too quickly. *He dreamed about me?* Avery couldn't decide if this pleased or annoyed him. He decided to go for annoyed and snapped, "Pay attention. You're workin' now. When you clean a horse's feet, you use a hoof pick and take your time. Check for cracks too, and work from the back of the foot toward the front. Horses are prone to hoof rot or thrush. Foul odor is a clue, so be mindful. Our horses are pretty good about havin' their legs lifted, so you should be okay. I'll show you what to do before I saddle up."

Avery led Daisy, a black and white piebald filly, out of her stall and into the paddock. Looping her lead rope over a fence post, he stood beside her, murmuring in a soothing voice while he placed his left hand on the horse's shoulder and ran his right hand gently down the front of her leg.

"You grasp the leg here from the front and at the same time press your left hand against the shoulder. The horse will shift her weight from the right leg, and when she does, lift it, like so." Avery demonstrated while Daisy waited with patient indifference.

JD watched, standing so close that if Avery had wanted to, he could have turned and kissed him. Not that he wanted to.

"You try the next one." He handed the hoof pick to JD, who took it and moved to the other side, managing to follow directions reasonably well. After watching him a while longer, Avery said, "I shouldn't be too long. If you finish her before I get back, you can let her out to pasture. Then you can fill the water buckets and muck the stalls."

Avery brushed down Jamie's coat and saddled her up, watching JD out of the corner of his eye. He moved stiffly and winced from time to time. Avery almost felt sorry for him—until he remembered how JD had teased him during the mating, making him squirm. He'd just keep the guy so busy he wouldn't have a chance to make any sexually loaded remarks. He'd get him so tired he'd forget he even had a dick.

To his credit, JD hadn't said a word about his obviously aching muscles. At least he wasn't a whiner, and he did work hard, if not very efficiently. Nevertheless, he couldn't just waltz in here and assume he could instantly become a ranch hand. It took hard work and experience. Avery had had his share of kicks in the shins, falls from horses that came to a sudden dead stop, and slipping in piles of horseshit when he was learning the business. No reason JD should be protected, just because he was the boss's nephew and had a bunch of fancy degrees.

Avery was astride Jamie and about to head out when JD looked up with a lazy, seductive smile that nearly took Avery's breath away. "Before you ride away, let me tell you about that dream. Happened right here in this pen. You were naked, on your knees, your hands roped behind you, your head in the dirt. Ever had a whipping, Ave? A real whipping with a strap or a riding crop?"

Shocked, Avery felt the heat rising up his neck. How dare this asshole talk to him like that? He started to answer, to demand what the hell gave JD the right to say that crap when he realized his balls were throbbing beneath a raging hard-on.

The seductive smile had ramped up into a full-fledged shit-eating grin that made Avery want to haul off and deck the guy. He started to speak but couldn't think of a thing to say. The image JD had placed into his mind had blocked his ability to think clearly, much less come up with a snappy comeback. Wheeling his horse, he rode out of the paddock without a word.

~*~

"Have some more chicken fried steak, honey. It was Charlie's favorite." Dutifully, JD held out his plate while his aunt dumped another piece of the meat beside the lump of gooeey, reconstituted flakes that passed as mashed potatoes.

He would have liked to cook for Aunt LuAnn, not only to avoid her horrible cooking, but to introduce her to the idea that food didn't have to be breaded, salted and cooked within an inch of its life in order to be tasty. But he was too bone weary even to offer.

Avery was working him like a pack mule. He was sure Avery was doing it on purpose, though he did work just as hard right alongside him. But Avery had been doing it for years. Not to mention JD probably had a good six or eight years on the guy.

Every muscle in his body was screaming, and the thought of having to get up again tomorrow morning at the crack of dawn and do it all again was almost more than he could stand, but he'd be damned if he let Avery know that.

He'd mucked stalls, picked shit and pebbles out of hooves and raked the paddocks until sweat ran into his eyes and his calves were cramping. He towed down and brushed the sweating horses after their romp in the pasture, nearly getting kicked in the

face by an ill-tempered gelding called Leftie, while Avery had smirked nearby. He'd never realized how much work taking care of horses really was.

"How old's Avery?" He asked his aunt.

She closed her eyes a moment, mentally calculating. "He must be about twenty-six or twenty-seven. Why?"

JD shrugged. "No reason. Just curious. He sure can work rings around me."

"Oh, well. He was born to it. His daddy had a ranch, before he went and got himself killed in a bar brawl."

"Killed? That's horrible."

"Yeah, it was a long time ago. Avery was maybe five or six. John Dalton got in a fight with a stranger down at Sweeney's Tavern. He was always getting in fist fights when he had a few beers too many. But that night he picked the wrong guy. The guy had a knife and he used it." LuAnn shook her head and clicked her tongue.

"Tsk, such a shame. For a boy to lose his daddy for no good reason, and leave his mama to raise him all alone."

"So what happened to their ranch? After his father died?"

"His mom kept it running for a while, but she finally sold it and moved into town. Avery was probably thirteen at that point. She sold his horse, too, because she couldn't afford to keep it boarded.

"That's when Avery started getting in trouble. Acting out. He started going around with a bad crowd. He was arrested once for stealing a car, and I think that really shook him up. He dropped out of high school and has worked ranches since, far as I know. He's a good kid, but kind of a loner. Before she passed, his mama tried to fix him up with a few girls, but nothing much came of it."

So LuAnn didn't know Avery was gay. Had Uncle Charlie known? Aloud, he said, "Does Avery have family?"

"Some cousins somewhere in Oklahoma, I think. Nobody local, not since Maybelle passed. He's got friends in Dallas, though. Likes to spend the weekend there, sometimes."

At the gay bars, no doubt, JD thought, far from the prying eyes of the local busybodies and the macho cowboys who wouldn't take kindly to a queer in their midst. Did he restrict himself to the bars, or was he familiar with the BDSM scene? Because JD was now certain beyond any doubt the guy was a sub, or at least a bottom—someone who craved being taken forcefully and used roughly, by another. Each time he'd tested him, Avery had passed, or failed, depending how you looked at it, with flying colors. His expression when JD had told him of the dream (which was actually a daydream, and

one he'd love to bring to pass) had been priceless. The combination of shock, embarrassment and sheer, raw desire had been something to behold.

For the rest of the day, though Avery had kept the conversation tightly reined to all things ranch and horse, the sexual tension between them had been palpable. More than once, JD had nearly taken action, only a hair's breadth away from pushing the sexy stud against the wall and grabbing him by his package while he breathed in his ear all the things he wanted to do to him.

JD hadn't been kidding when he'd said Avery's body was saying 'yes', even while his mouth said 'no'. It wasn't just the obvious hard-on the guy was sporting. It was the look in his eyes. JD had seen that look many times before—a look of intense, carnal longing, not necessarily for JD himself, but for what he was offering.

He knew, even if Avery didn't yet know it himself, that Avery was born to be naked and bound, on his knees, his mouth open, or his ass cheeks spread, waiting to get just what he needed.

This wasn't Paris or New York, however. It was quite possible, even if Avery hung out in the gay bars in Dallas, that he'd never been exposed to the scene, never found the opportunity or courage to explore his masochistic impulses on his own.

JD realized with a jolt of surprise that he was obsessed with the guy. He hadn't stopped thinking about him since the second their eyes had met. Avery pretended no interest whatsoever in him, but JD wasn't fooled. Still, he wasn't used to being rebuffed, especially not by someone so clearly aroused by what he was offering.

Maybe he was on the rebound from Tommy, or maybe he just liked a challenge, but sitting there at the table with his aunt, JD made a silent vow. *One way or another, I'm going to get that boy.*

Chapter 4

The next morning, already up and working for nearly two hours by himself, Avery scowled toward the big house, wondering where the hell JD Reed was. Several times he'd nearly stomped up the path to the big house, a vague fantasy forming in his head of climbing the stairs to JD's bedroom, pulling open the door and hauling the lazy bastard out of his bed.

The college graduate with his fancy degrees and his world traveling couldn't even manage more than three days of honest labor. Or did he think he was better than Avery, because his family name was on the ranch deed, while Avery's name counted for nothing – nothing at all.

Though he never discussed it with anyone (and who, after all, was there to tell?), Avery was ashamed of his lack of education and humble background. He'd been devastated when his mother had sold their ranch for pennies on the dollar, and his horse, Beauty, to pay the back taxes. He'd fallen in with some mean boys, boys as angry as he was at the lack of control over their lives. Hard drinking and hard playing left little time for school and he'd dropped out the minute he'd turned sixteen.

Now, with ten years behind him, he'd grown up and come to regret a lot of the things he'd done in his youth. He'd distanced himself from those guys and the trouble they caused, but he couldn't get back what he'd given up.

Well, JD Reed could go fuck himself. He could pack his bags for New York City and good riddance. Even as this thought formed itself, Avery knew he was lying to himself. However arrogant and improper JD Reed was, however slow and inexperienced as a ranch hand, he had gotten under Avery's skin.

The dude was sexy, no doubt about that. It wasn't just his good looks, which were undeniable. It was a certain powerful presence that whispered to something inside Avery, something he wasn't sure he understood or wanted to know about. Every time JD made one of his smart-ass, sexual comments, it didn't just make Avery hard, it caused a jolt to run through his body as if he'd been poked with a live cattle prod.

Did JD just say those things to get a rise out of him? Though he hated to admit it, it was working. The thought of himself naked on the ground, wrists tied behind his back, face in the dirt, excited something deep in his gut, even while he rejected the image outright with his brain.

Avery was distracted from his musings by the delivery truck trundling along the road toward the hay barn. It pulled up alongside the second-story loading door so they could unload the top layer of hay bales directly into the loft.

The timing was not the best, as the cloud-filled sky suddenly darkened, a crack of thundering ushering in a shower of hot, fat raindrops.

The truck had unloaded and driven away by the time JD decided to put in an appearance. "Man, I got soaked just coming from the house to the barn!" JD made a show of pulling his Stetson from his head and shaking the droplets from it. He stuck it back on his head and just stood there, watching Avery stack the extra bales.

Rain pummeled the roof. JD leaned against the doorframe of the barn and said in that seductive way he had that set a slow, hot burn in Avery's blood, "You make that look easy, Avery. I'd love to see those muscles in action without all the clothes in the way."

He glanced up at JD from beneath the rim of his hat. His cock nudged awake as he drank in the tall, handsome man. With the hat, boots and the color he'd acquired over the past couple of days, the guy actually looked like he might belong on a ranch. JD was watching him in that disconcerting way he had, like Avery's head was made of glass and all his thoughts on display.

Avery swallowed and ignored the heat JD's comment caused. "Decided to show up, huh? You just gonna stand there all day, or you gonna pitch in?" He squinted at his watch. "It's goin' on nine-thirty. This here's ranch life, Reed, not some pussy job in a kitchen. Horses can't wait for their breakfast while you sleep the day away."

JD shrugged. "Give me a break, will ya'? I've got a few years on you. And not for nothing, but I didn't spend my life mucking stalls and picking hooves. They didn't teach Horse Shit Shoveling 101 in college."

A cold, sickening shame slithered its way through Avery's veins, replacing the heat he'd felt a moment before. Shame segued into rage at the arrogant son of a bitch. Who the fuck did he think he was, just because he had the fortune to be born to money and an easy life? How dare he rub it in Avery's face that he hadn't had the same opportunities?

Avery dropped the bale he was holding and moved toward JD, who slouched against the doorframe like he had all the time in the world. Not thinking very clearly, Avery felt his fists clenching at his side. Before he realized what he was doing, he lifted one and smashed it against JD's jaw, not very hard, but hard enough to make his point.

"Hey!" JD cried. He fell backward out into the paddock and right onto his butt. Scrambling to his feet, he backed away from Avery. "What the fuck!"

It had felt good to hit him, better than it had a right to. All the anger he felt for so many things, for being twenty-six and alone, for losing Beauty, for losing his mom, for

losing Charlie, for having the fate of his cabin and his job in the hands of these people who didn't give two shits if he lived or died—stung him like a thousand hornets, stirring him into a fury. Avery rushed toward JD, oblivious of the rain.

He threw a right hook, eager to knock JD down again. JD blocked the punch with one arm, his other fist headed for Avery's chin. Years of street brawls as a kid had made Avery fast, and he easily dodged the punch.

All at once he felt the sharp kick of JD's boot at his ankles and before he realized what was happening, he was flat on the ground. He lay stunned for a second, trying to catch his breath. JD was leaning down, holding out a hand to help him up.

Unbelievably, the bastard was grinning. Determined to wipe that grin off once and for all, Avery rolled toward JD's legs and grabbed them, pulling the other man down. JD stumbled and fell with a startled cry. Seizing his momentary advantage, Avery hurled himself on top of JD. Strong arms came around him, squeezing him tight.

Avery tensed his muscles and jerked hard in JD's embrace, wrenching his arms free. As they rolled, Avery reached out for JD's throat, but got his shirt instead. He gripped the fabric tight, trying to pull JD close enough to punch him again.

With surprising strength, JD wrested Avery's fingers from his shirt, ripping it as he fell back. Avery lost his balance, his head slamming back into the slippery mud.

JD lunged toward him, throwing his heavy weight over Avery and effectively pinning him to the ground. Avery twisted, grunting as he grappled to regain control. He succeeded in pushing JD off him, but JD kept hold of him, pulling him onto his back on top of JD, whose strong arm came up with surprising force around Avery's throat.

"You little shit," JD panted into his ear. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" He had Avery in a tight chokehold. Unable to breathe, Avery clawed at the other man's arm. JD only tightened his grip.

There was a sudden flash of lightning, followed almost instantly by a deafening roar of thunder. JD's grip loosened and Avery seized the moment, twisting out of his grasp.

Both men scrambled to their feet, but before Avery could get his bearings, JD was on him again, slamming him hard against the side of the barn while at the same time jerking his right wrist up behind his back.

Avery tried to pull away, but JD pressed hard against him, Avery's arm twisted painfully between them. His right cheek was mashed against the barn and he could taste the salty tang of blood in his mouth.

"Is this what you wanted? Is this what you need?" JD's voice was a low, dangerous purr in Avery's ear. He jerked Avery's arm higher and Avery gasped in pain. "Don't start something you can't finish, boy. You don't fool me. I know who you are, even if you don't. I know what you need. You need to be held down and taken. You need to

surrender to a man strong enough to make you beg. Stop fighting it. Stop fighting me. You know you want it. You want it bad."

Avery didn't answer. He was dizzy and couldn't seem to catch his breath. His cock was hard as a bar of iron and his balls felt tight and aching. He realized with something approaching shock that he'd never been so turned on in his life. What the hell was wrong with him?

All at once, JD released his arm and spun him around so they were face to face. Before Avery could react, JD leaned down, covering Avery's mouth with his. He pressed his tongue between Avery's lips and a shudder of pure, unfiltered lust hurtled through Avery's body, lodging in his groin. He could feel his heart galloping in his chest.

As the rain poured down, they kissed, the taste of Avery's blood mingling between them. JD reached for Avery's wrists. Lifting his arms high, he pinned Avery to the side of the barn, leaning with his full weight against him, his cock hard against Avery's hip.

JD finally let him go and stepped back, shaking the wet hair from his face and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He was covered in mud and soaked to the skin, his shirt hanging half off his body. Jesus god, but the man looked hot.

"We'd best get ourselves cleaned up." JD bent down, reaching for Avery's hat, which had fallen into a puddle. Avery took it, aware his hand was shaking. He had no words for what had happened. The anger at JD's cut about his past still lingered beneath the surface of his mind, but the overlay of confusion and sexual heat made it seem almost irrelevant.

Avery knew he needed to move—to get out of the rain, to make sure the horses weren't too spooked by the thunder, to change out of his mud-stained, soaked clothing, but he remained leaning against the barn, his eyes fixed on JD Reed.

JD turned to go, but then turned back. "I want you, Avery Dalton. I want you bad. But on my terms, understand?"

"No," Avery asserted, though it was a lie. "I don't have a god damn clue what you're talkin' about."

JD stared hard at him. Discomfited by the stare, Avery forced himself upright and turned away, but not before he saw a small smile curl its way over JD's lips.

~*~

"That you, JD?" LuAnn called from the kitchen.

"Yes, ma'am." JD hurried toward the stairs in his socks, hoping to avoid his aunt until he cleaned up. He'd already kicked off his muddy boots and left them on the porch.

"You're just in time," LuAnn hollered. "I have some biscuits and gravy just about out of the oven. I called Avery on the cell phone to come on up and get out of this rain, but I just got the voice mail. I swear, that boy hates technology. I gave him Charlie's phone to use, but I wouldn't be surprised if he forgot to turn it on. Hopefully he had the sense to get out of this rain and on back to his cabin."

JD found himself wondering about that cabin. It had been little more than an abandoned shack, back when he was a kid. They hid in it sometimes when playing games, but the spiders and mouse dung had made the place less than inviting. He was curious to see how Avery had fixed it up. It was far enough away from the rest of the ranch to make the perfect place for the kind of play JD had in mind...

"I'm muddy," he called back, moving quickly so LuAnn wouldn't see his ripped shirt and what a mess he was. "I'm just running up for a quick shower and I'll be right down."

Once safely ensconced in his bathroom, he pulled off the tattered remains of his shirt, wrapped it in a plastic bag from under the sink and put it in the trashcan. He shucked off his filthy jeans. Even his underwear had mud on it.

While the shower water was heating, he examined his face in the mirror. Surprisingly, he didn't look too much the worse for wear. There was a pretty good-sized lump on the back of his head, which he touched gingerly.

He stroked his sore jaw and shook his head. Avery had come out of nowhere with that sucker punch. Still, JD knew, even as the words were leaving his mouth, that'd he'd gone over the line with the remark about shit shoveling 101. Knowing a little of Avery's past, as he now did, he should have been more sensitive.

But he didn't regret what had happened. Not if it meant breaking through the wall of denial and repression that kept Avery from him. When they'd kissed, any last lingering question as to Avery's desire was swept away. He wanted JD as bad as JD wanted him. Or at least he wanted what JD offered, even if he didn't yet fully understand what that was.

JD climbed into the steaming shower, closing his eyes as the welcome water cascaded over his aching body. He soaped up and washed his hair and then just stood a while under the hot spray, idly massaging his cock.

The way Avery had stared at him when he'd finally let him go—everything in his demeanor and reaction told JD he was ripe for the plucking. He should have taken him then and there. He should have turned him back to the wall, jerked down his pants and fucked him.

Jesus, he wanted that man in the worst way. He closed his eyes as he stroked himself, imagining Avery, naked and bent over the paddock fence, legs stretched wide, ass thrust out. He'd secure his wrists and ankles to the fence with strips of sturdy rope.

He'd use that nice, wicked-looking riding crop that hung on the tack room wall to give Avery what he needed. He wouldn't stop until every inch of that hot, sexy ass was thoroughly marked, until Avery was begging for him to stop.

Maybe there was a horse whip somewhere in that tack room – something long and supple that would raise a few welts. JD was proud of his skill with a single tail. He had mastered the technique over his years in the scene, and was asked from time to time to demonstrate his technique at the BDSM clubs he used to frequent in the city.

He love nothing better than to fuck a freshly-whipped ass, the skin hot and tender against him. He'd ease himself between those firmly muscled cheeks, savoring the clench of Avery's ass on his cock. He'd grab him by the hips and ride him hard, slamming him against the railings as he took his pleasure.

When he was done, he'd move around to the other side of the fence and grab Avery's erection, pulling it through the rails. He'd jerk him off, gripping his balls hard with his other hand. He'd make Avery beg for it. He wouldn't let him down till he came, and even then he might leave him tethered for a while, just to admire the sight of the sexy cowboy, splayed and at his mercy...

JD pulled at his shaft and moaned, imagining Avery kneeling before him, taking it deep into his throat. He pumped his cock, almost feeling the hot lick of Avery's tongue along the shaft and the massage of his throat muscles against the head.

He came, shooting jets of cum that mingled with the soap suds. Opening his eyes, he heard his aunt calling from downstairs and hurriedly washed the remaining soap from his body.

Turning off the shower, he grabbed a towel and wrapped it hastily around his middle. Tracking water through the bedroom, he stuck his head out the bedroom door and called, "I'll be right down."

Chapter 5

Save for his hat, Avery stripped naked before entering his cabin, leaving the soaked, muddy clothing outside on the small concrete slab at the door's entrance. He brought in his boots to clean and shut the door, grateful to be out of the pouring rain.

There was a strange chirping sound coming from the kitchen table. He approached it, at first thinking some little critter had found its way inside, before realizing it was Charlie's cell phone, which he'd forgotten to take with him that morning, as usual.

He put his dripping, dirty hat on the table. Touching the cut on his lip, he picked up the phone and looked at the small screen. *Missed Call*. Flipping it open, he saw he had a voice message. He was about to retrieve it when the phone rang in his hand.

"Hello?"

"There you are. It's LuAnn. Forecast says it's gonna rain like cats and dogs all day. Why don't you come on up to the house for supper with JD and me? We'll eat early, around four. Not much work you can do in this downpour."

Avery had no formal kitchen in his cabin – just a hotplate and a microwave. It would be nice to have a hot, home-cooked meal for a change, even if LuAnn's cooking was not all that good. It was still better than the canned chili and Ramen noodles that were the mainstay of Avery's diet.

What was he thinking? How could he possibly face JD Reed after what had just gone down between them? He needed time to think, time to figure out what was going on. His body, however, didn't seem to need much time. Just the mention of JD's name was enough to get his cock's attention.

The recollection of that kiss, of being pressed up hard against the wall, JD's warm breath on his face... *Is this what you wanted? Is this what you need?*

Yes. Whatever the hell it was, yes! Avery had never felt so alive, so on the edge, as he had at that moment. In spite of the pain of having his arm twisted behind his back, in spite of the embarrassment of having been bested in the fight, in spite of the blood in his mouth and the feeling of helplessness at being pinned to the wall, or maybe (this thought both scared and thrilled him) *because* of those things, Avery's cock had been hard as bone.

"Avery? You still there?"

His mouth answered before his brain caught up. "Yes, ma'am. Supper sounds good. Thanks."

Somehow Avery made it through the rest of the day. After cleaning up and jerking off, the image of JD looming large in his fantasies, he rode the tractor back to the stables. He looked in on the horses, not staying too long so he wouldn't end up smelling like horse shit when he showed up for supper.

The lightning and thunder had mostly eased off, now just a distant flash and boom from time to time, but the rain continued to fall. He was wearing a leather jacket and his Stetson, so he didn't get too wet on the walk up the path to the big house. Though it was only afternoon, the rain and clouds made the day much darker, and he could see the rosy glow of the lights behind the pink gauze curtains LuAnn had hung in her front parlor.

Avery wiped his boots on the mat, knocked and waited, feeling nervous and awkward. In the past when he joined the Reeds for supper, he'd felt comfortable enough just giving a little knock before turning the knob and announcing his arrival.

But things were different now, with Charlie gone, and JD in the house. How were you supposed to act around someone you'd fought in the mud with? Someone who had claimed you with their kiss as surely as a stallion claimed a mare in heat? What had he been thinking when he accepted the supper invitation?

The thought of turning around and hightailing it back down to the barn suddenly made perfect sense, but before he could act on it, LuAnn pulled open the door. "There you are. I'm glad to see you didn't get washed away in all this rain."

Avery stepped into the front hall and removed his wet hat, which he hung on the hat tree set there for the purpose. LuAnn hovered near him. "Why, Avery! What happened to your mouth?"

Embarrassed, Avery touched the cut with his fingers. His lip felt more swollen than it had before. "Oh, I, uh, I tripped in the mud this mornin'. Landed right on my face."

Hands on her hips, LuAnn appraised him and Avery got the uncomfortable feeling she didn't believe him. "Uh huh. Well, you boys better be more careful. JD's got a bruise blooming on his jaw that looks just like someone punched him! He took a fall, too, so he says."

"Oh. Well, yeah." Avery wished he could disappear. "We'll be more careful, all right," He shifted his feet, feeling like he was six years old and standing in the principal's office.

"Well, come on in and sit down. Food's 'bout ready."

Avery realized his nostrils were being assailed by the wonderful smell of roasting turkey. "That smells great, LuAnn. What you got cookin'?"

"Oh, it's not me. JD asked if he could make supper and I said, sure, why not? The only thing Charlie ever learned to do was boil an egg, and sometimes he didn't even get that right." LuAnn laughed, but with affection in her tone.

"I had this big ol' turkey left over," she went on. "I was gonna make when all the relatives were here, but people brought so much food, I never did get around to it. I had yams and green beans on hand too, so JD decided to make a Thanksgiving feast in July. Don't that beat all?" She beamed like JD has just made soup from a stone, instead of throwing a turkey in the oven. JD went to school in France for *that*?

Yes. That felt better. Focus on what an arrogant prick JD was, not on how he'd made him melt with that kiss. Pretend none of it had happened. LuAnn's being there would make things a little easier. JD wouldn't dare make those strange, unsettling comments about knowing what Avery needed and wanted, not in front of her.

Feeling somewhat more at ease, Avery followed LuAnn into the dining room and sat down across from her. JD came through the swinging kitchen door at that moment, a large platter in his hands. He was wearing a white shirt, unbuttoned at the throat, tucked into black jeans. The beginnings of a purple bruise were definitely evident on JD's jaw and Avery experienced a spasm of guilt for being the one who put it there.

"Hey, Ave," JD said nonchalantly, as if the strange events of the morning had never happened. He set down a large turkey, its skin a rich golden brown, stuffing spilling from it. "Glad you could join us."

Avery noticed the place setting at the head of the table — Charlie's place. JD was taking over. Who did he think he was? Ignoring JD, Avery said to LuAnn, "Thanks for havin' me."

JD lifted a large carving knife from the platter and began to slice the meat. LuAnn poured iced tea into their glasses while they waited. Avery's mouth watered and he had to swallow to keep from choking.

Once JD sat down, they began passing dishes. Avery helped himself to the green beans and the turkey and stuffing, giving the sweet potatoes a miss, as he'd never much cared for them.

He took his first bite of turkey and stuffing and, forgetting his manners, licked his lips with delight. Usually not one to pay much attention to food, he couldn't help but notice how moist and flavorful the turkey was. But it was the stuffing that really caught his attention. It was buttery, with hints of orange and nuts and spices Avery had no names for, and the crunch of something — what was it, apple? Whatever it was, it was up and away the best stuffing he'd ever tasted in his life.

JD was watching him, a pleased smile on his face. "Like it?"

Forgetting for a moment all that had passed between them, Avery nodded. "Fantastic."

"Try the sweet potatoes," LuAnn urged, putting some on Avery's plate. "His secret is the fresh black pepper." Reluctantly, Avery took a small bite of sweet potato, spread with melted butter, brown sugar and black pepper. He was dubious of the combination,

but again, his taste buds exploded with pleasure at impact. This was a far cry from the candied yams his mother used to make, covered in gooey blobs of burnt marshmallow and hunks of canned pineapple.

"JD, I do declare, this is the best turkey I ever had," LuAnn enthused. "Did they teach you this in Paris?"

"No, ma'am." JD smiled. "This is good ol' Americana all the way. If you're feeling adventurous and I can find the ingredients, I can make y'all some grilled veal chops with fresh herbs in a Port wine sauce, or maybe," he squinted up toward the ceiling and stroked his chin, "roast duckling in a pepper crust, drizzled with white truffle honey and served with julienne of snow peas, vanilla-glazed turnips and topped with a ginger dressing. And for you, Avery," JD turned his brown eyes on Avery and offered a devil's grin, "maybe some lamb tripe cooked with pine nuts and red pepper, served over rice with a pesto sauce."

"Tripe," Avery said, wrinkling his nose. "Ain't that a fancy word for the stomach?"

"The lining, yeah. Actually, properly prepared, it's quite delicious."

"I'll stick with turkey, thanks." Avery took another bite to make his point and JD laughed. The knot of nerves in Avery's gut eased a little.

"I'll just get some more tea," LuAnn said, taking the empty pitcher.

While she was gone, JD leaned close to Avery. "I want to come by your cabin later."

Nobody ever came by Avery's cabin. He had never brought any of the guys he sometimes hung out with in Dallas back to the ranch, not even Jack. Charlie and LuAnn had been by a time or two when he was first getting it ready, but since then it had remained his private sanctuary, and he liked it like that.

He started to say no, but JD's hand on his stopped him. "Don't shut me out, Ave. Something happened this morning, and I'm not talking about the fight. I know you want what I can give you. I know you've got the courage to find out what I'm talking about. I'll stop by later tonight, once LuAnn goes to bed."

JD hadn't asked, he hadn't waited for a yes. The guy had a serious case of overconfidence. Before Avery could retort, the kitchen door swung open and JD pulled his hand away. LuAnn sat down, busily filling their glasses and jabbering away about how delicious the food was.

Over coffee and apple strudel, Avery thought about what JD had said about courage. He still wasn't very clear on what all was going on but maybe JD was right. Maybe it was time to find out.

~*~

JD followed the path along the perimeter of the property, a flashlight in his hand, a coil of thin rope looped around his arm. He hadn't realized quite how far away the cabin was from the main house. No wonder Avery used the tractor for transportation.

The night was almost cool, the air fresh-washed from the rain. He saw a light glimmering up ahead and knew he was near the cabin. His heart beat just a shade too fast. He knew he was pushing Avery, but he wanted him too much to take his time. The fight had only intensified his desire. He wasn't used to men resisting him. Avery Dalton was a challenge, that was for sure.

He likened it in his mind to a bareback bronco competition he used to love as a kid, leaping astride the powerful, agile horse and staying on, no matter how hard it bucked and kicked. It was much more satisfying to sexually claim a man who was strong in both body and in spirit, and Avery was definitely both things.

Avery hadn't said yes when JD had informed him he was going to stop by, but nor had he said no. More than once during the course of the meal he had caught Avery staring at him with a look that told him in no uncertain terms that Avery was interested, very interested.

The light being on was a good sign, or so JD decided to interpret it. He approached the cabin, whistling as he neared. He rapped his knuckles on the rough wooden door and stood back, waiting.

A good thirty seconds passed before he knocked again, calling out softly, "Avery, it's JD." For the first time, the thought that Avery might refuse to open the door crossed his mind. He realized as it did that he hadn't contemplated failure. He simply wanted Avery too much for that to be an option. It was somewhat disconcerting to realize that desire transcended mere sex. He wanted more from Avery, though just how much, he wasn't quite prepared to admit, even to himself.

He tried the knob and, to his surprise, it turned. Pushing it open a crack, he called again. "Avery?"

Nothing.

He opened it wider and stepped inside. He heard water running and realized Avery must be in the shower. Glancing around the room, he quickly took in the surroundings, curious how a man like Avery lived.

The cabin was one large room, maybe six-hundred square feet, topped on one side with a low-ceilinged sleeping loft. The walls and floors were made from thick planks of rough-hewn wood. Intricately patterned woven Native American throw rugs were scattered over the floor and posters of brightly colored landscapes adorned the walls. There wasn't much furniture – a large, rather lumpy looking sofa, a wooden rocking chair and a small kitchen table flanked by two chairs. The room was clean, the floor swept, a small bookshelf filled with neatly arranged arrowheads, some feathers and a

few knick knacks. Avery's hat hung on a hook by the door, his boots placed beneath it, no evidence of the mud that still caked the old boots JD had left on the front porch of his aunt's house.

The sound of the shower stopped, and JD called out, "Avery. It's JD. The door was open." He moved toward the table and put down the rope. Fishing in his pants pocket, he removed his knife and set it down beside the rope.

After a moment, the door to what must be the bathroom opened, and there stood Avery, his dark hair wet and tousled around his face, his broad chest ruddy from the hot water, a small towel wrapped around his narrow hips.

"You always walk uninvited into people's houses?"

"You knew I was coming. You didn't say not to." JD's fingers were itching to pull that towel away.

"You didn't give me a chance."

"You want me to go?"

Avery stared at him for a long moment without answering. Finally he shrugged. "You're here now."

JD stepped closer. He could feel the heat emanating from Avery's damp skin. "You shower for me?" He grinned.

Avery stepped back. "Nah, I stopped to check on the horses after I left your aunt's place. I got to oilin' a new saddle and ended up smellin' like the stable again. I'll put something on."

JD didn't want him to put something on, but he didn't stop him. As Avery retreated back into the bathroom, JD moved toward the shelf. He picked up a small Native American doll made of soft leather, wearing a robe fashioned from tiny beads that formed an elaborate pattern. It looked very old. Carefully, JD set it down again and picked up one of the arrowheads, running his finger over the notched stone.

When he heard the door open, he put down the arrowhead and turned toward Avery, who was now wearing a pair of soft, faded jeans and a white T-shirt, his feet bare. He looked good enough to eat whole.

Avery walked toward a small refrigerator, the kind kids had in their dorm rooms, and extracted two bottles of Lone Star beer. He held one out to JD. "As long as you're here..."

JD took the offered beer and sat down on the rocking chair. Avery sat on the sofa caddy corner from him and twisted the cap off his beer. He took a long drink. JD followed suit, though Lone Star was not his beer of choice, with its unremarkable, almost flavorless taste. He kept this opinion to himself, reasonably sure it would not be appreciated.

Instead, he offered, "This is a great place you've got here. Back when I was a kid this was just a shack. No electric or plumbing that I recall. But you've got it fixed up real nice."

Avery fairly beamed with pride. "Yeah. Charlie let me renovate the place. He even paid for the septic tank and let me stay here rent free."

"And that stuff on the shelves," JD offered. "It's really cool."

Avery looked toward the knickknacks, nodding. "I found every one of them arrowheads, most of 'em here on this ranch. That doll was my great grandmother's."

"Wow. That must be worth something. You've got some Indian blood in you, huh?"

"Yeah." Avery's lifted his chin and touched the bow and arrow tattoo on his left arm. "My great grandmother was a full-blooded Apache. She married a white guy from Ireland." He touched his snub nose and offered a rueful smile.

"I bet that didn't go down so well, on either side of the family."

Avery nodded. "You got that right. Hatred and ignorance never seem to go out of fashion, I guess."

"Yeah, we know all about that, don't we?"

Avery nodded, his expression softening slightly.

"Look," JD said, sensing an opening. "I'm sorry about today. I mean, about that remark about horse shit and all. It was stupid."

"Well, it was out of line, I'm not gonna lie. But I shouldn't have hit you."

"I was probably asking for it." JD grinned.

"Yeah," Avery agreed. "You sure were."

JD laughed and Avery smiled at him. It was, he realized, the first time Avery had smiled directly at him. Taking this as a good sign, he stood and moved to the couch, sitting down beside the younger man.

Avery shifted slightly away from him, but just slightly. "What'd you bring that rope for?" He gestured with his head toward the table.

So he'd seen it. Good. "That's for you. When you're ready. I don't reckon you're ready yet, though."

"Ready for what?"

"You know for what." JD moved closer, so their thighs were touching. Avery stayed put. "Remember Kassie? The way you tied her down so she couldn't fight the stallion? I'm going to do that to you, Avery. It's what you need. But not yet. You'll have to prove to me you want it bad enough first."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," Avery said with his mouth, but his eyes said something different.

"It's okay, Ave," JD said softly. "You don't have to pretend around me. I already know your secrets. I share them, don't you see?" He reached for the back of Avery's head and pulled him gently forward. When Avery didn't resist, he touched Avery's lips with his.

Avery didn't kiss him back, but neither did he pull away. JD let his tongue dance lightly over Avery's lips, which, to his pleased surprise, parted. Seizing the advantage, he slipped his tongue into Avery's mouth, while drawing him into an embrace.

JD felt a tremor shudder through Avery's body. He turned so he was fully facing Avery. The sofa was long enough to allow him to press Avery down against it so he was lying flat. JD put his hand over the bulge in Avery's jeans. When Avery moved to push him away, he grabbed Avery's wrist and yanked his arm over his head, pressing it against the sofa.

"You know you want it," he purred in Avery's ear. "Stop fighting me."

Taking a chance, he grabbed Avery's other wrist and pulled it into position beside the first. Holding both wrists in a strong grip, JD leaned over Avery to kiss him, any trace of tenderness gone.

Avery was the stronger of the two, but he didn't resist. He was breathing so hard it was nearly a pant. JD knew it was far more than the kiss, more than their shared attraction, that was causing Avery's intense reaction. It was the fact of being held down, wrists pinned, arms stretched taut, that made Avery's heart pound. JD understood that Avery was hardwired to crave this kind of domination and control, even if he'd spent his entire life ignoring or denying it.

But he knew he had to go slow, or at least not so fast that he scare Avery away completely. He'd work it so Avery was the one to ask, the one to beg, for what JD already planned to give him.

Chapter 6

When Avery could finally catch his breath, he said, "Wanna go upstairs?" He didn't tell JD he'd never had a man, or anyone for that matter, up in his loft. The space barely contained the big old iron bedstead that had been his mother's and his mother's mother's before her and probably further back than that. If he'd had a sister, no doubt she would have gotten it, but as it was, it was one of the few things in the crappy apartment she lived in after selling the ranch that he'd wanted for his own.

It was a basic frame, with iron railings at the head and foot, the four posts at the corners higher than the bars between them. The bars were joined across the top by a curving horizontal bar that rose to meet the corner posts. His mother had painted the frame white, but when he'd got it, he'd painted it black, its original color.

The mattress was nothing to speak of, but he'd covered it with the one other item he'd always coveted in his mother's home — an Apache patchwork quilt designed with a morning star pattern in shades of black, deep canyon red and light tan. It had been in the family even longer than the bedstead and, though Avery would never have admitted this aloud, he harbored a notion that it somehow protected him from bad luck, and kept nightmares at bay when he was sleeping.

"Lead the way," JD replied, standing and smoothing his button-down shirt, which had gotten rumpled when they'd kissed.

Avery climbed the narrow ladder, JD behind him. The ceiling was low, so low JD's head was nearly touching it. There was barely room for the two of them to stand together. Avery was keenly aware of their closeness.

He had a sudden crazy impulse to kneel in front of the man he'd wanted to beat into a pulp only hours before. He ached to feel the heat of the other's man cock in his hand. He wanted to smell it and taste it. Jesus, what the hell was going on? Was he seriously contemplating fucking the boss's nephew? Was he out of his mind?

JD was watching him. "Hey. I know we didn't get off on the best foot." He touched his bruised jaw. "That's my fault. Sometimes I go too far, too fast." He drew his finger along Avery's lower lip, lightly touching the cut inflicted during their fight. Avery could feel the blood pulsing just below the surface. He touched the cut with his tongue, catching the tip of JD's finger at the same time.

JD slid his finger along Avery's lips, pushing it between them. Unable to control himself, Avery sucked on it, pulling it deeper into his mouth. JD pressed in a second

finger and Avery accepted this as well, dipping his head as he sucked them back toward his throat, his eyes closing.

JD pulled his fingers away, causing Avery to lean forward, his lips parted, his cock pulsing. JD drew his wet index finger along the line of Avery's jaw. Avery shuddered, his eyes locked on JD's as JD moved his hand down over Avery's throat, curling his fingers lightly around it. Avery swallowed, his breath shallow, his heart tapping in his chest.

What the fuck was wrong with him? Why was he letting this man do this to him? Why was he standing with his arms limp at his sides like a rolling-eyed cow waiting passively for the burn of the brand?

JD tightened his grip on Avery's throat, nearly cutting off his ability to breathe, and still he stood there, his cock rigid, his heart bumping hard against his ribs. JD squeezed harder, his eyes hooding.

Though Avery's mind ordered him to protest, to resist, to do *something*, he stood frozen, caught in JD's fiery gaze. Every nerve ending in his body was alive with anticipation.

All at once, JD loosened his grip and stepped back. Avery gasped for breath, but at the same time found himself moving forward. He realized with a small shock that he wanted that hand back on his throat. What the hell was going on?

"Take off your shirt." There was a command in JD's tone that Avery felt compelled to obey. He was surprised to find his fingers were shaking when he reached for the hem of his T-shirt. He pulled it over his head and let it fall to the floor.

JD smiled, though his eyes remained hooded. He put his palms flat against Avery's chest, covering his nipples. "I want you to do exactly what I tell you to do," JD said. "Put your hands behind your head. Lace your fingers behind your neck and don't move. Do that for me now."

Avery licked his lips, his mouth suddenly dry. He felt off-balance and confused. When he'd allowed JD up into the loft, he figured they'd get naked, have sex and that would be that. Every guy he'd ever picked up in Dallas, even those he'd formed some kind of attachment with over time, wanted one thing and one thing only – a cock in their mouth or their ass, and the chance to return the favor.

Instead of fucking Avery's body, this guy was trying to fuck his mind, if that even made any sense. Who the hell did he think he was, ordering Avery to put his hands behind his head like he was going to be searched? Ignoring his raging erection, trying to deny a little longer that JD was exciting the hell out of him, he growled, "What, are you crazy? Why would I do that?"

"Because I told you to." JD's voice was quiet, but edged with steel.

Avery swallowed hard. Again, something in JD's tone made him want to comply, but a lifetime of being his own man made him snap, "What game are you playin' at?"

"A game you already know the rules to, if you'll just stop fighting yourself. Think of it as a challenge. I want to see how long you can stay still, keeping your hands in position, no matter what I do. Do you think you're capable of doing that, cowboy?"

Avery scowled, but he was paying attention like his life depended on it. *A challenge.* What the hell. It wasn't like he was agreeing to be tied down or anything like that. If he didn't like what JD was doing, he'd just stop him. Simple as that.

With a small nod, Avery lifted his arms and locked his fingers behind his neck, wondering what the hell would happen next.

JD ran his hands down Avery's sides, his light touch a confusing torment. Avery shifted. "I said don't move, Avery. No matter what I do to you. Surely you're man enough to obey that one simple rule?"

Obey...

Avery nearly retorted that he didn't take orders from anybody unless they were paying his salary, but something kept the words from forming. Something kept his hands behind his head. He couldn't deny the hard-on in his jeans.

JD waited a beat and then nodded, as if Avery had said something aloud. His hands resumed their roaming, moving over Avery's stomach and back up to his chest. His eyes on Avery's face, JD tweaked Avery's nipples, pulling them erect. Avery had never given much thought to his nipples before, but when JD pinched them, he noticed.

JD pinched harder, adding a savage twist that made Avery's nipples throb with pain. Avery dropped his hands and instinctively smacked at JD's hands to get him to let go.

JD stepped back, shaking his head, a hint of a smile playing over his lips. "Too bad. You moved out of position. Naughty boy."

Avery felt his face heat. He was confused, even angry. "What the hell is goin' on? Who do you think you are?"

"Someone who knows what you need." JD reached for Avery's fly and in one quick movement, he yanked the metal buttons open. Avery couldn't help the shiver that ran along his spine when JD put his hand over the aching bulge trapped in his underwear.

"You can deny it till you're blue in the face, but you need what I'm going to give you." He squeezed his cupped hand tight around Avery's balls, almost but not quite hurting him. "Don't fight it, Ave. You're already mine. We both know it."

Avery pulled back, opening his mouth to protest, but before he could, JD slipped two fingers between Avery's lips, his other hand still gripping Avery's cock and balls.

Again, despite himself, Avery's eyes closed and he sucked. He groaned against JD's fingers as JD released his balls and stroked upward against his cock.

"Now we'll try this again," JD said. "You'll put your hands behind your head like I told you, and you won't move out of position, got it?" He pulled his fingers from Avery's mouth and let go of his cock. Avery realized the head of his cock was poking up above the waistband of his underwear. His undone jeans were starting to slip down past his hips. He started to adjust himself but somehow the look on JD's face stopped him.

"Hands behind your head. *Now.*"

Avery found himself obeying. He told himself it was only so JD would get on with whatever game he was playing and they could get down to fucking. But even as he formed the lie in his mind, he knew there was more at stake here, if he could just figure out what it was.

He reassumed the position, wishing his heart would slow down so he could catch his breath. He couldn't remember being this excited since the first time he lay with a man, back when he was nineteen.

JD unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it onto the bed. JD's chest was smooth like his own, the lines of his body long and lean. JD sat on the bed and pulled off his boots and socks. He stood again, moving close to Avery, so close he could feel his warm breath on his cheek.

JD touched one of Avery's bent arms. "Good boy," he murmured and Avery tensed.

"I'm not your boy," he managed, though he kept his fingers clasped behind his neck.

JD smiled, lifting his brows. "It's a good thing to be my boy, Avery. I promise." Without waiting for a response, JD hooked his thumbs on either side of Avery's jeans and pulled downward, dragging them along Avery's legs. Avery took a breath and started to lean toward JD, aching to touch him.

"Stay in position," JD snapped. "I know what you want." He slipped his hand into Avery's underwear as he spoke, his eyes on Avery's face. "You'll get it when I'm ready. On my terms."

His hand felt so fucking good on Avery's cock that he didn't even bother protesting. JD knelt in front of him, dragging Avery's underwear down. His erect cock bobbed straight out and he thrust his hips forward, desperate to feel JD's lips close around it.

"Please." The word slipped out before he could stop it, the vowels held long enough that it sounded like begging.

JD grabbed Avery's balls again, this time skin on skin, reaching far back, his fingers circling them at the base. Leaning down, he licked in a teasing circle around the head of

Avery's shaft, causing a tremor of pure lust to surge through Avery's body. Somehow he managed to keep his hands behind his head, afraid JD would stop if he didn't.

JD slid his tongue down the shaft, Avery's balls still caught in his grip. "Your cock is so hot I'm afraid it's going to catch fire. I better cool it down." He closed his lips over the head and slid down, leaving a trail of nearly unbearable pleasure in his wake.

"Please," Avery murmured, aching with need. The word had slipped again from his lips without his permission, but he didn't care, as long as JD kept up what he was doing with his lips and tongue.

All too soon, however, JD stopped, pulling back. Letting go of Avery's balls, he stood. "Good boy," he said in a purr. "You stayed in position. You can put your arms down now and get your reward." He shucked his jeans and underwear while Avery watched hungrily. His cock was thick and long, pointing straight at Avery.

"You got something?" JD asked and Avery nodded. He reached beneath the bed and pulled out the shoebox where he kept his condoms. He tore a single packet from a row of them and dropped it to the bed.

"Lube?"

Avery shook his head. He'd always relied on the other guy for that, since he never brought anyone home, and spit worked just fine for jerking off. JD shrugged and picked up the condom. "Good thing for you it's pre-lubricated. Get on your hands and knees."

Avery did as he was told, reaching for his cock while he waited for JD to put on the condom. "Hands off," JD ordered. "You touch it when I say so."

"What the..." Avery's protest died on his lips as JD stared him down. What was it about this guy? He wanted him too bad to analyze it. His asshole was actually clenching with anticipation. He couldn't wait to feel that fat cock push its way inside him, lube or not.

JD positioned himself behind Avery. "Put your hands out flat on the bed and lower your shoulders to the mattress." Again there was that command in his voice that made Avery want to obey. He did, feeling very vulnerable, as the position forced his ass up high.

He tensed, expecting to feel JD's cock or fingers, but instead he felt something wet and warm. He realized it was JD's tongue, moving in tight circles around the rim of his entrance before moving to its center. It felt wonderful and Avery pushed back, trying to get the tip of JD's tongue inside his ass.

JD licked him for several more seconds, before replacing his tongue with a finger and then two. "That's it, open yourself to me. Good boy." Now Avery felt the crown of JD's shaft nudging against him. Obliging, he pushed back, his own cock throbbing.

JD eased himself in slowly, his hands resting lightly on Avery's ass. "That's it," he crooned. "Take it for me. All of it." Avery grunted as JD filled him. The bit of lubricant

on the condom plus JD's saliva had helped ease the entry, but still he felt fuller than usual. It was almost painful, but a good pain. He pushed back, eager to take every bit of JD's cock inside him.

"Yeah, that's it. Fuck yourself on my cock." JD grabbed Avery's hips and moved hard, thrusting so his balls slapped against Avery's ass. Avery started to lift himself from the bed to get better leverage but JD's strong hand on his shoulder stopped him.

"Stay down. I want you just like this. Now move that sexy ass." He punctuated his remark with a stinging slap to Avery's left cheek.

"Hey—" Avery began, but JD cut him off.

"Do as you're told." He reached beneath Avery and grabbed his cock. He slid his thumb over the head, capturing the bit of pre-cum there, which he drew down along the shaft. Avery moaned and gave himself over to the pleasure of the hand on his cock and JD deep inside him.

Strong fingers dug into Avery's left hip, which, along with the hand on his cock, held him in place. JD thrust hard against him, forcing a grunt from Avery with each pounding stroke. He continued to massage Avery's cock at the same time, and it wasn't long before Avery felt his balls tightening. It felt so fucking good, but beyond that, it felt so *right*.

His mind shut down, all thoughts flying from his head as he shuddered into a long, searing orgasm, each spasm accompanied by the slamming of JD's hard cock inside him. He fell forward against the bed.

JD grabbed his arms, jerking them back behind him. Instinctively Avery tried to pull away, but JD's grip was strong. He held him by the wrists in this uncomfortable position while he fucked him like a piston.

Though he probably could have wrested himself free, Avery stayed still. Something about the position, the very humiliation of being ridden like a horse, his arms held like reins, sent a thrill of aching heat directly into the marrow of Avery's bones. Though he'd just climaxed, his cock stirred beneath him.

A low, guttural moan rose from JD's throat as he slammed hard against Avery's ass. His grip still tight on Avery's wrists, he jerked several times in succession as he came.

Finally he let Avery's arms loose and fell sideways on the bed, pulling Avery over with him so they were spooning, JD's cock still lodged inside him. Lying in JD's arms, his heart still beating a rapid tattoo, he didn't want to move.

He didn't want JD to leave. The realization was a startling one.

With every guy he'd ever been with, once the spell of his lust had released him, he itched to grab his jeans and make his getaway. He'd make up something about somewhere he had to be. He would assure them he'd look them up when he was back in town. He might mean it and he might not, but either way, he never stayed.

He lay still, listening to the sound of the crickets and the rush of the creek outside, and JD breathing beside him. The cut on his lip throbbed a little and he tasted blood. For a moment he wished JD would lick it off, kiss it away. The orgasm must have addled his brain, he decided. It was just post-sex insanity and would soon pass.

JD pressed close against him and Avery felt him sigh against the back of his neck. He realized by JD's deep, slow breathing that he'd fallen asleep. Gently he pulled himself away from JD, who rolled onto his back, his eyes closed, the used condom hanging half-off his cock.

Avery removed it and dropped it in the small bucket he used as a wastebasket. He pulled the sheet up over the lower half of JD's body, realizing with a shock he planned to let JD stay the night.

Leaning up on one elbow, he stared down at the sleeping man. Lightly, he touched the bruised jaw. The swelling had mostly gone down. Had LuAnn bought their stories of slipping and falling? Did she know where JD was now?

Avery reached down for the quilt, which had fallen to the end of the bed. He pulled it up, spreading it over them both. Feeling strange and new, tentatively he lowered himself beside the sleeping man, putting his arm across JD's chest. He closed his eyes, wondering as he drifted on the edge of sleep if the morning star quilt would catch JD's dreams too.

Chapter 7

Avery opened his eyes. The sun was just barely up — his internal clock told him it must be about four in the morning. The bed beside him was empty. He ran his hand over the rumpled sheets, touching the spot still damp from where he'd come.

With a sigh he fell back against the pillows. He must have been sleeping pretty hard not to wake up when JD flew the coop. Was LuAnn Reed waiting up when he got there, hands on her hips, with a "*Where you been, Mister?*" on her lips, the way Avery's mama used to when he stayed out all hours?

Avery put his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. Last night had been intense, no question about it. What was it that had made it so different from anything he'd experienced to date? Rough sex was nothing new to Avery. He could give it as good as he took it. But with JD, there'd been something else at play. Something Avery couldn't quite get his head around.

What was it about last night that was so different? What was it about JD? For the first time in his life, Avery had let go. He'd given up control — he'd let another man dictate when and how they'd have sex. Instead of feeling belittled and lessened by this, he felt exhilarated — and confused as hell.

He touched his throat, recalling JD's tight grip, and how it had translated directly to fire in Avery's veins. Why had he tolerated JD's arrogance? Nobody pushed Avery Dalton around. Period. But somehow when it was JD doing the ordering, Avery couldn't seem to help himself. Not only did he want to obey, but the very act of it made him hard.

Or was it just that he'd been extra horny lately, and JD was handy? Maybe that lust had confused him into thinking they shared something more than just a rough and ready good time.

Whatever they'd had, surely it couldn't lead to much more. He was kidding himself to think otherwise. This was only a stopover in JD's life on the way to something better. No way a guy from New Fucking York would want to hang around East Texas any longer than he had to.

Which suited Avery just fine, thank you. He'd been nuts to let the guy into his cabin in the first place. He didn't need the complication of mixing his sex life with his work and home life. He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "I don't give a damn if that Yankee bastard comes or goes," he announced to the empty room.

He said it with such conviction that he almost believed it.

~*~

A fifty-pound bale of hay came hurtling toward JD, very nearly knocking him in the head. As it was, it landed on his foot and hurt plenty. "Hey, watch out where you're tossing those things. You almost decked me."

"Watch where you're standin'," Avery retorted. "Can't you stack any faster? We've got a ranch to run, you know."

Since JD had arrived at the stable an hour before, Avery had barely said a word, except to bark orders. It was almost as if last night hadn't happened – as if time had stopped just after the fight, and he'd dreamed the rest.

It wasn't that Avery's kneejerk resistance to sexual domination was unusual – JD had been with other guys new to the scene whose bodies responded to what was happening, even while their minds rejected it as being weak or unmanly. In fact, he rather enjoyed taming those kind of guys, and teaching them firsthand about the power of a BDSM relationship.

At first he hadn't especially cared if Avery got it or not. At the start of the week when he'd first messed with Avery's head, he'd seen himself as just someone passing through. Avery was a challenge and a distraction – a way to put Tommy out of his mind for good, and have a little fun along the way.

But as the week went on, and as he got to know Avery better, he was coming to not only lust after the guy, but to actually like him as well. It was cute the way Avery got so flustered when he teased him. Beyond that, Avery worked hard and was usually surprisingly patient with JD's various ineptitudes in helping to run the ranch.

Avery's obvious love for the horses was something to behold. When he was focused on the animals, he lost that hard edge about him. The chip he carried on his shoulder vanished when he was grooming a horse – stroking its mane and speaking in a soothing tone. JD recognized the passion Avery had for his work, as he had that same passion for cooking.

Avery's cabin was small and sparsely furnished but clearly Avery had taken care to make the space comfortable, especially the peaceful loft, with that grand old iron bed covered in a faded, but clearly much-loved quilt.

Thinking about Avery's home left JD both moved and somehow bereft. He thought about the dumps he'd lived in over the years, putting away every possible dime for "someday." He'd never had the time or energy to make them his own – they'd just been places to crash.

JD hadn't been sure what to expect this morning, but he'd hoped Avery would at least acknowledge that something had happened – something more than a quick fuck between near-strangers. Was Avery going to pretend there was nothing between them? Or was JD the one who had it all wrong?

He stopped stacking a moment to turn and watch the younger man. He was shirtless, the sweat gleaming on his torso, and there were bits of hay in his dark, shiny hair. Had JD's own lust and longing for a D/s connection made him see things that weren't there? Had he been the only one to feel the power of the moment the night before?

Though he'd been in the scene for years, JD still didn't entirely understand himself why it turned him on so much to assert complete sexual control over another person. He didn't really know why it made his cock hard as steel to tie a guy down and whip his ass before fucking him for all he was worth. There was nothing hotter than the look of mingled fear and raw lust on a man's face, just before he marked his ass with the cane, or let the melted wax fall on bared skin.

It was an intricate erotic dance of resistance, fear and ultimate surrender, with both Dom and sub moving in sync toward a uniquely and mutually satisfying connection that, for JD at least, could never be matched by a vanilla encounter.

He'd come to accept that he didn't have to understand it. It was a part of who and what he was, as much as being right-handed or, for that matter, gay. It was in his DNA to be the one in control, and there was nothing he liked better than to subdue a strong, willful man like Avery and bring him, quite literally, to his knees.

Yet the real intensity of D/s didn't lie in the physical act of control, though that in itself was hot. The real power of such a relationship lay in the gift of another man's submission, and a Dom's ability to harness and use that gift. It was a circle, an emotional bond between lovers that transcended anything vanilla, at least for JD, even when love wasn't part of the mix.

When mutual respect and love were added, something incredible happened. BDSM became more than a shared kink between sex partners. It was an integral part of the relationship. It forged the connection and made it that much stronger, like iron alloying into steel.

"You gonna stand there all day or help me get this job done?" Avery's voice jerked JD back to the moment. That old scowl was back on the cowboy's face. Maybe it wasn't that Avery was conflicted about his own submissive leanings. Maybe JD had just plain got it wrong. Maybe Avery regretted last night and this was his way of showing it.

JD turned away, forcing his tired arms to lift and stack the bales piling around him. He'd been busting his ass for a week in this job, determined to prove to both Avery and himself that he could do it. He'd taken on every task Avery had given him, no matter how messy or difficult, and not once had Avery acknowledged a job well done or thanked him for his efforts.

Maybe Avery Dalton wasn't worth the trouble. He was too young, for one thing. He was clearly in denial about his own needs, that much was clear. You couldn't fake the

strong, visceral reaction Avery had had to JD's hand on his throat, or the way his body had stilled when JD had captured his wrists while he rode him to orgasm.

Afterwards, when JD lay with his eyes barely cracked, his body pinned to the bed by one of the most powerful orgasms he'd ever experienced, Avery had leaned over him, touching his jaw. JD had witnessed the look of tenderness and awe on Avery's face that made his feelings plain. JD had seen the look many times before—it was the look of pure submissive satisfaction.

Admit it or not, Avery had needed what he'd given him as much as JD had needed to give it. Yet now he was acting like JD was nothing more than a greenhorn irritant, just someone in his way. Again he wondered, was he worth the trouble?

Avery climbed down the loft ladder, jumping the last several feet to the ground. He looked better than a man had a right to, his muscles sinewy and hard, his dark eyes like liquid tar in his handsome face. Just his closeness made JD's cock hard. He could analyze the crap out of Avery's motivations and reactions, but bottom line, he wanted that boy something fierce, trouble or no.

Lifting the hem of his sweat-soaked shirt, JD pulled it over his head and dropped it to the ground. He stood with his hands on his hips, facing Avery. "What's your problem? Stop pretending you didn't love what happened last night. Stop pretending you wish I wasn't around."

Avery looked away, mumbling something.

"What? I can't hear you, boy. Look at me when you speak."

Avery turned again to face him, his eyes flashing. He thrust his chin forward. "I *said*, I ain't no sissy boy."

JD shook his head, trying not to laugh, since Avery looked so serious. He took a breath, trying to frame what he had to say. Years in Paris and New York City hadn't prepared him for such naiveté. Could Avery really be this clueless about what was going on between them?

"Listen to me. What happened last night had nothing, absolutely zero, to do with being a sissy boy. It's about how we're hardwired, you and me. It's about an exchange of power—a consensual exchange of power between two people who both understand the courage it takes for one person to submit to another. It's about the farthest thing from being a sissy there is."

He stared into Avery's eyes, willing him to understand. Avery's face softened for a moment, but then he looked away again, kicking at a hay bale with the point of his cowboy boot, his lower lip caught in his teeth.

Suddenly exasperated, JD lunged forward, catching Avery in a rough embrace, their slick chests touching. He pushed his leg hard between Avery's thighs and slammed him back against the stacked hay before Avery even had time to react.

JD grabbed a handful of Avery's hair and jerked back hard, using the weight of his body to pin Avery against the bales. He pressed his knee hard against Avery's balls, drawing a gasp from the younger man. JD seized the opportunity to thrust his tongue into Avery's mouth. It wasn't a kiss so much as staking a claim. They were both breathing hard. JD could feel Avery's heart smashing against his own.

All at once, Avery's body relaxed, his tongue moving to meet JD's. JD eased the pressure created by his knee, though his fingers remained entwined in Avery's hair. They kissed, the heat of the night before rising between them like a flame. If JD had dared, he would have taken Avery right there on the hard clay floor.

One of the horses neighed and snorted, and JD became aware of the sound of a truck engine. "You boys in there?" LuAnn called from outside. "I'm heading into town. Y'all need anything?"

JD moved back quickly while Avery, who was sagging against the wall, struggled to his feet. JD hurried toward the entrance to the stable and stuck out his head. "No, ma'am. We're good."

As she drove away, he turned back to Avery, who stood by the bales, still breathing hard. JD approached him and touched Avery's cheek in a quick, tender caress. "We *are* good, you know. And it's just going to get better. I'll come over tonight and show you just how much better, okay?"

Avery didn't answer right away. JD touched his cheek again, drawing his finger along Avery's firm jaw. At the same time, he put his hand over Avery's crotch, where his erection still bulged. "Okay?" He said again.

"Okay," Avery agreed, his voice husky with lust.

~*~

Later that night over supper LuAnn said, "Janie really wants me to sell this old place and move down to Houston."

JD jerked his head up with surprised shock. "What? The Circle R's been in the Reed family for generations."

"I know, I know." LuAnn shrugged, looking embarrassed. "But I got my life to live too. You probably think I'm horrible for even thinking about it, but frankly, this has always been Charlie's baby, not mine. The land's got value, and the horses too, but this place doesn't make all that much money and it's a lot of work."

"Avery busts his ass and Charlie did too, and for what? After Charlie's father gambled away all the thoroughbreds and piled up the debt, it's a wonder Charlie was able to rescue this place from bankruptcy, and it took him twenty years just to come up to zero. Yeah, the place is viable again, but only just barely."

JD was shaken by this revelation. Yes, he knew the place had fallen in stature from an esteemed breeder of thoroughbred race and show horses to just breeding pleasure horses, but he'd never really known the history of why.

LuAnn continued. "It takes money to run a ranch. Horses cost a lot to feed and bed, there's the real estate taxes, and we're still carrying a mortgage on the stable. Charlie had life insurance, but our lawyer told me it's just enough to pay off the debts and leave me a modest annual income."

She sighed. "I know it's sacrilege to talk about selling the family ranch, but I want to watch my grandkids grow up. And this house..." She stopped, tears pooling in her eyes. "He's everywhere here. It's so hard to have him gone."

JD put his hand over LuAnn's. If she sold the ranch, what would happen to the fledgling relationship developing between Avery and him? She looked so miserable, though, so woebegone, that his heart went out to her.

"I understand," he said softly. "You must miss him so much."

She nodded, the tears spilling down her cheeks. She used her napkin, wiping away the tears and offering a wan smile. "I know he wouldn't want the ranch sold, but it's just too much for me. I asked Jimbo if he wanted to consider it, but you know your dad."

"Yeah." His father was raised on the ranch along with Charlie, but left for college at eighteen and never looked back. Things hadn't been easy for them back then, and his dad had never liked ranch life and made no bones about it. When JD had spent his summers here with his sister, his parents had stayed behind in Midland.

Though he knew he should be focusing on the matter at hand, all at once he saw Avery in his mind's eye as he'd been early that morning, deep in sleep, dark lashes grazing his cheekbones, black hair falling over his face. He could almost feel the heat of Avery's hard body trapped beneath his, the grip of thick hair in his fingers, the iron press of his erection against Avery's thigh as they'd kissed against the bales.

LuAnn was watching him with a strange expression. He realized his face had gone slack with lust and he forced it back into neutral.

They were quiet a moment. JD wondered if Avery had any idea what LuAnn was contemplating. He thought about the little cabin that was clearly Avery's pride and joy. What would happen to that if LuAnn sold the place out from under him?

"What about Avery? What happens to him if you sell?"

LuAnn waved her hand vaguely. "He's good with horses. He'll find something else. Or maybe whoever buys the place will keep him on."

JD didn't know what to say. If she sold the ranch, what excuse would he have to stick around? He would have to move on eventually, leaving the area – and Avery Dalton. He sure didn't spend all those years training to end up as a short order cook in

some local diner. The closest city with any kind of decent restaurants was Dallas, and the competition was probably fierce for good jobs.

"If you sold, how soon would it be?"

"I don't know. Soon as possible, I guess. I'd have to get the place listed, find a buyer, negotiate the sale of the horses..." She paused, and then added. "Don't tell Avery. Not yet. I don't need him jumping ship in the middle of things."

JD nodded. Selfishly, he had no intention of telling Avery. Things were already difficult enough without Avery getting all distracted over worries about the ranch. The guy was skittish enough without adding that into the mix.

"What about you, JD? I really appreciate your helping out this past week. You at least gonna stay on a while longer? I know it isn't glamorous like your fancy chef job..."

"If I had one, you mean." JD tried to smile and nearly made it.

"Oh, honey, you'll get back on your feet. The way you cook? They'd be fools not to hire you. But meanwhile, I'm awful grateful you're here. It's not so lonely with you around."

"I'm glad, Aunt LuAnn. It's working out well for both of us. I needed a break from city life. It's not all it's cracked up to be. I plan to stick around at least a few more weeks, if you and Avery can put up with me."

"Thanks, honey." LuAnn smiled. "You going out again tonight?"

"Huh?" As far as he'd known, she'd been asleep when he left, and still was when he returned.

"You were out late last night, weren't you?"

JD swallowed, embarrassed. "Uh, yeah. I was..." Silently he struggled to come up with a convincing lie.

"It's okay. I don't mean to pry. You're a grown man—you can do what you want. Just keep your cell phone with you, in case of emergency."

"Sure. Right. Will do, Aunt LuAnn. I was actually thinking of going out later. Mind if I borrow your truck?"

"Keys are hanging by the front door."

"Thanks." He jumped up, taking their plates to the kitchen, wondering just how much she knew.

Chapter 8

That evening after his shower, Avery ate a meal of canned chili and saltine crackers, washing it down with two bottles of beer. He put fresh sheets on the bed, swept the floor, straightened the items on his shelf and paced around for a while, feeling both excited and nervous as hell.

“What the damn hell am I doin’?” he whispered. He was a fool for saying JD could come by tonight. But it hadn’t really been a choice, had it? He could keep it together as long as they didn’t touch, but when JD reached for him, his brain just shut down and his body took over.

JD had left the coil of rope and the pocket knife on Avery’s kitchen table the night before, and as he ate his supper, Avery had stared at it, recalling when they had watched the hobbled mare being mated. JD had stood way too close, leaning in and speaking in that sexy, low tone that made Avery’s skin go hot and cold all at once.

The words were still branded in his mind. *Imagine being tied down like that and taken hard. What’s that like, do you ever wonder? What would it feel like to be bound, helpless in your restraints while someone used you for his pleasure?*

Avery glanced at the wall clock. It was only a little after eight. JD hadn’t said when he was coming by. Did he expect Avery to sit around waiting for him? Maybe he’d just climb in his old Chevy and drive all the way to Dallas. He’d find someone to distract him, and when JD showed up, the cabin would be empty and dark.

But he knew even as he tossed the idea in his mind that he wasn’t going anywhere. He’d wait all night if he had to. He wanted to see JD again, and in the worst way.

There was a crunch of gravel on the road that ran along the edge of the ranch property. Avery saw headlights shining through the window as the vehicle pulled up beside the fence, and his heart skipped a beat.

After a moment there was a knock at his door and Avery hurried over to open it. JD stood there, hands in his pockets. “Hey there.”

“Hey.” Avery stepped back. JD moved past him while Avery shut the door.

“You got Charlie – uh, your aunt’s truck?”

JD nodded. “I figured that way she’d assume I left the property. Keep things more private.” Avery nodded his agreement.

They stood quiet a while, taking each other in. JD looked good—real good. His blond hair was still damp from a shower and he was wearing a dark blue T-shirt and jeans that molded to his long, lean legs, black cowboy boots on his feet.

He looked Avery slowly up and down, like he was assessing his value before he made an offer. Determined to hold his own, Avery stared right back.

“You thought about what I said today, Ave? About letting go of control, and the courage it takes to submit?”

“Yeah,” Avery said, his voice coming out hoarse. He cleared his throat and said more forcefully, “I think I kind of get it. It’s like when you get a tattoo. The needle is a challenge, especially with intricate work on bone, where it’s real sensitive. There’s a kind of power in takin’ the pain. In takin’ it into yourself. I don’t really have the words for it but...”

He trailed off, hoping he was making sense. JD nodded. “Yes. Just like that. Embracing the pain. Finding the courage to flow with it until after a while, it’s no longer pain, but pleasure. Pure pleasure. And the experience is intensified when you give over control to someone else.”

JD reached out to draw a finger along Avery’s jaw. The touch was electric. His eyes on Avery’s, JD’s fingers went around Avery’s throat, squeezing gently. In spite of himself, Avery let out a short gasp.

“I’ve been thinking about it.” JD kept his hand on Avery’s throat, leaning in close. “You did good last night with the first task of keeping your hands behind your head, once you got the hang of it. You want to keep going? You ready to explore that courage we were talking about?” His fingers tightened against Avery’s windpipe.

Despite himself, Avery made no move to stop JD. He closed his eyes, trying to swallow against the strong grip at his throat. “Open your eyes and look at me. Answer my question.”

JD let go and stepped back while Avery took a gulp of air. He nodded slowly. Whatever the hell was going on, his cock ached to find out, if for nothing else, to get this strange, fierce desire out of his system once and for all.

“All right, then. We’re going to experiment with a little rope bondage. You just get out of your clothes and kneel there on that rug.” JD pointed to the woven throw rug in the center of the room. “I’ll get the rope ready.”

Avery stood stock still, not entirely sure he’d heard correctly. “Say what? You want me to just shuck off my clothes, right here? And *kneel* on the floor like some stray dog beggin’ for table scraps?”

JD, who had turned toward the table, turned back slowly, his eyes narrowing. “Yeah. That’s exactly what I want you to do. You got a problem with that?”

Avery gave JD his best barroom don't-fuck-with-me sneer, his hands curling into fists at his sides. "Yeah. Maybe I do. I've been thinking about all this exchange of power stuff. Maybe you need a taste of your own medicine, huh? Let's see what gets you hot, city boy." Trying to keep his pounding heart at bay, Avery pulled open the metal button at his fly and slid down the tag, revealing the erection in his underwear.

JD stared at him for several seconds, his mouth drawing down into a frown. Then he moved toward him and for a moment, Avery thought he was going to kneel and suck his cock. The realization was followed by a curious rush of disappointment. This wasn't supposed to be how it went. Why was he taunting JD like this?

But JD didn't kneel. All at once he lunged toward Avery, ducking his head in a gesture Avery recognized from his street fighting days. He planned to grab Avery around the waist and throw him down, but Avery responded instinctively, catching JD's head as he came between his bent arm and side. He held him, but only for the second it took JD to twist free.

They faced each other, circling like wrestlers. "You want to play, huh?" JD smiled but his eyes were hard, his voice edged with steel.

Adrenaline was squirting through Avery's veins, making him nearly sick with it. His heart was beating fast as he bounced on the balls of his bare feet, trying to find the advantage. Moving at the same time, they locked arms, twisting and jockeying for position.

"You can dish it out, but can you take it?" Avery asked breathlessly, as they grappled. He tried to laugh but it came out more as a gasp.

JD didn't answer. Instead, in a sudden movement, he let go of Avery, dropping on all fours. Before Avery realized what was happening, JD wrapped his arms around Avery's legs and toppled him backward onto the sofa.

Before Avery could move, JD was on him, flipping him onto his stomach, twisting one arm behind him as he had that day in the barn. Avery was bent over the sofa on his knees, his face pressed down against the upholstery. Leaning over him, JD jerked up on his arm, sending a shooting pain clear through Avery's shoulder.

"Hey, that hurts," Avery cried, trying to get out from beneath him.

"That's not all that's going to hurt," JD replied grimly. Still keeping Avery's arm painfully bent, he yanked Avery's open jeans down with his free hand. A moment later he tugged hard at Avery's briefs, baring Avery's ass.

"Hey," Avery yelled, trying to squirm out of JD's firm grasp. JD ratcheted his arm higher and Avery groaned, at once afraid and more excited than he'd ever been in his life.

A stinging sharp blow landed hard on Avery's bare ass. He stilled, from shock as much as anything. JD hit him again, just as hard, across the other cheek. Something

strange began to happen. Avery felt a curious kind of slowing down inside himself. And a kind of recognition. It was the strangest thing. The spanking hurt, but at the same time, a quiet, persistent voice inside him whispered, "*Yes...finally...*"

JD loosened his grip on Avery's arm. At that moment he could have twisted away. He could have stopped JD. Though JD was taller, Avery was stronger. True, JD had got him into this position, but he could have got out of it...if he'd wanted to.

He didn't want to.

"You want to play, Avery, you better figure out the rules first." JD's hand came down again, harder than before. He smacked Avery several times, just where his ass cheeks met his thigh, the blows so hard they partially lifted Avery's body. "You pressed the envelope, just like a little kid, seeing how far you could go. Well – this..." he struck him again, "is how..." again, "far," again, "you can go."

Avery grunted. The rough sofa upholstery was rubbing against his hard cock with each blow. He didn't understand it, but he couldn't deny it – the pain from the spanking wasn't pain. Or rather, it was, but somehow his mind was processing it as pleasure. Maybe he was just wired wrong, but whatever the deal was, it hurt so good.

Don't stop, he urged silently, not sure why he needed this so damn bad, just sure that he did. His ass was on fire, like a thousand stinging currents of electricity sliding over his nerve endings, ricocheting to his brain and straight back down to his throbbing cock. Still JD smacked him, forcing a grunt from Avery's lips with each well-placed blow.

He realized with a shock that he was about to come. "Ah," he cried, the word escaping his lips as a burst of semen shot from his cock. He shuddered, arching back against JD's hard palm.

JD rolled him over, a low laugh coming from his throat. "You little pain slut. You *came* from a spanking. And here I thought I was punishing you." Avery cracked one eye open, trying to hear JD over the thumping of his heart.

Pain slut.

He let the words roll in his mind. JD's eyes were narrowed, but the corners of his mouth kept lifting, as if he were trying to keep a grin at bay. He was watching Avery with an intensity that would have unsettled him, if he'd been in his right mind. Instead, a strange, rising sense of elation gave Avery the oddest feeling that he was weightless. In a moment his body might rise from the floor, buoyed by a strange kind of madness that felt better than any sanity he'd known to this point.

He felt JD lifting his legs, rolling him so he was stretched out along the sofa on his back. After a time of floating in a kind of trance, Avery's breathing deepened and his body resumed its mass, only tenfold, so that he felt as if someone had placed a lead blanket over him.

JD sat beside him, staring down. "Listen. We need to talk." For a moment Avery worried JD was going to leave. *Don't go*, he almost blurted, but he held his tongue. JD didn't go. After a pause, he began to speak.

"Remember when we first met, and I asked you if you got off on the pain?" Avery nodded. "Well, that's only one aspect of what I want to show you. Submission is about way more than that. It's about allowing someone to take control—to let it happen because it feels right. It takes courage, but it also takes trust."

He stroked Avery's cheek and Avery resisted the urge to turn his head and lick JD's fingers. JD continued. "I know you were just messing around just now. There's a time and a place for play, and that's okay. But I want something more with you. I want to take you past the games. But maybe I jumped the gun, and you're just not ready. Maybe you just don't want it bad enough."

"No! I—I mean, yes." Avery looked away, confused and a little angry, though if it was at JD or himself, he wasn't sure. "It's just..." he paused, trying to find the words.

"Yes? Tell me."

"I ain't gonna lie and say this doesn't turn me on. I guess I just don't get *why* I'm feelin' this way. It goes against everything I know about being a man, if you follow me. But at the same time, I can't hardly think of nothin' else."

"That's okay, Ave. You don't have to know why. Just trust me. I'll show you." He stood, pointing to the throw rug. "Now, let's try this again. I don't usually give second chances, but I think you just might be worth it. Get naked and kneel on the rug. If you can't obey, let's end it here and say good night."

Avery swallowed, rolling from the sofa to the floor. He pulled his T-shirt over his head and kicked out of his jeans and underwear. Not sure what he was feeling, he knelt on the rug while JD just stood there, watching.

"Kneel up, chest out," JD said. After a moment's hesitation, Avery did as he said, feeling at once awkward and incredibly turned on. JD leaned down, kissing him lightly on the mouth. He pushed Avery's hair back from his forehead.

"Much better. Stay just like that while I get the rope ready." JD walked to the table and picked up the knife. Avery watched as he cut the rope into several lengths. His ass smarting and he reached back to touch the skin, surprised by how hot it was.

JD came back to him, the rope in hand. "Okay now. I'm going to use this rope to bind your wrists behind your back. I want you to relax. Stand up and put your arms behind your back, one wrist on top of the other. You might just be surprised by the freedom you find in bondage."

Avery's nerves were sparking and he felt almost lightheaded with excitement. His cock had risen to half-mast and his balls felt swollen and hot. He put his arms behind his back.

“Higher.” JD pushed Avery’s arms up against his back. Avery’s pulse quickened as the rope was wound around his wrists. Why was he letting this happen? As JD tied the knots, each pull of the rope was almost like a direct tug on Avery’s cock.

Once Avery’s wrists were secured, JD moved to stand in front of him, reaching out to touch the coiled rattlesnake tattooed just below Avery’s hip. He traced a finger along the diamond pattern, moving toward the snake’s open mouth.

Avery tugged experimentally at the rope around his wrists. While it wasn’t tight, it was certainly secure. No way he could get out of it on his own. The realization was at once unsettling and exciting.

Taking Avery’s head in his hands, JD kissed him. Avery kissed him back, suddenly ravenous for the other man’s mouth. As they kissed, JD’s fingers moved through Avery’s hair, gripping hard as he explored Avery’s mouth with his tongue. The tight hold on his hair hurt, but somehow the pain just added to the pleasure.

JD finally let him go and Avery stumbled forward a little before righting himself. JD was looking intently into Avery’s face, his eyes blazing. “I swear, Avery Dalton, I will have you. All of you.” It wasn’t a threat, but more like a promise.

JD reached for Avery’s cock, stroking it while speaking in a low, soothing voice. “I know it’s foreign to how you think of yourself, but sexual submission is not about being weak. It’s not about being forced, either. It takes a strong man to let someone else take control. It takes a brave man to be honest about what he needs, even if it’s not what society tells him he should want.”

He stared at Avery, perhaps expecting a response, but Avery had no words. Whatever it was JD was offering – he wanted it.

~*~

“Kneel and close your eyes.” JD pointed to the ground. Something flashed in Avery’s eyes, but after a moment, he obeyed, lowering himself gracefully on powerful legs, his arms still bound behind him. JD couldn’t remembering wanting someone the way he wanted Avery. The yearning he’d sensed in the young, untried ranch hand for a D/s experience was no less intense than his own desire to provide that for him.

He hadn’t been that surprised by Avery’s challenge. If anything, he’d have been surprised if Avery hadn’t tried to test his boundaries. JD was surer than ever Avery was not only a pain slut, but also a true sub. But he understood he was also a Texas cowboy and it had to go against his grain to commit such an overt act of submission. Yet there he was, kneeling, head bowed, naked and bound, the very picture of erotic submission.

JD reached a hand into the front of his jeans, straightening his rapidly-elongating cock. He tore off his shirt and kicked off his boots and socks. Opening his jeans, he dragged them down to his thighs, not having bothered with underwear that evening after his shower.

His cock sprang free and he gripped it in his hand. "Open your mouth and then be still. Don't try to do anything on your own. Pay attention and do what I tell you. Understand?"

Instead of obeying, Avery pressed his lips together and then bit the lower one in a gesture JD was coming to recognize as nerves. If any trained sub had so flagrantly disobeyed him, JD would have come down on him hard. But Avery wasn't a heavy player, and JD wanted him far too much to take the chance of pushing him too fast.

He stroked the top of Avery's head, keeping his voice gentle. "Trust me. I know what you need."

Avery nodded, eyes still closed. Slowly, he opened his mouth. JD moved forward, holding his cock in his hand and placing the head between Avery's parted lips. Avery stiffened, again opening his eyes as he pulled back.

"Do I need to blindfold you?"

"No. I'm just not used to the ropes. I mean, I like to use my hands when I—"

"Just your mouth. Lips and tongue only. You do just exactly what I say and not a thing more or less." Avery's breath was shallow and rapid, almost a pant.

So new, so new, JD thought. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been with such a total novice to the scene. "Slow your breathing. Take deep breaths. Try to relax." It was almost like calming a skittish horse, he thought.

When Avery's breathing was closer to normal, JD said, "We're going try this again. Open your mouth and close your eyes. Keep them closed, and remember, just do what I say."

Avery nodded, closing his eyes and parting his lips. Again JD placed just the head of his cock between Avery's lips, moving it over them until they were smeared with his pre-cum.

"Lick the head, but only the head," he ordered. "Use only your tongue—no lips."

Avery's tongue snaked out, licking along the slit and then moving in a sensual circle over the sensitive crown. "Hmm," JD murmured in approval. He pushed half the shaft into Avery's mouth. Avery's lips closed over it, his tongue gliding along the underside.

Though it felt great, JD jerked back, pulling his cock away. Moving to the side, he leaned down and gave Avery a sharp smack on his reddened ass. Avery's eyes flew open in startled surprise.

"Did I tell you to suck my cock, boy?" JD demanded in a stern tone.

Avery's dark skin flushed darker. "I—uh, I thought you wanted..."

"I want you to pay *attention* and do as you're told. Stop trying to run the show. Accept that you're mine for tonight. Accept that you need to be here, bound and on

your knees at my feet.” JD caressed Avery’s cheek. “Accept that this is where you belong, even if you aren’t entirely sure yet.”

Avery stared up at him, the confusion of emotions warring over his face almost comical, if it didn’t matter so damn much. *Go slow*, he reminded himself, though his cock felt like it was about to explode.

This time when he placed his cock between Avery’s lips, Avery kept his mouth in an O, letting JD slide the shaft back toward his throat without trying to suck or lick him.

“Good boy,” JD said softly. He placed a hand on the back of Avery’s head to hold him still, and moved forward until the tip of his cock met the back of Avery’s throat. Avery started to gag, but, to his credit, didn’t try to pull away.

JD eased back, murmuring, “Relax. Relax your throat and take it. Do it for me.” He moved forward again, going even farther this time, aware he was blocking Avery’s ability to breathe. He counted in his head — *one, two, three...* all the way to ten, and still Avery hadn’t tried to pull back. Well pleased, JD withdrew his cock, watching as Avery gasped for breath, his eyes opening wide.

“Now,” JD said, his voice thick with lust. “You can suck my cock.”

Avery leaned forward eagerly, his mouth wide, his own cock bobbing at his groin. Just to tease him, JD stepped back, forcing Avery to lean farther forward to reach him. It felt too good to keep up the tease, and JD allowed Avery to suck the length of him, licking in hot, smooth strokes with his tongue.

It would have felt good to have Avery cup his balls, fingers tight around the base while he sucked his cock, but he liked the fact that Avery was bound in his rope even better.

Avery was licking and sucking for all he was worth, leaning forward to take JD to the hilt, then sliding back, creating an exquisite suction along the shaft as he moved. JD looked down at Avery, whose cock bobbed gently, heavy balls swaying, his enthusiasm obvious.

When he felt his balls tighten and knew he was about to climax, he tried to pull back but Avery held on, moving forward with him, JD’s cock caught in his heavenly grip. “*Ah, Jesus,*” he moaned, unable to help himself any longer.

He grabbed Avery’s head, holding it tight while he jerked in uncontrollable spasms of pleasure, sending streams of cum down the kneeling, bound man’s throat. After a moment, he went limp. It took a few moments before he came to himself enough to focus.

Sinking to his knees in front of Avery, he kissed him lightly on the mouth. When he could speak, he said, “I’m sorry. I tried to pull back but —”

“It’s okay,” Avery interrupted. “You use condoms — I figured you’re negative.”

"Yeah." JD nodded. "Yeah, but I should have negotiated that first, I'm sorry."

Avery managed a shrug. "I'm negative too. Shit, I'm practically a monk, except once every couple of months I find someone to mess around with, but always safe."

"A monk, huh?" JD grinned, kneeling in front of Avery and gripping his shaft, which was hard and hot to the touch. "One of those kinds who self-flagellate?"

When Avery looked blank, JD explained, "The kind who whip themselves till they bleed to atone for their sins. I was just making a joke."

JD stood, pulling up his jeans as he moved behind Avery. "Stand up for me."

Avery obeyed and JD inspected the ropes, making sure they weren't too tight or cutting off circulation.

Avery tugged at his bonds, twisting around to look at JD. "So, uh, you gonna untie me?"

"Nope. Not quite yet. One more thing I want to do first." Moving to face Avery, he knelt in front of the other man and rested his cheek a moment against Avery's hip, savoring the musky scent of his cock.

Lifting his head, he licked along the base of Avery's shaft, moving upward. He took it between his lips, enjoying the spongy give of the crown. Avery moaned, pushing down to try and get more of his cock into JD's mouth.

JD pulled away. "Uh unh," he scolded. "Remember, you don't run this show. Your job is to stay perfectly still. Don't move. If I sense you're trying to take over, I'll stop and you go to bed with blue balls. Got it?"

Avery licked his lips and it was clear by his expression that a part of him wanted to sass back, but, after several seconds, he only nodded, his cock as hard as ever. Satisfied, JD leaned forward again, this time taking the length of the shaft into his mouth, while cradling the balls beneath it with one hand.

His own lust satisfied for the immediate moment, he was able to take his time, focused solely on teasing Avery to new heights, then pulling back each time Avery began to thrust forward, out of control. It wasn't until Avery's legs were actually trembling, his head thrown back, the tendons standing out on his powerful neck, that JD gave in.

He pulled away only long enough to say, "Come for me," before plunging back down over Avery's cock. Within seconds he was sucking down long, hot streams of ejaculate, his hand gently milking Avery's balls until they were empty.

Avery sank to his knees, head bent forward, his black, straight hair falling into his eyes. JD moved quickly, untying the ropes that bound Avery's wrists. Avery's arms fell limply at his sides. JD, kneeling down behind him, gently massaged both arms, while at the same time resting his cheek against the other man's back.

After a moment, Avery twisted around until they were facing each other. JD remained on his knees, while Avery sat flat on the floor, his legs stretched out on either side of JD. He brought his arms around JD, holding him so tight in his powerful arms that JD could barely breathe. Avery was hiding his face in the crook of JD's neck. He could feel Avery's heart pounding.

Gently he pried himself from Avery's too-tight embrace and pulled back to see his face. "Hey. Hey, Ave. You okay?"

At first Avery wouldn't look at him. Gently but firmly, JD put two fingers beneath Avery's chin and forced him to look up. What he saw caught at his heart. Avery's liquid black eyes were shining with such naked emotion that JD almost had to look away.

"Yeah, I'm okay," Avery whispered. "I think."

Chapter 9

The next day dawned hot, the temperature already climbing over ninety before nine that morning. Avery and JD worked quietly. They were barely keeping up with daily chores, with no time left for maintenance and improvement projects Avery kept on a mental list in his head. Avery had been forced to admit that, though JD was still wet behind the ears as far as horse ranching went, he was a hard worker. But for how long?

Surely it was only a matter of time—days, or weeks at the most—before JD would pack up and head back to New York. He'd return to his real life and forget all about Avery Dalton. No way he'd spent all those years learning to be a fancy chef, just to settle for working on a horse ranch.

Avery tried to tell himself this was for the best. Who needed some greenhorn adding to his workload, when he could hire someone with experience and actually get the chores done by the end of the day? Yeah, the sex was super hot—but who needed the complication of having sex with someone you had to work with?

A little after noon they took a break, settling under the shade of big pine tree to have their lunch. A hot wind had kicked up, rustling through the underbrush and stirring the air around them. JD had taken to packing Avery a lunch, and he didn't mind one bit, as the sandwiches JD made were way better than the bologna on white that was Avery's usual lunchtime fare.

It was times like these, when Avery took a break and his mind began to wander, that he missed Charlie most. Charlie loved to tell stories about the ranch back in the good ol' days, back before his daddy nearly ran the place into the ground. Charlie's face would go sort of misty, and he'd close his eyes, like he could see a film on the backs of his eyelids of his granddaddy showing the finest quarter horses and thoroughbreds in the area, back when they'd had four fulltime ranch hands onboard.

Though Avery would have died a thousand deaths before admitting this to anyone, he used to pretend that Charlie was his dad. In this fantasy Avery would one day inherit the ranch, and, building on the work Charlie had already accomplished, bring it back to its former stature. Sometimes he would embellish the scenario, imagining Charlie as an old man, sitting in his rocking chair up on the porch of the big house, telling Avery how proud he was of him, and that Avery was like a son to him.

Now that fantasy would always remain nothing more than a passing dream. Charlie was dead and buried, and Avery was alone as usual. He shook his head, annoyed at this train of thought. He'd always been fine alone. He was fine now, too. He

took a drink from the bottle of cola and stared out at the shimmering mirage over the pastures. He could make out flashes of heat lightning against the horizon.

He stole a sidelong glance at JD, who was leaning back against the tree trunk, his head tilted back and eyes closed. Avery's mind slid to the night before. It had been so intense – the ass whuppin', the rope, the whole idea of giving up control.

Instead of feeling weak and unmanly, something about the experience had actually left him feeling stronger. Or no, that wasn't precisely right. It had left him feeling more like – himself.

They'd moved upstairs to the loft and JD got to talking about what it all meant. He held forth about what he called the poetry of dominance and submission. He talked about sensual ownership – the giving of your body and will to another. He explained about giving up control of your orgasm, learning obedience and flowing with the power of a good whipping. He talked about training, punishment and discipline.

Avery didn't quite follow all of it, or get every fancy word JD threw around, but he got the gist, and it made a deep kind of sense to him. Though it sounded kind of complicated, even a little dangerous, he couldn't deny the whole idea of sexual submission was hotter than a fresh jalapeño.

After a time, the talking stopped. JD told Avery to get his ass ready, and he'd fucked him hard. "You won't come again tonight," he'd informed Avery. "I want you to burn for me."

Avery hadn't answered, but his cock had hardened at this declaration. After JD had left, it stayed hard. Though it was late, and Avery knew he needed to get some sleep, he began to stroke himself. Who was JD to dictate when or how he took his pleasure? Yet when he finally came, the experience was somehow less than satisfactory.

"Aren't you going to eat your lunch?" JD put two fingers lightly on Avery's forearm, and just that touch was enough to heat Avery's blood. Forcing himself to focus on his food, Avery unwrapped the sandwich JD had made for him and took a bite. In spite of his preoccupation with JD, he chewed with relish.

"Damn, JD. What is this? It's delicious."

JD's face lit up. "It's just brisket. I use Merlot and balsamic vinegar and cook it real slow. No real trick to it. But I'm glad you like it."

Avery shook his head. "Well, I don't know what mare low is, but you sure can cook. I'll give you that. You're bein' wasted here on this ranch." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wanted to stuff them back in. It was bad enough JD would be leaving soon on his own. Did he really want to give him an extra push out the door?

"I don't feel like I'm being wasted," JD said, with a wink. But then a cloud seemed to pass over his face.

"What? What is it?"

JD shook his head. "Nothing." After a moment, he added, "LuAnn wants me to give her a ride to the airport later this afternoon. She's going to spend a few days with Jane and the grandkids."

"Has she, uh...has she talked about what her plans are for the Circle R?"

"Plans?" JD looked downright guilty, and Avery felt his gut clench. All at once, he knew.

"She's gonna sell, ain't she?"

JD looked stricken and Avery knew he was right. His stomach dropped, like being in an elevator, the car freefalling down the shaft. On some level he'd known it the second Charlie had died in his arms. LuAnn had never cared about the place. All she ever talked about were her grandkids in Houston, and how she wished she could spend more time with them. Shit, she was probably going down today so they could hash out the details of when she was moving.

He grabbed JD's arm, focusing his feelings of helplessness and rage on JD, even though he knew that wasn't fair. "When? When's it happenin'? Were you gonna bother to tell me, or just watch while my life was sold out from under me?"

JD pulled his arm away. "Stop it. It's not like that. She only just told me the other night at supper. It's not written in stone. She's just thinking about it, is all." JD spoke in a calm voice, but the guilt was on his face like shit on a pig.

Avery stood, his appetite gone. All that talk about trust and connection last night only went so far, apparently. JD didn't even have the common decency to let Avery know his life was about to be ripped out from under him. As long as he kept quiet, he could fuck Avery when he wanted, and just disappear when the Circle R changed hands.

"Hey, come on, Ave. Look, I'm sorry I didn't say anything sooner. She asked me not to—"

Avery pulled his hat low over his eyes and turned away. What a fool he'd been to let this guy get close to him. What an idiot to think JD actually cared for him as a person, instead of just a piece of ass. It didn't do to get too close to folks. One way or another, they always left you in the end.

A familiar and unwelcome pain moved through his gut, twisting and sliding like a poisonous snake toward his heart. Avery willed it away, focusing instead on the hot rush of anger that went with it. What did he care what JD thought of him? He didn't give a fuck about JD Reed. Let him and LuAnn go straight to hell.

"I got a ranch to run," he spat. Tossing his half-eaten sandwich to the ground, he stomped away.

~*~

Why was everything always so complicated? Things had been going so great with Avery, and now it was all messed up. On the drive to the airport, JD tried to feel LuAnn out more on her intentions regarding the ranch.

"Maybe you should keep the ranch at least another year. You know, till you're sure what you want to do," he offered, trying to keep his voice neutral.

LuAnn shook her head. "I've been talking to Harry Steadman. He's interested. And I called Johnson Realtors about listing it. They do all the ranch business in these parts. They'll have a good feel for the value."

"But Uncle Charlie, his dream of —"

LuAnn crossed her arms, a spot of pink appearing on each cheek. "Don't you lecture me on Uncle Charlie and his dreams," she snapped, startling JD with the vehemence in her tone. "I spent most of my life living out Charlie's dreams. It's high time I had some of my own."

Chastened by this, JD apologized, but the image of Avery's stricken face was still etched sharp in his mind. "Maybe there are alternatives — a way to keep it in the family, without having to sell outright to strangers."

"Like what? You gonna buy it? I thought you wanted to be a chef, not the owner of a horse ranch." She'd turned an appraising eye on him then. "What's really going on here, James Darren Reed? Why're you so fired up about the place? Since when has the Circle R become so important to you?" The use of JD's full name was reserved for parents and relatives intent on scolding him when he was a kid.

He kept his eyes on the road, glad for the excuse not to face his aunt's probing look head on. When he didn't answer right away, she said, "It's about Avery, isn't it? You're sweet on him."

"Excuse me?" JD clenched the steering wheel. He'd never officially come out to his family. His mother knew, and "forgave him", and of course his sister, Jeanette, knew, but he'd never advertised the fact to other relatives, seeing no particular reason to do so. And he was pretty darn sure Avery hadn't either.

"I'm no fool, JD. Anyone would have to be blind not to see the way the two of you stared at one another over supper the other night. I sleep light, too. Always have. Night before last when you went out walkin' and didn't come back till nearly dawn? You gonna deny you were with Avery?"

JD didn't respond, but he could see by the look in her eye that his expression must have been answer enough. LuAnn continued. "Charlie used to fret Avery might be a homosexual, but I told him not to judge. We are what we are and the Lord loves us all. Your mom told me about you at least ten years ago, when she was going through her 'I'll never have grandbabies' phase."

"Huh," was all JD managed to come up with.

LuAnn put her hand on JD's thigh. "Listen, honey. Ranch life is hard. You might like playing horseman for a week or two, but you're gonna get tired of it and wanna go back to your big city life and fancy restaurants and all that. Avery's life is here. He's young and a good worker. Just because I'm selling the ranch doesn't mean he's gonna be out on the street with no way to support himself. I'm sure if Harry buys, he'll want to keep Avery on. Even if he doesn't, Avery's the kind of person to land on his feet. He's been making it on his own since he was a kid." She sighed heavily. "I got my own life to live, honey. I need to get away. I need to put Charlie to rest in my head and heart. I need a fresh start."

JD nodded, knowing it wasn't fair to press his aunt because of his own selfish agenda. And she was right. He had no intention of playing at ranch hand for the rest of his life. It was backbreaking work, but more than that, it wasn't his calling. He wanted to cook for people, to create dishes that made eating not just a chore to fill their bellies, but an experience to be savored. When he was cooking, he forgot everything else. It was, truly, a labor of love.

At the same time, Avery had gotten under his skin — way under. He found himself completely disarmed by Avery's innocence, combined with his intense and powerful reactions to the D/s experience. But it went beyond that. He was, to use Aunt LuAnn's term, sweet on Avery Dalton, no question about it. As sweet as Texas pecan pie.

~*~

The temperature was easily over a hundred, the air so dry Avery's sweat dried nearly the instant it beaded on his skin. He paused in his work to take a drink of water from the canteen clipped to his belt. While he drank, something caught the corner of his eye and he turned to look.

The back of the Steadman ranch abutted the Circle R on the east side of the property. There were several tall dead or dying trees on the Steadman side, festooned with creepers and hanging moss. Gray and yellow smoke was curling above the old trees.

Avery's first thought was dry lightning. When dry lightning struck a tall tree, it could smolder for days, undetected until it was too late.

He stared in fascinated horror as a large branch cracked and crashed into the underbrush below. Within seconds small flames stirred at the trunk of the tree, crawling through the leaves and brushwood on the ground. One patch touched a nearby tree trunk and scrambled up like a squirrel.

Fire!

There was nothing but a fence and a road between that fire and the Circle R. With a shaking hand, Avery grabbed his cell phone to call the fire department. He didn't make the call, however, since at that moment he heard the sound of sirens and the urgent

honk of the fire truck horns. The local fire trucks had water tanks and hoses, but would they be enough to put out the blaze before it spread?

Concerned for the horses, Avery hurried into the stable, checking the mares and geldings, and the little foal, Smokey. They were reasonably calm, not having seen the flames or smelled the smoke yet. He rushed into the second stable where the stallion was kept. The General raised his head and snorted in greeting.

Avery went back outside, surveying the area. The old hay barn, which had once been the original stable, wasn't in the best repair. There were a few boards missing on one wall, leaving some exposed area for blowing embers. If that barn caught on fire, they'd have a disaster on their hands. Avery made a mental note to move the repair of the missing slats to the top of his to-do list.

One of the fire trucks came racing along the road between the properties and several men leaped from the truck, turning the tanker hoses onto the blaze. Avery was distracted by the old truck rumbling up beside the paddock fence. JD jumped out. "Shit! I could see smoke from a mile away. I was afraid it might be here! What's going on!"

Avery pointed to the blaze. "Fire over at Steadman's place. We need to get the horses out to the back pasture."

"You think it's going to come here? They won't be able to contain it?"

All at once a hot wind blew up, sending burning leaves and embers flying through the air like birds on the wing. "I don't wanna take the chance. The road between the properties should act as a natural firebreak, but that doesn't mean we're safe."

He eyed the stacks of hay by the front doors of the large stable. Damn it, he'd meant to get those in there, but JD had pissed him off so much he'd wasted half the day fuming about it.

As if the world suddenly switched to slow-motion, he watched in helpless awe as several glowing embers blew along the wind and alighted on the bales. Before he could react, they'd caught in a whoosh of flame.

"Get the garden hose!" Avery cried, pointing toward it. "I'll get the horses out." JD ran toward the garden hose while Avery rushed into the stable. Thank god the horses couldn't see the fire, which would have spooked them for sure.

But as smoke began to filter into the stable, some of the horses started to panic, whinnying and kicking at the sides of their stalls. Trying to stay calm, Avery opened the stall doors that led to the back paddock, shouting at the beasts to get on out. Most of them bolted past him, but it took some coaxing to get Macy and her baby out the door. He watched with relief as they ran with the rest toward the back pasture, hopefully far from the flames.

He ran back to help JD. JD had managed to put out the hay bale fire, but smoke from the fire still raging across the road was blanketing the area, making it hard to breathe. The hot wind could well be carrying more embers and ash in its wake.

"The General," Avery cried, hurrying over to his stall. The stallion was pawing nervously, tossing his head in restless agitation. The stable was filling with smoke.

"Come on, buddy, come on." Avery got the back door opened and shouted for the General to get a move on. The General eyed the open door with a dubious expression for a moment, tossing his mane and swishing his tail. Avery's eyes were smarting from the smoke, his heart hammering in his chest.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the General moved through the back gate and galloped out into the pasture. He returned outside to watch the firefighters, offering silent prayers, wishing he could help.

JD touched his arm. "Hey, Ave. It'll be okay. They're getting it under control. The Circle R is going to be fine." Avery turned to look at JD. His face was smudged with soot, his hair matted with sweat. There was a tenderness in his eyes that made Avery's heart catch, despite his determination to remain angry.

He turned away, trying to focus on Steadman's property, where it did seem the firefighters were gaining the upper hand against the blaze. JD touched his arm again and Avery pulled away, but not before he felt the power of that touch.

Damn it, JD Reed had somehow slipped past defenses Avery had spent a lifetime erecting. He'd found a way not only into Avery's jeans, but his heart as well. The question was, what the hell happened now?

Chapter 10

"What you need," JD said, "is some distraction." He held up the long, black leather riding crop he'd found in the tack room but Avery didn't turn around. Avery was in the hay barn, a hammer in his hand. He hoisted a plank and held it against a spot where a slat was missing.

"Avery. You hear me?"

Slowly Avery turned toward him, nails poking from the corner of his mouth. Spitting the nails into his hand, he said, "What I need is to get this barn more secure. We're lucky no embers got blown in through one of these holes. This dry hay'd burn faster than a sinner in hell." He placed the nails between his lips again and turned back around, hammering at the plank.

It was already nearly dark out. Once they'd been sure the fire was contained, they'd corralled the horses back into their stalls and got them settled for the night. But Avery couldn't stop working. His nervous energy was palpable, despite JD's efforts to calm him down.

JD had called his aunt to let her know what was going on. "That coulda been our ranch, JD," she said in a worried voice. "It's so damn hot out there you just *think* the word fire and that dry grass'll catch. Was there a lot of damage on Harry's place? I wonder how this will affect his interest in buying the ranch."

JD wondered too, though all he could do was reassure his aunt at that point that everything was under control. Now if he could just get Avery to calm down. He'd already tried food, but Avery had waved it away, saying he wasn't hungry.

He watched Avery furiously hammering for another minute or so. Enough was enough. JD tucked the handle of the riding crop in back of his pants. He came up behind Avery and put his hands on his shoulders, forcing him to turn around.

"Give me that." He took the hammer from Avery's hand and set it on the floor. "Those too." He plucked the three nails sticking from the corner of Avery's mouth and tucked them into his jeans' pocket.

"You need to slow down, Avery. You're going to make yourself sick. This'll still be here in the morning. Everything's okay. The fire's out. The horses are safe."

Avery didn't answer. JD reached for him, trying to pull him into his arms, but Avery remained stiff. "Come on, Ave, relax." He wrapped his arms around Avery, holding him in a gentle but firm embrace until he felt some of the tension ease from Avery's taut body.

"That's better," he soothed. "You need to let go of what all you're carrying around. Remember what we talked about last night? Sometimes the greatest freedom comes from giving yourself over to someone else."

"I remember your *sayin'* that," Avery replied with a scowl. At least he'd got him talking. That was a start.

"And do you remember this?" Without giving Avery a chance to respond, JD gripped his hair and pulled his head back, covering Avery's mouth with his own. He kissed him hungrily, ferociously. Cupping Avery's ass cheeks, he pressed his own erection against the rising bulge in Avery's jeans. Avery brought his arms around JD's neck and he leaned heavily against him.

When they finally fell apart, JD took the crop from his jeans and held it up. "It's time, Avery. It's time for the next lesson." JD had stopped by the tack room for a blanket on his way to the barn, which he now draped across a bale of hay.

Avery, who had worked straight through supper, was shirtless and filthy, but JD didn't care. "Shuck those jeans and kneel over this bale. I'm going to whip the stress right out of you, Avery Dalton."

Avery stared at him, his chin starting to jut forward, but before he could speak, JD held up his hand, putting steel behind his words. "Don't you go fighting me on this. I don't want to hear anything out of your mouth except, 'Yes, Sir.' The time for denying that you want and need this is past. You know it and I know it, so do as you're told."

He knew he was taking a gamble. Avery was still obstinate enough to continue to deny his own impulses, despite all the mounting proof to the contrary. JD stood his ground, silently willing Avery to obey him.

Avery stared at the riding crop in JD's hands. It had a supple looped rectangle of leather at the end of the handle, perfect for marking Avery's sexy ass. JD slapped the rectangle against his open palm, gauging Avery's reaction to the sound of leather on skin, a sound that never failed to arouse JD.

Avery licked his lips and reached for his belt buckle. JD suppressed a triumphant smile, forcing his expression to remain neutral while he watched Avery pull off his boots and lower his jeans and underwear.

"Good boy," JD said softly. "Now assume the position I told you. Kneel on the ground in front of the bale and drape yourself over it. I'll start out slow and build you up to it." He held his breath while Avery stood there, naked, his eyes glued to the crop.

JD counted to five in his head. Finally Avery moved toward the bale and lowered himself over it. He rested his cheek against the blanket and closed his eyes. He had to be bone-weary, but the time for rest would come later.

JD stood beside him and leaned down, stroking the firm flesh of Avery's ass. Avery tensed at first to the touch, but then relaxed as JD continued to stroke and massage him.

When JD was satisfied Avery was ready, he began a light tapping with the leather, just to get Avery's skin used to the feel.

He used the crop over both cheeks and Avery's thighs, covering the area and readying it for more. Avery was staying very still, a good sign that he was into it. Either that or he'd fallen asleep, JD thought with an inward grin. To test this theory, he brought the crop down hard, the smacking sound echoing through the barn.

Avery flinched and furrowed his brow, his lips pursed with pain. JD smacked the other cheek and Avery flinched again but otherwise remained in position. Encouraged, JD began to crop him in earnest, letting the leather move in its stinging dance over Avery's ass and thighs.

Avery's breath was coming fast and shallow, his hands clenched into fists. JD stopped the cropping and knelt beside him, stroking his hair. "Slow down. Take a deep breath." He tapped Avery's right fist. "Relax. Unclench your hands. You don't fight the pain. You take it into yourself. You let it become a part of you."

He continued to stroke Avery's hair, watching as his hands eased open and his breathing slowed. "That's it. Good. I'm going to continue now." Avery didn't move and JD took this as permission. He stood again, running the soft leather over Avery's reddening skin.

He started light again, though taking less time now to increase the force of the strokes. Soon he was cropping Avery's ass and thighs even harder than before. Each time Avery began to pant or clench his hands, JD would remind him to breathe and slow down.

Avery was paying attention, and clearly made an effort to obey, staying still all the while under the barrage of stinging leather. JD was impressed with his ability and willingness to take the whipping, but he wanted more. He wanted to take Avery beyond mere endurance, to that place where pleasure and pain lost their meaning as separate concepts.

He kept up a steady, methodical cropping over Avery's ass and thighs, watching Avery's face and reading his body language all the while. After several minutes, he no longer needed to remind Avery to breathe or relax. Avery was breathing deeply, his hands open and limp on the bale, his eyes closed. The muscles in his face had relaxed, almost as if he were sleeping, and a small half-smile played over his lips.

Avery, this newbie to erotic pain, was entering subspace. He was flying. Though JD had never flown himself, not being one of those Dom who felt it necessary to experience every sensation they provided for their subs, he'd seen it often enough to know it when he saw it. It never failed to thrill and astound him – the knowledge that *he* was the one responsible for the euphoric trancelike state induced by intense physical play.

Because Avery was so new to the sensation, JD had to be especially vigilant. He would ease Avery into the experience, keeping a careful watch on his reactions. The intense sensations of both pain and pleasure triggered a dumping of endorphins and other chemicals into the bloodstream that acted much like morphine – increasing the pain tolerance of the sub as the scene became more intense. Because of that, Avery might not be aware or even capable of telling JD to stop.

By the same token, if he stopped too soon, he'd jerk Avery from the trance, denying him the complete experience of flying – a sort of *subspace interruptus* that he'd learned from lovers in the past was the most frustrating of experiences.

"Avery," he whispered, his mouth close to Avery's ear. "You okay? You don't have to speak. Just nod." He ran his hand lightly over Avery's ass. The skin was hot to the touch and flushed a dark red from the cropping. If Avery didn't respond, he would stop. But after a few seconds, Avery slowly nodded his head, his eyes still closed.

"Want me to keep going?"

Again Avery nodded. JD dropped the crop and stroked Avery's heated flesh with his fingertips. Cupping his palm, he caught the bottom half of one round globe, hitting him hard enough to elicit a faint groan. He hit the other cheek just as hard, leaving a handprint on the darkened skin. Again Avery groaned, his eyebrows furrowing just slightly. Gauging Avery had had enough, JD eased off, finishing with a series of light smacks that he slowly changed to more of a massaging stroke.

He sat down on the bale beside Avery, lifting Avery's head gently into his lap. The smile still hovered on Avery's lips, and he gave a long, low sigh of contentment. JD smoothed back the hair from Avery's soot-smudged cheek and tucked it behind his ear.

Avery opened his eyes and twisted his head to look up at JD. "Wow," he offered.

JD grinned. "Feeling better?"

"I feel..." Avery paused, seeming to ponder this. He lay his head back down on JD's knee. "Amazin'. I don't even know how to describe it. It's like, better than sex. No, that's not it. It's like bein' drunk, only without the sick woozy feel after. No, no, that's wrong. It's like..." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "It's like this one time when I was a kid and my mom took me down to Galveston. I went swimmin' in the water, and I got kind of far out. I was tired, so I just lay back and let the water buoy me. I was floatin' beneath this clear blue sky and it seemed like everythin' was right with the world."

He looked up again at JD, his smile wide. "Do it again, JD. Take me to that place again."

JD laughed. "I will, I promise. But not now. You took quite a bit tonight. I'm predicting a bruised butt tomorrow. What you need now is some food in your belly, a hot shower and a good night's rest."

Avery lifted himself, placing his elbows on either side of JD's thighs. "Yeah? And what do you need, huh? I bet I know." He reached for the snap at JD's fly and pulled it open, drawing down the zipper.

In a very un-sub-like manner, he reached into JD's underwear and pulled out his rapidly hardening shaft. He lowered his head over the shaft, sucking it in deep.

"Ah," JD groaned. He leaned back on his hands, giving himself over to the hot pleasure gripping his cock and balls. Avery licked, sucked and kissed his cock with an energy that belied the near-stupor he'd been in just a moment before. He pushed JD's underwear down lower, tucking it beneath his swollen balls. Avery cupped the balls in one hand, while he curled the other around the base of the rock hard shaft. All the while, he licked and sucked in a frenzy of motion, quickly bringing JD to a strong climax.

Avery held on tight as he came, milking the shaft for every drop and sucking it down. Finally he let JD go, but remained kneeling in front of him, his cheek again resting on JD's thigh.

When JD collected himself enough to speak, he said, "Hey. Come on up here beside me." He held out his hands and Avery took them, allowing JD to hoist him up. JD shifted so Avery would have a better spot on the blanket to rest his bare, tender ass. Avery winced as he sat and reached back to rub his behind.

"I told you," JD said with a grin. "You're going to remember that one for a while."

Avery looked embarrassed. They both stared down at his erection. JD brought his hand over Avery's balls and let his fingers move lightly over Avery's shaft, his mouth watering as he watched the pre-cum seep from its tip.

Avery moaned and arched his hips forward. With a laugh, JD dropped his hand, shaking his head. "I think I'll make you wait a bit. You're showing all the signs of a very greedy sub boy," he said in a teasing voice.

JD stood, tucking himself back into his jeans. "Come on back to the house, get cleaned up and eat some supper. Then, if you're very, very good, I might see what I can do about this here," he reached down, delivering a playful smack to Avery's bobbing cock, "uh, situation."

~*~

Avery stood for a long time in the shower, enjoying the water pressure. The shower in his cabin was little more than a dribble in comparison. His ass and thighs stung beneath the hot spray, but for some reason he didn't mind. In fact, he liked it. It was a reminder of the amazing experience he'd had there in the barn.

The fire had shook him up bad. He'd been so wound up he literally couldn't stop, even though he was dog tired. He couldn't remember being so agitated since he used to steal cars with his friends back in high school, taking them for joy rides before leaving

them with empty tanks on some back road to be discovered once the kids were long gone.

They were invariably drunk or high or both when they did it, and goaded each other on in their stupid and dangerous petty crimes. They stole four cars before they got caught, and each time had left him with the jittery, panicked feeling he'd felt during the fire—like his world was spinning out of control.

To bring it back down, he would drink Southern Comfort until he passed out, sometimes awakening in a pool of his own vomit, drained and miserable for days afterward.

Getting caught was probably the best thing that happened to him. He, along with the three other boys involved, was sent to a juvenile detention center. Because he was younger than the other boys, he was placed in a different program.

When he got out, he avoided the two kids still in town—the third, who was really the ringleader of the gang, moved away with his family. That's when Avery had got his first job on a ranch, at the age of sixteen. He was old enough to drop out of high school, and despite his mother's protests, did so. Sometimes he regretted not having his diploma, but from what he could see, it hadn't made that much difference, except to make him feel inferior around guys like JD who had gone on to college.

JD...

His thoughts circled back to the man who had calmed him with a riding crop! What the hell had gone on there? Avery didn't know, but he knew for damn sure he wanted to find out. He had to find out. Unlike booze, which left him hung over and sick, the crop had somehow stroked the edginess right out of him.

At first it hadn't hurt—just a light tap-tap-tapping of leather, but after a while JD began to smack him pretty hard, hard enough to make him jump. Yet he couldn't deny the sting had made his cock hard.

Then it got to be almost too much. He withstood it because he'd taken worse and knew he could do it if he willed himself to take it like a man. And if nothing else, it completely distracted him from the riled-up, edgy feeling he'd been experiencing all day.

There was a moment when JD was focusing on one small spot on his thigh, much more sensitive than his ass—smacking it over and over until it felt like someone was lighting a fire on his skin. He almost balked, but he stuck it out a few more seconds. That's when something completely foreign began to happen. He could feel it, like a physical thing, like someone had pulled a plug inside him and let all the toxins and the pain drain away from him like dirty water out of a tub.

His body actually felt light, like he was going to lift off the ground. He was aware of the crop still smacking his skin. He could tell by the sound of the leather that JD was

still hitting him pretty hard. But he didn't feel the pain any longer. Or rather, he didn't process it as pain.

He realized he was barely breathing at that point, but oxygen seemed unnecessary. All he needed was to keep feeling the steady slap of leather against flesh, as his body melted into the hay bale and his spirit lifted clean out of him.

He wasn't sure how long the sensation lasted, only that he didn't want it to stop. He'd felt as peaceful and easy as an eagle with wings spread wide, soaring against a deep blue sky.

He'd come down slowly, the feeling of peace remaining with him. Though he hadn't been aware how he'd come to be there, he found himself with his head cradled in JD's lap. A kind of wonder fell over him, that this man with his crop had given Avery such an intense experience, something he'd promised, but Avery had dismissed because he didn't understand.

"I wanna understand," he said aloud. "I need to know more." He realized as he said this that JD was the one he wanted to teach him. Okay, so the guy was going to leave in a day or a week or a month. Did anything really exist past today anyway? Was it right to keep JD at arm's length just because there was no promise of tomorrow?

He heard the door open and JD stuck his head in. "Hey you, you're going to melt in there. Come on out and get some supper. It's nearly ten o'clock."

"I'll be right out."

He heard the door close and he stepped out of the shower, reaching for the towel JD had hung for him on the rack, but the rack was empty. "You looking for this?" There stood JD, holding up a large, white towel. Avery stepped into it, feeling happier than he could remember.

While Avery dried himself, JD sat on the closed commode, eyeing him with obvious appreciation. "I already ate supper," he said with a sly grin. "Drop that towel, why don't you, so I can have my dessert?"

Chapter 11

JD was jerked awake by Avery's cry. The room was dark, save for the light of the moon outside the window. In the weeks since the fire, LuAnn had stayed down in Houston, and, while Avery had engaged in sex and BDSM play at the big house, until now he'd always insisted on returning to his own cabin for the night.

Avery was twitching beside him, his face creased as if he were in pain, though his eyes remained closed. JD realized Avery must be dreaming, and from the looks of things, the dream was not a good one. He pulled the sleeping man closer and stroked his face. Avery jerked and tensed, struggling against him.

"Hey, Ave. You're having a bad dream. Wake up."

All at once, Avery sat bolt upright, his eyes flying open. He was breathing hard, staring straight ahead with unseeing eyes.

"You okay?" JD lifted himself on one elbow and lightly touched Avery's shoulder. "It was just a nightmare. Want to talk about it? That usually takes away its hold, don't you think?"

Avery whipped his head toward JD, staring at him as if he had no idea who JD was. Finally he said, "No. No, I don't wanna talk about it. No." JD could feel the tension radiating from him and knew he was still in the grip of whatever dark images had slipped into his dreams.

"That's okay. You don't have to. But you're awake now. You can let it go."

Avery didn't answer. He plucked at the coverlet, fingering it, his face settling into a frown. He muttered something, his voice agitated.

"What?" JD was watching him, concerned.

Avery turned to him, his dark eyes slowly clearing. "My quilt. I'm not used to sleepin' without it. It uh..." he broke off and bit his lower lip, turning away.

Gently JD reached for him. "Hey. What is it? Look at me."

Slowly Avery obeyed, his lower lip still caught in his teeth. JD looked searchingly into Avery's face. "What is it? What about the quilt?"

"It's nothin'. It's stupid."

"No. No, it isn't stupid. Tell me." JD wanted to hug Avery to him. He wanted to stroke his back and murmur that everything was okay, it was just a bad dream, he could go back to sleep, safe in JD's arms. But he understood Avery would not welcome this sort of comfort. While Avery was flourishing with his training as a sub, he was still

very private and careful. He was sensitive about being regarded as a “real man” and not a “sissy boy.” Sensing somehow the quilt played into this notion, JD waited, hoping Avery would confide in him.

After a while, Avery spoke. “My quilt. It’s been in my family for generations. It’s pure Apache, hand-stitched by the women of my grandmother’s tribe. It, well, this is gonna sound crazy, but it keeps bad dreams away. It catches them and keeps them from enterin’ your spirit.”

“It doesn’t sound crazy,” JD said, stroking Avery’s arm. “Maybe we could bring it up to the big house on the nights you stay here. Certainly no harm in it.”

Avery flashed a grateful glance at him. “Yeah. Thanks.” He pushed his hair from his face and rubbed his eyes with his palms. “Listen, I should probably get goin’ —” He looked at the clock radio, and JD followed his gaze. It was just after midnight.

“No!” JD blurted, suddenly aware how very much he wanted Avery to stay. The feeling was new for him. Though he hadn’t minded staying the night with Tommy, or whoever his lover of the moment was, usually once the sex was over, he was ready for sleep. He hadn’t particularly cared if someone was beside him or not.

JD swallowed and took a breath, wondering what was coming over him. It mattered that Avery stay. Not just as a show of trust on Avery’s part, but because JD realized he would be terribly lonely without him there. JD, who had never been lonely in his life, who had told himself he preferred solitude, found himself almost desperate to keep Avery in his bed.

Trying to keep that desperation out of his voice, he said, “Stay. Please? I’ll be your dream catcher. I’ll keep you safe.” He reached for Avery, pulling him into his arms. Avery let himself be held, though JD could feel the tension in his body, like he was ready to bolt the moment JD let go.

He held Avery close, stroking his soft, thick hair. *I’m falling in love.* The words, uninvited and unexpected, slipped into JD’s mind and he knew they were true. They very nearly made their way from his brain to his lips, but he kept his mouth shut, not sure how Avery would greet such news.

After a while Avery relaxed against him. Tenderness washed through JD and he held Avery closer, never wanting to let him go. After several minutes, he felt Avery’s body fully relax against his, and his breathing came slow and deep. He continued to hold him, afraid to move and wake him, afraid if he did awaken, he would leave for sure.

“I think I’m falling in love,” he now dared whisper to the sleeping man, though so quietly even he could barely hear the words. Nevertheless, they echoed in his heart and filled him with a sense of wonderment. He lay awake a long time, stunned at the admission, with very little idea what he was supposed to do about it.

When next JD opened his eyes, rosy dawn light filled the room. He became aware of Avery, still asleep beside him, and his heart gave a triumphant leap. He'd stayed the night!

He put his hand lightly over Avery's erection, which was lifting the covers into a tent over his groin. Hopefully his dreams were good ones, he thought with a smile.

At his touch, Avery shifted and opened his eyes. After a moment, he smiled sleepily at JD. "Hey."

"Hey," JD replied, his cock hardening as he continued to stroke Avery's cock through the covers.

"What time is it? We gotta get up and check the horses."

"Relax, it's early yet. I have something else in mind first. Don't forget your place, boy." The words were calculated to put Avery in a submissive state of mind, and JD could tell by the spark of light that came into Avery's eyes that the words had had their desired effect.

To test his conclusion, he pressed Avery's shoulder and said in a firm voice, "My cock needs attention, boy. You know what to do." Avery licked his lips, his eyes shining. Obediently he slid down beneath the covers, seeking JD's cock with his lips.

JD sighed his pleasure as Avery's warm, wet mouth enveloped his rapidly rising shaft. He let Avery suck him for a while, and then said, "Turn around so I can do you at the same time."

Avery seemed almost reluctant to let go of JD's shaft, even for a moment, but he obeyed, twisting on the bed. JD reached for his hips, burying his face in the heat at Avery's groin. He inhaled the intoxicating sent of Avery's musk, which never failed to make him hard.

Avery began to lick and suck him again, taking JD's shaft deep in his throat. "Yeah," JD moaned. "That's it. You are not to come until I do, got it? You do and I'll make sure you can't sit for a week." The threat wasn't a serious one, as Avery willingly submitted to a spanking, his cock hard as a rock against JD's thigh the whole time he was being disciplined.

Avery answered by sucking furiously, his head bobbing along the length of JD's shaft. JD took Avery's lengthening cock into his own mouth, letting it rest heavy and hot against his tongue. He found and gripped Avery's balls. Avery groaned and JD squeezed his balls harder, which made Avery's shaft all the more rigid in his mouth.

Avery pressed the tip of one finger into JD's ass, sending a shudder of pleasure through him. Though he'd meant to hang on longer, he felt the hot cum moving up from his balls. He came in a series of wracking spasms, somehow managing to keep Avery's cock in his mouth the whole time.

He focused on Avery, taking the length of him deep into his throat, Avery's balls still caught in his fingers. Avery began to buck against him, his body temperature suddenly rising so he felt like a furnace against JD's naked body.

"Please, Sir," Avery gasped, "can I come?"

JD didn't answer for a few seconds, though he was well pleased Avery had remembered to ask. He had taught Avery he must always ask permission for his orgasm. They had begun to work on Avery's orgasm control, or rather his lack of it. Avery came at the drop of a hat. JD was teaching him to delay the immediate gratification, bringing him to the edge again and again before finally allowing him to come.

He loved to look at his boy afterwards, lying limp and covered in sweat, his eyes closed, his mouth slack, a look of exhausted rapture on his handsome face. At those moments, JD understood himself and it frightened him a little. He understood he was falling in love with this man. Falling in love with a Texas ranch hand he was destined to leave.

Avery was shaking with the effort of holding back his climax. Relenting, JD pulled back long enough to say, "Come for me." He sucked Avery's cock back into his mouth, savoring the hot cum that spurted over his tongue like sweet cream.

They lay still a while, resting their faces on each other's thigh. JD drifted near sleep, but came awake when Avery pulled himself away and rolled from the bed.

"I gotta get goin'," Avery announced.

JD smiled indulgently at him, aware he too should be getting up. "Yeah, I know," he grinned. "You've got a ranch to run."

"Yeah," Avery grinned back, and JD's heart swelled with happiness.

~*~

The weeks continued to slip by, and still LuAnn stayed in Houston. She was profuse in her thanks to JD during their weekly phone calls for all he was doing. The property was listed, but so far there had been no offers. Harry Steadman had backed off from his initial interest in buying the place, while waiting for his insurance company to assess the fire damage to his ranch and pay out.

During her absence, LuAnn had essentially abdicated the responsibilities of the ranch to JD. If Avery hadn't been in the mix, JD knew he wouldn't have stayed around. As it was, he found himself paying the bills, scheduling the deliveries, and learning way more about ranch life than he'd ever wanted or planned on.

Charlie's life insurance money had been paid. Once they'd agreed JD would stay on a while longer, LuAnn had offered to pay him a fulltime wage. Instead, he'd convinced her to allow him to hire a real ranch hand until they got the place sold. He left the actual

hiring to Avery, who had got George Harlan to come onboard, even though he'd been warned it was only temporary.

JD oversaw the administrative side of things, in exchange for the free room and board. Though this left him with no cash flow, it had many positive benefits, including making the roles between JD and Avery less blurry. JD was the Dom by night, and Avery, no longer confused by having to order JD around by day, was flourishing as his willing submissive.

In addition, it gave JD time to cook.

Though he hadn't planned it, he had begun to run an informal catering service out of LuAnn's large, well-equipped kitchen. The day after the fire he'd made several batches of sticky cinnamon rolls, which he and Avery later took over to the fire department as a partial thank-you for their hard work. The rolls had been so popular that no less than four of the firefighters had called the house, asking if they could order a batch for home.

A volunteer organization always chronically short of funds, they'd been more than grateful when he'd made ten more batches for their annual fundraiser breakfast the next week. He'd also cooked several simple quiches and egg casseroles, which had all been big hits.

The word spread quickly, with people in the area calling to see if he'd be willing to cook for their party or wedding. Before he knew it, he had an impromptu catering business and a steady, if modest, income. He had even begun to turn away business, there being too much for him to do alone.

Over the weeks, there were a few folks who came by with the realtor to look over the ranch. JD tried to arrange the visits when Avery was on a different part of the property or had gone into town to pick up some things, but the timing never quite worked. The wounded expression on Avery's face when he saw people milling about on what JD knew he regarded as his ranch nearly broke JD's heart.

"What's she askin' for it?" Avery asked one day, over supper.

JD named a figure that included the land and all the horses. Avery gave a low whistle, but then pursed his lips and stared at the ceiling, as if doing mental calculations. "I wonder if she'd agree to a deal. A partnership of some kind. I ain't sure how that stuff works but..."

Curious, JD asked, "What kind of partnership? Did you have someone in mind?"

Avery turned those dark, serious eyes on JD. "Me."

JD laughed, thinking Avery must be making a joke. Avery scowled, his face turning stony, and JD realized, too late, that he wasn't kidding. Gently, he said, "Avery, I know how much you love this place, but get real. It takes money to make that kind of investment. You could never swing it."

Since JD now wrote the paychecks for Avery and George, he knew what he was talking about. Though the job paid better than minimum wage, it wasn't a whole lot better, and certainly not enough to run a ranch, partner or no.

"You don't know everythin', just 'cause you went to fancy schools and think you own this place now."

"Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings." JD reached across the table to put his hand on Avery's, but Avery pulled it away.

"Yeah, well." It seemed as if he wanted to add something, and JD waited. He'd learned with Avery, you needed to give him time. When Avery did finally speak, it was to say, "I'm turnin' in early tonight."

JD didn't try to stop him. Maybe a little space would do them both good.

As he was washing up the supper dishes, he let his mind wander over the month with Avery. The relationship was so different from his usual D/s affair. The men he'd been involved with before Avery were clued in to the scene. They didn't accept each new experience with wonderment and rapture, as Avery did. They took it more as their due.

Yet along with the wide-eyed innocence accompanying Avery's sexual awakening, JD continued to hit the wall of his reserve. Avery still had a chip on his shoulder about JD's position on the ranch, and the crappy hand life had dealt him. Sometimes Avery's resentments and fears would come between them, damaging or at least slowing the developing D/s connection. While Avery was becoming adept at erotic submission in the bedroom, he still held an essential part of himself aloof from JD, keeping him at arm's length about his deepest held feelings. And yet, wasn't JD just as much to blame?

What was missing, though JD himself hadn't yet tried to address it with Avery, was love. Neither man had yet to make that simple declaration to the other. It had been on JD's lips many times, but so far he hadn't found the courage, or was it the stupidity, to admit it.

Because, after all, what was the point? Wasn't it only a matter of time, perhaps a very short time, before the ranch changed hands, putting a serious wrench in whatever it was developing between them? JD knew he would have to resume his "real life", the one he'd trained and sacrificed for all these years. And to do that, he'd need to return to New York.

Where did that leave him with Avery?

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket and JD, after wiping his soapy hands on the dishrag he'd tucked into his jeans, fished it out. It showed a missed call, though it hadn't rung. This seemed to happen pretty often out on the ranch, where cellular service was intermittent at best.

He saw there was a voicemail and pushed the speed dial to call it. It took him a moment to recognize the voice, and it was hard to hear what was being said over background noise he recognized as the clinking of pots and glasses and the shouts of a busy restaurant kitchen.

He focused on the French-accented voice, which he recognized as Phillip Stark, the man who had fired him only weeks before. After boisterous greetings, the man said, "I have it on good authority that there's a position opening up for sous-chef at Le Jardin and I immediately thought of you.

"Andre spoke to Gerard Jacques, the owner, and he's eager to meet you. Once in a lifetime, JD. Call me as soon as you get this. The competition's going to be fierce. I think you should do your chicken velouté sauce for Gerard. This will seduce him into forgetting the rest of the competition, eh?" He laughed, adding in French for JD not to delay.

JD clicked the phone shut, his mind suddenly ablaze. He'd just been offered the chance to interview for a job at the most prestigious French restaurant in Manhattan. If he got it, it would be the coup of a lifetime.

Chapter 12

The sun was setting in a blaze over the trees on the edge of the property. JD and Avery were astride horses, cantering side by side. Avery pulled ahead, urging his horse into a gallop. He loved the feel of the wind in his face and the strong, muscular body of the horse beneath him. When he was on a horse, all his cares fell away. Nothing mattered but the horse, the land and the open sky.

When Avery was only about four, his father had brought him home a belt with a big buckle on which was painted a red winged horse with the word *Mobilgas* beneath it. His dad had explained the horse was called Pegasus, from Greek mythology.

Avery had kept the belt for years, long after he had outgrown wearing it. He loved to stare at the red horse, fantasizing he was riding it, taking off for the sky. He still half-fancied, if he rode fast enough, his horse would somehow sprout wings and off they would soar together, until they were just a speck on the horizon.

As he reached the copse of pines near his cabin, he slowed and wheeled, waiting for JD to catch up. JD had been acting odd all day, and he knew something was up – he just didn't know what.

It had been both the strangest and most wonderful two months of his life. He lived with the constant, gnawing worry about the sale of the ranch, though he tried his best to put it out of his mind from day to day. George, as he'd known he would be, was an excellent addition. He worked as hard as Charlie ever had, and always deferred to Avery's way of doing things. He was quiet, like Avery. He didn't need his hand held to do his work, as JD had. They were a good team and Avery felt as bad for him as for himself that soon they might both be out of a job.

But if the days were anxious, the nights were heaven. Never in his life had he felt so right in his skin. Instead of slinking off to Dallas for less-than-satisfactory sex with near-strangers, he had found a man who completely captivated him.

Each new thing JD introduced him to was more exciting than the last. He'd come to understand his craving for their rough sex play and letting JD take charge wasn't at odds with being manly and strong. He'd embraced the idea that to submit took courage.

He loved the feeling of JD's hard palm on his ass. He almost shook with excitement when JD put his hand on his throat and ordered him to move forward, choking himself against JD's hand.

JD would count, making sure Avery kept his eyes open and fixed on JD's, and he always reminded Avery before the breath play that he could stop at any time just by pulling back. But Avery didn't pull back. He loved the challenge of enduring it as long as he could.

Once, he'd tried to trick JD in actually taking him out, but JD had realized what was going on and let him go, slapping him hard for his disobedience, which only served to make his cock even harder. He knew better than to try something like that again. He had to admit, he loved knowing JD was looking out for him and would never let him come to harm.

Avery had learned to love their bondage play as well. Sometimes JD kept Avery loosely bound for an hour or more, while he took his time, driving Avery to the edge of orgasm over and over, but not quite letting him get there. He would tease, suckle, whip, caress and torment Avery, using his hands, mouth, the riding crop and a leather whip he called a flogger, which he'd picked up in Dallas just for Avery.

Avery would beg to be allowed to come, and JD would say, "No. Not yet. You haven't earned it." He would continue the sexy game until Avery was literally ready to burst and shaking with need.

Though Avery would groan with frustration when denied yet again, in fact he loved what was happening. It satisfied a longing that sprung from somewhere deep in his gut. He didn't have the words for it, but he knew, right down in his bones, that he'd been waiting his whole life for what JD offered.

Nobody had ever looked at him the way JD did. Nobody had ever made him feel so cared for or desired. It was a strange thing, something he still didn't entirely understand but couldn't deny – when JD took him on journeys of sexual suffering, he was there the whole time, holding his hand, leading him deeper into a place that never failed to leave Avery on fire with lust and aching with something more fierce than that – a kind of longing to submit to JD that went way past sex.

Though he'd never thought he needed it, and would have denied it before he met JD, JD took *care* of him. And he couldn't deny it – it felt good. He felt, for the first time in his life, that he was safe.

Was this love? He had no idea, but he knew one thing. He didn't want it to end.

And yet, he knew it *would* end, and sooner rather than later. He knew it wasn't fair to compare, but couldn't help but think every relationship he'd ever had in his life that had mattered had been shattered by loss before its time. His dad, cut down in the prime of his life in a senseless death, his mother, wasting away from cancer when barely fifty, and then Charlie, fit as a fiddle one day, stone cold dead the next.

Not that he was afraid JD would up and die on him. No, he would just leave. The ranch would be sold, and whether or not they kept Avery on, what more would JD

have to do there? Surely he wouldn't stick around deep in the heart of Texas just to be near Avery.

Would he?

Avery shrugged off the thought, telling himself it was ridiculous. And yet...and yet he couldn't shake the feeling that whatever it was they shared was more than just lovers having a kinky time together. He'd caught JD's naked gaze, so hungry, so openly full of...he barely had the nerve to even think the word...*love*.

Was he falling in love with JD Reed? He'd never said those words, not to anybody. JD was the first and only man who had penetrated the wall built solidly around Avery's heart. He hadn't even known the wall was there, until JD started taking it down, brick by brick. Could he find a way to build the wall again before JD smashed his heart flatter than a hotcake?

JD rode up beside him. "This is perfect. Let's stop here and rest a while by the creek. Let the horses drink if they want." They dismounted and JD spread a blanket he'd brought along over a relatively smooth patch of grass beneath the pines.

Avery knew something was up. Had the last folks to come by the ranch made an offer? Was this the beginning of the end? He tried not to anticipate, instead just leaning back against the trunk of a tree and closing his eyes.

"I've got something to say, Avery."

"I know."

JD drew in a deep breath and blew it out. Avery felt his gut clench, but he didn't move. "I got a phone call last night. From New York. I have a chance at an incredible job at the most prestigious French restaurant in the city. If I can work there for a couple of years, I'll be able to write my own ticket."

Avery remained still, though the blood was roaring in his head, his heart smashing painfully against his ribs. *Of course*. JD was leaving. So it had come sooner rather than later, but then, he'd always known it was just a matter of time. Avery forced himself to breathe deeply through his nostrils, not betraying any of the anguish rising inside him at the loss of the man he'd never told he loved.

In what he hoped was a calm, neutral voice, he offered, "New York? You're leavin', huh? Well, good luck and all that." He actually felt his heart contract – maybe the bricks were going up again, and that was a good thing. Too much feeling only meant too much heartache.

He tried to imagine life as it had been before JD had burst into his world. The solitary nights in his cabin, the occasional trips to Dallas for random sex that half the time left him lonelier than when he'd started. He'd thought he was content. He told himself the horses were all he needed – that people were overrated. Until JD had come along, he'd believed it.

Would he be able to go back to that life, once JD was gone? Would he be able to find a man like JD—someone who understood his deep-seated need to submit, but still left him the space to be himself when he needed it?

“Hey. Hey, Avery.” He felt JD’s warm breath on his cheek, but he didn’t open his eyes. He couldn’t. He’d been turned into stone by JD’s declaration that he was leaving. He felt JD’s fingers chucking his chin, lifting his face. Stubbornly, he kept his eyes closed.

“Stop that, Ave. Look at me. I’m *not* leaving you. Not for good. But I *have* to check this out, don’t you see? It’s what I’ve been working toward my whole life. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t at least see what they’re offering.” He paused, perhaps waiting for Avery to respond, but Avery said nothing.

JD continued. “I might not get the job. I’m not even sure I want it.”

Avery opened his eyes. He couldn’t quite bring himself to look into JD’s face and focused instead on a point just past JD’s shoulder. He heard his own voice as if from a distance. “But if you do get it...?”

JD leaned forward, putting his hand on Avery’s thigh. “You could come with me! Have you ever thought of leaving Texas? There’s a whole big world out there, Avery. A world we could explore together. You could come up to New York with me. I’m not saying forever, but if it meant we could stay together?”

“Leave Texas?” Avery had never been out of the state, nor had he ever had a particular desire to do so. Until this moment, the Lone Star State had always been plenty big enough for him.

JD spoke quietly, but Avery could feel the intensity beneath his words. “Think about it, Ave. LuAnn is selling this place out from under you. What’s left for you here? I’m not talking about leaving Texas forever. Think of it as more of an extended vacation. I’m willing to bet you’ve never had one of those in your life.”

He began to speak faster, urging Avery with his tone to agree. “You’d be with me. We could go to the BDSM underground clubs in the city. You’ll see some things that make your eyes pop out of your head. It’s fun, as long as you recognize most of it is just games.

“Imagine what it would be like, not having to hide the fact we’re gay. Not to mention the time we’d have to really explore our partnership as Dom and sub. We’re just getting started, you know. And with both of us so busy and having to keep things secret, I’ve never really taken you where I know you can go. I want it all with you, Avery. Not just the sex and the D/s play, but a real relationship.”

Avery shook his head. What JD was offering sounded like a fairy tale, and fairy tales, at least in Avery’s experience, didn’t have happy endings. “You’re askin’ me to give up my life here and traipse off with you to New York City? What would I do up

there? All I know is horses. I ain't even got a high school diploma. I'd be dependent on you. I ain't never even lived with a guy, much less moved across the country to be with him."

JD moved closer, taking Avery's face between his hands. He kissed him, slow and deep, sucking the breath from Avery's body, sending the blood rushing to his cock. When he finally let Avery go, JD said, "You belong to me, Avery Dalton. Now that I've found you, I don't ever want to let you go. Say you'll come with me."

Avery's heart was pounding, his cock throbbing. He could feel JD's will, dragging him forward like a hesitant colt on a rope. Still he didn't respond. He needed something else. He didn't know what, but he needed more than the promise of adventure to turn his life on its head for another man.

JD kissed him again, this time gently, his tongue lightly probing Avery's mouth, his fingers moving in Avery's hair. He pulled back and leaned close to Avery's ear. "There's something else, Ave. Something I've been meaning to say."

Avery waited.

"I love you," JD whispered. "For the first time in my life, I've found somebody to love."

~*~

JD stared out the jet window at the soft, fluffy blanket of clouds beneath him and sighed. Instead of elation at the chance to work for a master chef, he half-wished he'd stayed back at the ranch so he wouldn't be faced with this decision.

The interview had gone very well. Mr. Jacques had been impressed with JD's expertise in the kitchen, but had been especially pleased when he'd made a joke in French to his assistant, and JD had not only understood, but replied appropriately in the language. It was that, he thought, more than his skill in preparing complex sauces, which had sealed the deal.

He'd been made an offer to start as sous-chef in two weeks time, at a salary four times what he'd been earning before, plus full benefits. The offer was almost too good to be true. Once upon a time he would have seen no downside.

Before he'd come down to the Circle R, he thought nothing of working at the furious pace that Paris and Manhattan weekend diners demanded, starting at noon and not stopping until midnight. He hadn't minded returning home to some impersonal efficiency apartment to crash. He had been content to cruise the underground clubs for submissive men to play with. And though he'd enjoyed the occasional longer-term affair, as with Tommy, it had always come to end, either with a bang or a whimper.

If he took the job, if he left Texas, would it be alone? Could he just slip back into that old life? Would he ever be able to let Avery go in his heart?

Avery hadn't yet said for sure he would go, but JD sensed if he continued to press, Avery would say yes. Though this should have made him happy, strangely it only made him more conflicted and confused. Was it fair to ask Avery to give up the life he knew, to move across the country with no job and no prospects, just because JD had finally found the guts to admit he loved him?

They hadn't spoken since he'd left for New York. He'd called a couple of times, but had only gotten Avery's voicemail. Actually, it was still Uncle Charlie's voice on the phone, which had been an eerie kind of shock, the first time he'd heard it. He shook his head indulgently, aware Avery didn't take kindly to technology. He'd never even owned a computer.

He closed his eyes, seeing Avery sitting tall on his horse, galloping against the backdrop of the wide-open Texas plains. Avery could spend hours out riding, and then another hour grooming and cleaning the animal with such patience and care, no matter how tired he was. In those moments JD got a glimpse of what true contentment was. Maybe, he thought, he could learn a lot more from Avery than just how to clean horse hooves.

~*~

LuAnn met JD at the airport. She'd called to let him know she had returned to the ranch to settle things up. "I got good news. I have a buyer for the ranch."

JD's stomach lurched at the news. "That was fast. I only just left two days ago. Was it that company that buys up ranches and merges them?"

"Yeah. They made an offer. They're going to shut down the Circle R." LuAnn voice caught for a moment, but she made a determined face and plowed on. "They'll take the horses and equipment and lease the land to a hay farmer or some such until they decide to sell it outright."

"And the price is good?"

LuAnn's face clouded. "Not so good. But in this economy..." she trailed off. "I just want to be done with it. I can use the proceeds to live off of. My son-in-law is building me a cottage behind their house. It's going to be perfect."

"Have you told Avery?" Was this why he hadn't returned JD's calls?

"Not yet. I was, um...I was hoping maybe you would? I mean, it's not like he didn't know it was coming but..."

"What about his cabin? That's his home."

"That cabin's part of the property, JD. Charlie let Avery live in it, but that don't make it his." LuAnn shrugged, though she looked miserable. "Avery's a grown man. He'll look after himself, don't worry."

JD absorbed this, dreading the look on Avery's face when he broke the news. Still, it was better he told him than LuAnn. Though he knew the news would give him more leverage in getting Avery to come up to New York with him, he found himself terribly sad at the thought that soon the Circle R would be no more.

What had it taken for LuAnn to let the family's legacy slip away? "If you don't mind my asking, what was the final price?"

When she told him, JD's jaw dropped. "Aunt LuAnn, are you sure that's what you want to do? That's less than half the value."

"He's going to pay cash. I want to move on. I'm really happy down in Houston."

JD tried to get his mind around the idea of the Circle R, gone forever. Somehow he'd imagined it would always be there, even if it changed hands. The thought they were going to close it down completely hadn't entered his mind.

One thing he knew — he had to tell Avery. He owed him that much, and more.

Chapter 13

Avery tried to make his face muscles work. Though he'd known it was only a matter of time, the news hit him like a Texas tornado.

"She's really sellin'?" he finally managed to croak.

They were sitting in Avery's cabin, side by side on the old sofa. The day's work was done, and George had gone to Sweeney's Tavern in town, where he spent most of his time, drinking away his sorrows when he was unemployed, and drinking to his and everyone else's health when he was working. He'd invited Avery along while JD had been out of town, but Avery had declined, preferring the solitude of his cabin and the company of the rushing creek and the night creatures singing their lullabies.

JD had called a couple of times while up in New York, and Avery had purposely not answered. He'd decided to use the two days apart to take stock of his life and himself. He needed that space to decide what he really wanted.

I love you.

Those three simple words, words that were thrown around by so many folks as casually as if they were saying hello, had stopped Avery dead in his tracks when coming from JD Reed. He hadn't responded in kind, so dumbstruck by the declaration he'd lost the ability to speak.

But was love enough? And did love mean the same thing to JD as it did to him? He was still wrestling with the whole idea of love, and the part he wanted it to play in his life. While it felt wonderful to be in love, if that's what was happening between the two of them, it was also scary as hell. Because where there was love, there was invariably loss.

The thing was, when he was with JD, the draw of the man was so powerful that he felt himself falling under a kind of spell, just from the way JD looked at him. When JD commanded him in that deep, sexy voice to do something, Avery not only wanted to obey, he ached to—he longed to, with every fiber of his being.

He hadn't known he was submissive until he'd met JD. He hadn't even known what the word meant, at least in the way JD used it. But JD had shown him a whole new way of experiencing things. He knew, even if JD didn't figure into his life, there was no way he could go back to the casual, empty sex he'd enjoyed before.

But love...Did he love JD? Did he love him enough to leave everything he knew just to be with him?

"She hasn't closed the deal," JD said, "but she's definitely considering it. Thing is, this company doesn't want the ranch."

"What? Don't want the ranch? I don't understand."

"They want the horses and the equipment, but they're going to lease the property."

"Wait, what?" Avery repeated stupidly. He couldn't understand what JD was saying. There had always been a Circle R Ranch. Even if he left and moved to New York, the ranch would remain behind, a steadfast reminder of the life he could return to if and when he chose.

JD nodded, looking grave. "Between you and me, it's not the best deal for my aunt, but she seems pretty set on accepting the offer. She says she just wants out of it."

"No. No, she can't..." Avery felt the room closing in on him. He stood abruptly. "I need some air." Blindly he stumbled from the cabin. Without a clear idea of where he was going, he climbed into his truck. He turned the key in the ignition and the engine grumbled to a start. JD hadn't followed him out and he was glad of it. He didn't want JD to see the hot tears that had sprung to his eyes.

He headed down the dirt road, aware now he was going to the stables. He parked the truck on the road and climbed out. Opening the paddock gate, he left it ajar. The horses were quiet, though they stirred in muted greeting as he entered the stable. He made a detour to the tack room, where he grabbed Kassie's bridle.

He stopped at Macy's stall, looking in on the mother and colt. Smokey's coat was coming in sleek and gray, with swirls of white. He was aptly named. Avery realized with a jolt of anguish he would never see this fine colt grown into a stallion. What would happen to Smokey and the others? Would they get proper care and exercise, or would they be shoved in with a bunch of strange horses in crowded, dirty stalls? Had LuAnn even checked out where these poor horses were to be shipped off to? Or was her sole focus the damn money?

Anger felt better than helpless sorrow, and he let it surge through him. Heading to the last stall, he gazed at Kassie, admiring her white coat shining silver in the moonlight. His anger ebbed away at the sight of the beautiful mare. Entering Kassie's stall, Avery murmured, "Hey there, Kass. Wanna go for a ride?" As if answering, Kassie bent down, nuzzling his cheek with her velvet nose.

Avery slipped the bridle over her head, using his right arm on her neck to keep her head steady while holding her chin in his left hand. Gently he pressed the bar of the bit against her teeth and Kassie accepted it without fuss.

He led her past the other stalls and out into the night. She stood patiently as he grabbed a fistful of her mane near the base of her neck and pulled himself up, swinging his leg over her back. He hugged her powerful flanks with his thighs. It had been a long time since he'd ridden bareback and it felt good.

Together they moved out of the paddock, settling into an easy trot along the deserted dirt road that edged the property. For a while Avery didn't think at all. He let himself be lulled by the rhythm of Kassie's gait and her warm, quiet company.

But eventually his mind switched back on, with images of his beloved horses crammed in amongst strange animals in some dank stable. He could see himself, stuck in some tiny New York apartment, waiting for JD to come home, feeling trapped and isolated with nothing to call his own but the new love he felt for a man he'd only known a few months.

"I can't do it," he said aloud.

And then the thought of a span of empty, yawning days, days without JD's friendly, easy smile at the end of them, without the hot, sexy games they played, without his sweet caress in the night... Could he face a life without JD in it? Did he want to?

He wrestled with his thoughts, riding far down the road as he did so, Kassie content to amble at her own pace, Avery letting her lead. At length he turned back. The moon had set but there was enough light from the twinkling stars to guide him, and Kassie knew the way.

Once back in the paddock, he dismounted and looped Kassie's reins to a fencepost. Retrieving a brush and a towel, he wiped her down and brushed her coat smooth. "Thanks for the ride, Kass. You're the best. I'm gonna miss you. All of you..."

His voice cracked and he choked back the tears he could feel welling in his throat. Silently he admonished himself to stop acting like a damn kid.

"Maybe it doesn't have to be that way."

Avery swung around at the sound of JD's voice. He hadn't seen him when he'd entered the paddock, but there he stood, leaning against the old barn, one booted foot up against it for support. "Hey," he said by way of greeting, embarrassed to have been overheard.

"Hey back. I was waiting for you, Ave. We need to talk."

"Yeah. Look, if it's about New York —"

"No. It's about the Circle R. It's about us." JD moved closer. "I don't think I really understood until tonight just how much this place means to you. Your face when I told you she was selling," JD shook his head. "It was like I'd told you that you had one month to live."

Avery, embarrassed, started to protest, but JD cut him off with a raised hand. "No, please. Just hear me out. You made me realize something important tonight, Avery. Not everything is about money and fame. Me working in some damn restaurant is nowhere near as important as continuing to run this ranch and give these horses and us a real home.

"I want to be with you, yes. But not at the cost of pulling you away from everything that matters to you. I can make a life here, too. I've got the catering business – or I could have, if I put some time and effort into it. But more important, way more important, I've got you. I want to keep you, Avery. But only if you're happy to be kept. I realize now dragging you off to the city would be like taking Kassie here and locking her in a cell."

He waved toward the horse standing patiently between them. "You need the open spaces and the Texas sky. It's in your blood, same as mine. I thought I didn't need it till I came back here. I've never been so happy. I don't want to lose that."

Avery said nothing, trying to absorb what JD was saying. He replayed JD's words in his head, trying to find something to latch onto, trying to get what JD really meant. Eventually he said, "Us? You said somethin' 'bout *us* continuin' to run this ranch. But ain't she already sold it out from under us?"

"No, no, that's what I was trying to say back at the cabin. It's not a done deal. Not yet. And frankly the guy is ripping her off, in my estimation. Listen, I've got some savings. Not a million dollars, but what I've got, I'm willing to put forward to try to make some kind of deal with my aunt. All we really need to do is get that mortgage refinanced, or continue the payments on the existing mortgage if it came to that. If we could work something out, something that would give LuAnn the income she needs, while allowing the ranch to stay in the family, I'm hoping she'll at least listen to the idea."

Now Avery was truly stunned into speechlessness. JD was willing to give up his chance at his fancy New York dreams? He was willing to sink his savings into buying the ranch? Was Avery really hearing this correctly? "You'd...you'd do all that for me?"

"For us. For us, Avery. I want a life with you, right here at the Circle R. You run the ranch, I'll open *Circle R Catering* and run it right from LuAnn's kitchen, same as I'm doing now, only I'll get some help and do it right."

He came closer, leaning up against the fence where Avery stood patting Kassie's nose. "Only thing is, I'm not sure she'll go for it. I'm not sure I have enough to make it worth her while. But I might be able to borrow more from my parents –"

Avery cut him off. "I got money."

"Huh?"

"I got money put away. I've been savin' a long time."

JD laughed softly and shook his head. "We're talking serious cash here, Ave, not some piggy bank –"

Trying not to take offense, but failing, Avery snapped, "I've been workin' since I was sixteen. I never had many expenses, and for the past three years I've had next to none, what with my cabin free and all. On top of that, when my mama died, there was a

small life insurance policy. I ain't never spent a penny of it. Wanna come see just what I got? Then you can decide if it's piggy bank stuff or somethin' to be reckoned with."

JD nodded, looking sober. "Okay. You got a bank account?"

"Nope. It's under my bed."

"Excuse me?"

"I don't need no bank. I keep my cash under the bed in a shoebox."

JD laughed, but his eyes were twinkling and Avery found it impossible to stay angry, especially when JD caught him in a bear hug and kissed him on the lips. "You are full of surprises, Avery Dalton. Okay, then! Show me this secret cache of wealth you've got hiding under your bed."

After settling Kassie back in her stall, they drove together back to the cabin. JD waited downstairs while Avery climbed up to his loft and returned a moment later with a Stetson boot box. He sat down next to JD on the couch, setting the box between them.

JD stared down at the box and looked up at Avery with a question in his eyes. "Go on." Avery gestured toward it with his chin. "Open it."

JD obeyed, lifting the lid. Inside were stacks and stacks of bills – the box was nearly full. The bills on top were mostly fifties and twenties, with a few hundred dollar bills topping some of the neatly rubber-banded stacks.

JD mouth dropped open. "Holy shit, this is serious money. Did you rob a bank or something?"

Avery grinned, pleased and somewhat mollified. *Piggy bank, my ass*, he thought, though aloud all he was said, "It's enough, I'm willin' to wager. What's that they say – money talks? Let's go talk some sense into that aunt of yours."

~*~

The next morning at breakfast, JD waited until Aunt LuAnn was on her second cup of coffee. Avery and he, too excited by the prospect of what they were contemplating to sleep, had stayed up until nearly dawn, talking through their ideas on how to structure a deal that would convince his aunt to sell to them, rather than some stranger.

JD had been surprised by Avery's natural business acumen and ideas on how to run the ranch more efficiently. Having spent the past few months basically handling the books, JD had developed a rudimentary familiarity with the business, which from what he could see, basically broke even. Avery had ideas that, if they worked, would soon have the place turning a profit.

"How come you never shared with Charlie? These are some good ideas, Ave."

Avery shrugged. "I never finished high school. Figured I didn't know enough to offer an opinion."

"Yeah, well, you know a hell of lot. You're *smart*, Avery. The kind of smart that book learning has nothing to do with."

"Yeah?" Avery smiled tentatively, his eyes lighting with happiness that made JD's heart surge with tenderness.

"Yeah," he affirmed.

Together they figured out roughly what the horses, equipment and property were worth, based on the price the realtors had listed the ranch for, as well as Avery's extensive knowledge on the cost of procuring and caring for the horses. There was a balance on the mortgage, which LuAnn wanted paid off.

If they pooled their money, they could not only pay it off, but have some leftover. They would ask LuAnn to make them a loan for the remaining fair market value of the ranch, which was quite a bit more than she stood to make from the present deal on the table, and to make the deal even sweeter, they would pay her extra based on any profit they made as a result of Avery's ideas. They discussed it from every which angle, and couldn't see any downside, either for themselves or LuAnn.

They had gone over the numbers a dozen times, leaning their heads close together over Avery's tiny kitchen table, talking and laughing excitedly like the best of friends. JD realized midway through it that he'd never really had a friend who was also his lover before. It was mildly surprising to admit to himself that he'd never especially liked most of the men he'd dominated over the years, though he'd liked what they offered him.

With Avery it was different. He not only loved his Texas cowboy, he liked him too.

Now he watched his aunt, who, perhaps feeling his eyes on her, looked up. "What is it, JD? You've been nervous as a cat all morning."

"I've been thinking," JD said slowly. "'About the Circle R and how long it's been in the Reed family –"

"Now don't you start, James Darren Reed! You know I feel just *awful* about selling, but I got my own life to live! I want out from under this place." LuAnn's eyes filled with tears, her mouth twisting in anger and frustration. "It's not like you're stepping up to take over. If you're so damned worried about losing the place, why're you flying off to New York for your fancy interviews?"

Her face reddened with indignant outrage, but JD headed her off at the pass. Patting her arm, he interjected, "You're absolutely right, Aunt LuAnn. Here I've been getting on your case for letting the place go, without trying to come up with a way to keep it in the family."

"Here I am, forced to take an offer that you said yourself was less than..." LuAnn snapped her mouth shut, apparently just processing what JD had said. "What? What're you talking about, JD? You got something to say?"

JD smiled and pulled the now much-wrinkled paper from his pocket that Avery and he had spent hours pouring over the night before. He smoothed the page flat beside his plate and then reached beneath the table for the Stetson boot box, which he set carefully beside the loose leaf page. Lifting off its lid, he looked over at his aunt, whose attention was fixed on the contents of the box, her mouth dropping into a perfect O.

“Avery and I have been talking,” he began.

Chapter 14

Nothing was different, and yet everything was different. Avery Thomas Dalton, at the age of twenty-six years old and from the sweat of his own brow, was half-owner of the Circle R Ranch. They'd been working it for two months since the deal had closed, and some of his ideas for improvements were already making a difference.

He was still doing the same job, but it had taken on a whole new significance. For the first time in his life, he didn't feel less than those around him. He held his head high. No, he hadn't finished school, but maybe JD was right—you didn't necessarily have to have book learning to make something of yourself. Sometimes hard work and good luck were enough.

As a surprise, JD had had a special deed drawn up, breaking out the cabin and the surrounding acre of land from the rest of the ranch, listing Avery as the sole owner. This, even more than his willingness to cast in his lot on the ranch, had convinced Avery of JD's commitment.

JD had taken over the big house, adapting the kitchen for his catering business. He'd taken the necessary steps to get the right permits and permissions to run a food business from the ranch, and even had a fancy painted sign hung over the back door that read: *Circle R Catering*.

He had hired a part-time assistant, and if business continued to pick up as it was doing, was talking of making her fulltime, especially as Thanksgiving was coming, and the orders for JD's full Thanksgiving meals were coming fast and furious. He was even getting orders from as far away as Dallas for his chocolate pecan pie and his cheesecakes. There was talk of maybe doing something online, though all of this was foreign to Avery, who continued to focus on the real business of running a horse ranch. He too, was looking at possibly hiring another hand, probably in the spring.

Avery preferred to stay at his cabin during the week, and JD didn't press him, though Avery knew he had wanted him to move in fulltime. Avery wasn't ashamed of their relationship, but he liked his solitude. He loved his quiet, special place. Not only that, when he stayed with JD, they didn't seem to get much sleep!

Tonight, however, was Saturday, and JD had cooked a nice supper. They were sitting out on the wraparound porch, enjoying the cool October air. "Package came for you today, Ave."

"Oh, good. Is it the new ranch supply catalog? There's some groomin' products I've been wantin' to look at." Avery had found, to his surprise, that he enjoyed being more

involved in the business end of the ranch than he'd expected to. While the horses remained his first love, he took real pride in running the place, and was always looking for ways to make it better.

For the first time in his life he felt equal to anyone — high school diploma or not, and JD encouraged him in this. He often told Avery how proud he was of him, and how proud he was to be his partner. Avery knew the praise wasn't empty, and he soaked it up like a cactus in the desert.

The odd thing, or the great thing, he guessed, was that as he became stronger and more confident in himself, he was actually a better submissive to JD. He had more courage to experience new things, and found a deep kind of peace in giving himself completely to a lover who so obviously cherished him and what he called Avery's "gift of submission."

JD offered a sly grin in response to Avery's request for the catalog. Reaching beneath his rocking chair, JD pulled out a long, slender package. "This isn't business." He held out the package. Curious, Avery took it and pulled off the wrapper.

Inside was something that looked like a keychain, with a silver clip at the end that held a dozen or so strands of thin leather, knotted at the clip and hanging free below it, all about six inches in length.

"Know what that is?" JD asked softly. Though Avery had some idea, he shook his head. "It's a cock whip. Packs a nice sting. I plan to use it on you tonight."

Avery gulped, his cock perking to attention as the mood shifted between them. Whenever JD switched from best friend and lover to Dom, Avery responded instantly, a sensual, submissive mood settling over him like cloak.

JD stood. "Come on inside. I've been waiting all week for this. We're going to try something new."

Avery followed JD up to the master bedroom, which he'd made his own. He pointed to a thick throw rug that lay beside the bed. "Take off those things and kneel up like I taught you."

Avery stripped, his cock springing from its confines as he knelt on the floor in front of his lover, his arms locked behind his back, his chest thrust proudly forward. He was shaved now, his pubic area smooth as a babe's. At first this had left him feeling somewhat vulnerable, but at the same time it turned him on. JD said he liked it because it left him more accessible.

JD sat on the bed and reached into the nightstand. "Look what I got." JD held up a coil of clothesline. "Know what this is for?"

Avery shook his head again and JD smiled a slow, cruel smile. "I want to truss up your cock and balls. That suit you, boy?" Avery swallowed, aware of the heat creeping up his neck, even as his cock hardened in anticipation.

"I asked you a question. Answer me." JD snapped, though his eyes were dancing.

"Yes, Sir," Avery whispered.

"Good." JD moved to stand beside him. "I thought it would. Stand up." Avery stood and JD wound the thin rope in a figure eight around his balls, forcing them apart. He didn't bind them so tight as to hurt, but Avery was definitely aware of the rope. JD continued to wind it around the base of Avery's shaft, which jutted forward, already turning red from the captured blood flow. Pulling his pocket knife from his jeans, he cut off the excess rope and tied the remaining end off in a slip knot.

Avery's balls were throbbing in their rope prison, his cock straining hard, a drop of pre-cum at its tip. JD drew the leather over his tethered cock and balls. At first it was more of a caress than a sting, but then, with a flick of his wrist, JD caught Avery's bobbing shaft with the tips of the whip.

Avery gasped involuntarily at the sting. The rope must have made his cock more sensitive, the nerve endings engorged with blood as they were. "Take it for me, for us," JD urged, catching Avery's bound cock several more times in rapid succession.

"Ah!" Avery cried, averting his body.

"Don't turn away," JD ordered. "Don't focus on the pain. Focus on where it takes you. Breathe." Avery tried to take a deep breath, but instead managed only a hiccupped series of gulps.

"Better," JD said, stroking his cheek a moment. "You ready for me to continue?"

Avery's cock was on fire but he couldn't deny that the heat wasn't just from the sting of the lash. As it always did, the pain was edging its way into pleasure, same as if that snake tattoo had come alive and was slithering its way along his body, headed straight for his cock.

"Yes," he murmured.

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Sir. Please, sir."

"Good boy." JD struck him again, the tips of leather curling around the shaft like a dozen stinging bees. Avery closed his eyes, trying to breathe deep, trying to flow with the pain.

After one particularly cruel stroke, he opened his mouth and eyes at the same time, his safeword, *Smokey*, rising to his lips. But before he formed the word, JD had dropped the whip. Leaning forward, he took the tortured member between his lips and slid forward, soothing it with his warm, wet tongue.

While JD kissed and suckled Avery's stinging shaft, he also unwound the twine, replacing its biting grip with a gentle caress. Avery moaned, grabbing JD's shoulders for support.

JD pulled away and sat back, shaking his head. "Oops. You came out of position without permission. And you had been doing *so* well. I was going to let you come as a reward but now..." He shook his head again and Avery nearly yelled in frustration. He'd been maybe five seconds away from coming.

JD waited a beat and then laughed. "Damn, boy. I can't resist that puppy dog look. We'll let it slide, just this once. Come for me. You've earned it."

Avery wasted no time obeying.

Later that night, several hours after they'd gone to sleep in JD's huge bed, the dream catching quilt tucked over them, Avery awoke. He lay quiet a while, just enjoying the stillness of the night, and warmth of his lover sleeping beside him.

Reaching over, he pulled the covers off JD's naked form and ran his hand lightly over JD's back, moving down to the curve of his ass. JD offered a sleepy sigh, but otherwise didn't move.

Avery continued to stroke his skin, slowly increasing the pressure until he was kneading the firm muscle. He hoisted himself up and straddled JD's thighs, continuing his massage with a growing boldness.

His cock had hardened from touching the sleeping man, and he stopped the massage a moment to stroke his own shaft. A sly idea entered his head and once there, he couldn't shake it.

Reaching for the tube of lubricant they always kept handy, he squirted some on his fingers and carefully eased the tip of one into JD's tight entrance. JD didn't react, which gave Avery the courage to slip in a second finger. He eased them in and out, feeling JD's body relax and open to his touch.

Moving carefully, he lifted himself from JD's legs and lay down beside him. Gently, he pulled the sleeping man over until they were in a spooning position, Avery behind JD. He squeezed another bit of lubricant on his fingers and smeared it over the head of his cock.

His heart was beating fast. It wasn't that he'd never penetrated JD — JD liked to receive almost as much as he liked to give — but this was the first time Avery had dared to do it without JD's express consent and direction.

Carefully he nudged the head of his cock between JD's ass cheeks. JD's body was warm and relaxed against Avery's. Avery pushed gently, popping the head of his cock past the ring of muscle. He stayed still a while, savoring the tight grip of JD's ass.

Avery could tell JD was awake now, his body no longer limp, his breath coming more rapidly. Would he be mad at what Avery had dared without permission? As if in silent answer, JD pushed back against Avery's cock, forcing it deeper into his ass. He offered a low, sexy moan that gave Avery the encouragement he needed to push forward a little more, so that nearly half his shaft was buried.

He nestled his face in the crook between JD's shoulder and head, lightly biting JD's neck as he reached around to find JD's cock. Already half-hard, it quickly turned to steel in his grip. He withdrew his hand and spit on his fingers, returning it to catch JD's rigid shaft in his fist.

Avery began to ease himself in and out of the tight, hot hold of JD's ass, grunting with each hot thrust. He moved faster, his balls tightening and his cock fairly aching with pleasure. After a time he forced himself to slow down – this was for JD.

Usually JD was the one taking Avery to the edge of incredible pleasure and sensual pain, combining the two in such a way Avery was left completely spent and satisfied at the end of their play in a way he'd never been with any other man.

Now was his chance to return the favor, at least in some small measure. He pumped JD's shaft, pulling it taut and then easing the pressure. As he stroked his lover, he continued to move inside him, swiveling with long, deep thrusts in the tight glove of JD's ass.

"Oh," JD moaned, his body suddenly stiffening against Avery's. "Jesus. Yes. Oh..." He held the syllable while Avery continued to thrust and stroke. He felt the warm, wet spurt of JD's cum against his fingers and slid his thumb over the head, causing JD to shudder and thrust back hard against him.

When JD's body finally eased, Avery let JD's shaft go. He wrapped his arms around his lover, his cock still buried inside him. Though his lust burned brighter than a Texas wildfire, he was content just to hold his lover, to let him fall asleep, warm and safe in his arms.

"Come for me," JD murmured.

"Oh, no, it's okay, this was for you –" Avery began, but JD cut him off.

"I said, come for me. For *me*. It's what I want."

"Yes, Sir." Avery didn't need to be told twice, his body arching into movement before he could stop it. A sudden fierce wave of lust overrode him, making him forget everything except how good it felt to be inside the man he loved. He pounded hard into JD's ass, but JD only pushed back, urging him on.

"Yes, do it. Do it for me."

Avery came hard, possibly harder than he ever had in his life. He kept his arms around JD, as if holding on to a lifeline, as if he would slip away into nothing if he let go. He could feel their hearts beating, but he couldn't tell whose was whose, as he drifted into a dreamless sleep.

~*~

The house was filled with the delicious smells of roasting turkey and cinnamon apple pie. LuAnn and her family sat in the parlor, along with a rather shy but nicely

cleaned up George Harlan and Harold Baxter, the husband of Sue Ellen, JD's new fulltime assistant.

JD and Sue Ellen were attending to last minute details in the kitchen and soon they would all sit down to share in the Thanksgiving meal. The long table in the dining room was set, and everything was nearly ready. They were just waiting on Avery, who was still down at the stables checking in on Star, their newest addition, who was suffering from colic.

"I think I got this under control," JD said to Sue Ellen. "Why don't you go on in and visit with the guests, and I'll just finish these mashed potatoes. Avery should be here any minute and we can get started."

After Sue Ellen left, JD took out the pies to cool. He was just opening a bottle of wine when the back door opened and in strode Avery, wearing a dark blue denim shirt and freshly washed jeans. He was wearing the new cowboy boots JD had bought him for his birthday and he looked every bit the handsome Texas cowboy.

"How's that filly? She doing better?" JD asked, wiping his hands on his apron before pulling it off.

"Yeah. She's settled down. George's niece gave her too many apple pieces, I think, when she was visitin' earlier today. Boy, it smells good in here!" He rubbed his hands together. "I'm starvin'. When do we eat?"

"We were just waiting on you, Ave." Avery moved toward him, tilting his face up for a kiss. JD leaned down, catching his lover in a tight embrace as they kissed. Let someone walk in—JD was proud to be Avery's lover and didn't care who knew it.

As they stepped apart, Avery looked solemn.

"What? What is it?"

"You. Us. I don't know..." He paused and JD waited, aware Avery liked time to formulate his thoughts. Avery put his hand on JD's arm, his eyes warm. "I belong to you, JD. I never belonged to nobody before. It feels darn good."

JD smiled. "You know something? When you surrendered your trust and your heart to me, you gave me more than I ever could imagine possible." He shook his head, nearly overcome with amazement. "I've been searching for years, Avery, without knowing what it was I was looking for. I spent my whole life running after some dream, never realizing my heart was right here in Texas, waiting for you to find it." He lifted a hand, stroking Avery's cheek. "I belong to you, too."

Avery looked at him with shining eyes. "We sure got a lot to be thankful for, don't we, JD?"

JD smiled big, his heart nearly bursting with love and gratitude. "We sure do, Ave. We sure do."

**Also Available in both ebook and paperback
at Romance Unbound Publishing
(<http://romanceunbound.com>)**

Cast a Lover's Spell
Sarah's Awakening
Wicked Hearts
Submission Times Two
Confessions of a Submissive
A Princely Gift
Accidental Slave
Slave Girl
Lara's Submission

Available in Paperback on Amazon.com

Slave Jade
Obsession
Golden Angel: Unwilling Sex Slave

Connect with Claire Thompson

~

<http://clairethompson.net>
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/clairethompson>
<http://twitter.com/CThompsonAuthor>
<http://clairethompsonauthor.blogspot.com>
<http://romanceunbound.com>

~