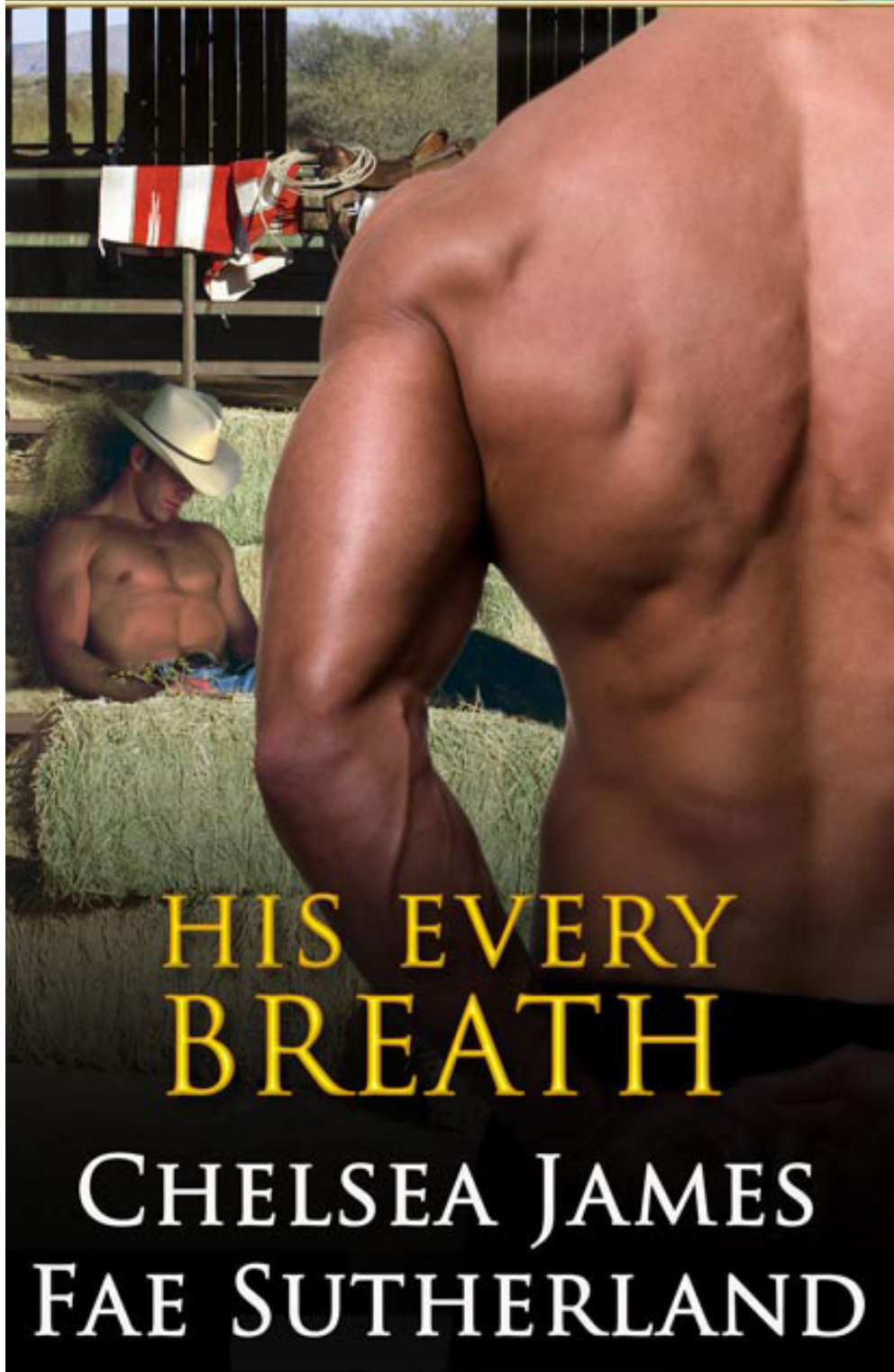


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



HIS EVERY BREATH

CHELSEA JAMES
FAE SUTHERLAND

His Every Breath
Fae Sutherland & Chelsea James

When rough-and-tumble Trace Collins allows his buddies to drag him to a gay strip club for his birthday, he doesn't expect to find his soul mate. But it's love at first sight for Trace and he is immediately enthralled by the sexy young Adonis who's getting naked on stage. Trace is determined to make that man his.

Riley Beckett doesn't want anything to do with romance or love. Past hurts and a jaded attitude make Riley a tough nut to crack, but Trace is no quitter. He's determined to win Riley's trust and show him what real love means. Persistence pays off when Riley finally begins to thaw and it looks as though "happily" might just meet "ever after". There's only one thing standing in their way—the devastating secret Trace is keeping.

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His Every Breath

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HIS EVERY BREATH

Fae Sutherland & Chelsea James

Dedication

For Melissa,
You're *my* breath.
~Fae

For Fae,
Because you gave me the guts to take this crazy path. Because you changed my life,
and because you helped me bring the cowboy and his diva to life. I love you behind the
back much.
~Chelsea

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BMW: Bayerische Motoren Werke Aktiengesellschaft Corporation

Food Network: Television Food Network

Hilton: Hilton Hospitality, Inc.

Holiday Inn: Six Continents Hotels, Inc.

Jeep: DaimlerChrysler Corporation

Jeopardy!: Jeopardy Productions Inc.

Monopoly: Parker Brothers Inc.

MTV: Viacom International Inc.

National Geographic: National Geographic Society Non-profit Corporation

Rush University Medical Center: Rush University Medical Center Corporation

Spiderman: Marvel Characters, Inc.

Chapter One

Britney might be a train wreck, but she sure did put out music that was perfect for half-naked men to dance to. The crowd at Boyztown, Austin's best-known gay strip club, went more than a little nuts when Miss Britney's opening notes began. Riley Beckett hid a smile as he hit the stage, his signature pop princess music all but drowned out by the cheers.

Gauging his audience as he went through his routine, Riley worked his way over to the right side of the stage, picking a few big tippers out of the crowd over there. And sure enough, all it took was a provocative tug on his thong and they ate it up. Sinking into a split-legged crouch, Riley gave the group of men a saucy wink before moving on.

A couple of shimmies, another spin on one of the three polished silver poles and Riley's gaze landed on the man seated at the end of the short runway, black cowboy hat pulled low. Stage presence kept his seductive smile in place but inside Riley was torn between laughter and pity. Either the guy was really hard up, or he had a thing for one of the boys. Riley had seen him here almost every night for the last...damn, it had to be at least a month. If the guy did have his eye on one of the other dancers, well, he might get what he was after. It depended on whom he was into.

Working his way back to the center of the stage and forward to the edge, Riley gave his hair a flip, pulling off his thong as he sank to his knees, grinning a little at the sudden cheers. And people said strippers didn't get recognition. Riley's eyes met those of the man in the cowboy hat and he gave him a wink. Let him dream.

The cowboy reached calmly into his front shirt pocket and pulled out a hundred-dollar bill, tilting his head back enough to meet Riley's eyes from under his hat. He held the bill up between two fingers, arching a brow.

Riley's brows lifted too, but he quirked a sexy smile and crawled forward, taking the bill from the man's hand with his teeth. The cowboy's eyes raked over Riley's body, fully exposed under the bright, colorful spotlights, then pulled out another hundred, twirling it a bit to indicate Riley ought to give him a little spin and the full view.

Riley didn't. The cowboy tilted his head slightly, tossing the bill to the stage and plucking out another with a clear is-that-enough-to-see-the-goods look.

Riley shrugged a little, letting his seductive smile curve his lips as he pushed to his feet and gave a small spin, meeting the man's eyes over one shoulder. Behind the smile though, he was rethinking his original assessment. The man wasn't hard up, he couldn't be.

Riley had just gotten a good look at his face and there was no way a man with that kind of wicked appeal wasn't getting every bit of ass he wanted and then some. And he wasn't into one of the other guys. Or if he was, he was fucking loaded. Riley hadn't ever

seen a guy drop three bills on a dancer he wasn't into. The third hundred was tossed to the stage and Riley danced away and finished off his routine, his eyes continually drawn back to the deep, shadowed blue gaze that watched him like a hawk. He didn't know what the guy's deal was but Riley would be glad to get offstage and away from those piercing eyes.

The man watched as Riley finished his routine, gathered up his money and sauntered seductively offstage. Riley glanced his way one last time as he slipped behind the curtain, shaking his head.

Rolling his neck as he made his way toward the dressing room, Riley did his best to shake off the lingering uneasiness of that...encounter? He didn't even know what to call it. Whatever it had been, it'd stirred up feelings and memories Riley had no desire to revisit. He'd learned his lesson about messing with customers. Sam had taught him well. As he opened the dressing-room door, the usual hubbub and chatter went a long way toward soothing his jangled composure. Or at least it did until the door opened again and Ronnie poked his head in.

"Riley. Private show, Champagne Room, now." The command was short, terse and Riley scrambled to his feet, darting for the door.

"Ronnie! Come on! You know I don't..." The club manager cut Riley off with a shake of his head, his brows lowered. Riley recognized the look and sighed inwardly.

"They want you, they paid for you. You know the rules when it comes to the VIPs. Now go." Ronnie walked off without another word and Riley scowled, turning on his heel and stalking back into the dressing room to put some clothes on.

Riley was still muttering under his breath as he skirted the audience at the back of the club. Damn it, Ronnie knew he hated doing private dances. He made more than enough in tips during his set to be able to pick and choose his one-on-one dances. Riley sighed and wiped the scowl off his face, replacing it with his stage smile as he slipped through the entrance to the Champagne Room, crossing to the corner cubicle and parting the curtains.

His smile, however, slid right off his face and he raised a brow when he saw the man with the cowboy hat. "Didn't get enough out there? I don't do private shows, cowboy." At least not if he hadn't hand-picked the customer. And he most certainly hadn't this time around. He would have stalked out then and there and given Ronnie a piece of his mind but he liked his gig here and if he pissed Ronnie off, not only would he fuck that up, but word could get around and he would be screwed.

His temper rose when one of the waitresses came in and he got a look at the drinks on her tray. A beer and a vodka martini, dirty. How the hell did the man know his favorite drink?

The man quirked a smile, dropping some bills on the waitress's tray for the drinks and a healthy tip, and lifted a brow at Riley, who stood with his hands on his hips, not even bothering to hide his irritation at the break in his routine.

"My apologies, darlin', the fella out there didn't seem to have a problem with it." The cowboy's lips curved in a half smile as he picked up the martini and held it out to Riley, his brows lifting. Riley wished he'd put on something besides the ripped and faded jeans that hung almost obscenely low on his hips. "Here, you must have worked up a thirst and the answer to your question is no."

Riley gave the man a baffled, impatient look and got a wide grin in return.

"No, I didn't get enough." The cowboy still held out the drink but Riley continued to ignore it, wishing it was as easy to ignore the man offering it.

Riley gritted his teeth, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. Never mind just giving Ronnie a piece of his mind, he was going to kill him. But he couldn't back out now and he knew it, even as he started making a mental list of all the ways he could make Ronnie suffer.

He fixed his stage smile back in place and, shaking his head, met amused blue eyes. "I don't drink when I'm working. So what is it you want from me, cowboy?" He nearly snarled when blue eyes gleamed wickedly in answer. "If that's what you're after, you can forget it."

The cowboy's smile cooled and he set the drink down. "I can guarantee you the back room of a strip club is not where I prefer to fuck. Nor do I pay for ass, even one as nice as yours."

He tipped his beer back then shook his head, grinning as Riley continued to glare at him. "Are you this surly with all your customers? Or is it something special just for me?"

He gestured to the cushion beside him. "I didn't mean to offend you, I just wanted to talk to you and this seemed the best way. Sit." Riley narrowed his eyes and the man hesitated, his demeanor changing visibly. "Please."

Riley bit back a sigh, knowing he was being far more prickly than he really ought to be. He relented and sat, though he kept a healthy distance between himself and the other man.

"Talk? You got Ronnie to agree to send me back here because you want to talk to me?"

"Would you have listened to a word out of my mouth any other way?"

Riley had to concede that point. If the man had approached him in any other way, Riley would have knocked his block off. Or at least attempted to. Riley was stronger than he looked, thanks to religious workouts, but the cowboy was big. Not fat, not even really stocky, just big. He was well over six feet, had broad shoulders that tapered to long, strong legs and Riley would guess he had to weigh at least two-thirty.

"Okay, okay. You're right, I wouldn't have. So you got me back here, now talk." Despite himself, Riley's curiosity was piqued. What kind of man went to this much effort just to talk to someone?

The cowboy chuckled. "You and me, darlin', we're gonna butt heads on this attitude of yours, I can see it now." He held out his hand. "First things first. Name's Trace Collins." Riley gave his hand a quick, listless shake, not bothering to offer his own name. He wasn't giving this man anything but his time, to do otherwise would be a colossal mistake.

"This is the part where you tell me your name and we say things like 'nice to meet you' and 'are you from around here?' You know, conversation." Riley ignored that, silence reigning for a few moments before Trace arched his brows and softly sighed. "No? All right then, moving on. Okay. I'm just going to put everything right out there. To put it plainly, darlin', you're the most beautiful man I've ever seen and you fascinate the fuck out of me."

"I'm not your darling." Riley pointed out, amused. Was that what this was about? Oh, it all made sense now. Trace didn't have a thing for one of the other guys who worked the circuit, he had a thing for Riley. If it were anyone else, Riley just might have indulged the guy with a little harmless flirting, but he already recognized the determination in Trace's eyes. The man was after something and any encouragement Riley gave him would be taken seriously.

"I appreciate the compliment, really I do. Unfortunately, you're just one in a long, long list of men who have been 'fascinated' with me, so don't be offended if I'm not particularly overjoyed by that."

Trace shook his head, his smile unfazed. "Not offended in the least. In fact, I'd be a mite worried if you were to just fall into the arms or bed of a man who said something similar. I like that you've got integrity, even if it does make my job a little harder." Trace tilted his head. "You were watching me out there. Same as I was watching you."

Riley's brows shot up and he shook his head, holding up a hand. "Hold it right there, cowboy. I was watching you because men who drop three hundred dollars in one go are rare and usually trouble. Looks like I was right."

Trace grinned. "No, darlin', you weren't. You were watchin' me and it was for the same reason I watch you. Because you're mine."

Riley stared, too shocked to play that off with a witty comeback. The man was batshit insane. Had to be. You couldn't just tell a guy they were yours like that, especially not a dancer, especially not Riley. He pushed to his feet.

"I think you need to go now. Or I do." Job or no job, he wasn't getting tangled up with some psycho who thought Riley belonged to him just because he'd watched him dance a few times. He raised his brows when Trace didn't move an inch but kept right on watching him with that infuriatingly calm, self-assured smile on his face.

"Okay, so I'll go." And get a couple of the bouncers the second he got out of here. Fucking jackass Ronnie. Let a fucking crazy arrange a private show. Just fucking brilliant.

Trace rose, blocking Riley's path and holding up his hands placatingly. "Wait. One thing and then you can go and I'll get out of your way. Look at me. Do you honestly think I'm gonna hurt you?"

Riley was chagrined to find that no, he didn't think the cowboy intended to hurt him. Trace might be a big, imposing sort of guy but there wasn't any mean in his eyes. He could spot mean a mile away. Regardless, Riley had learned his lesson about the good intentions of charming men and had no plans to recreate that situation.

"It ain't the perfect first meeting but it was this or fake a heart attack during a lap dance." Trace shrugged, giving Riley a lopsided grin. It was completely incongruous, the touch of little boy, and if it weren't for that, Riley would have left on the spot. Instead, he sighed and sank back down to the couch. He couldn't resist a man with a sense of humor, who didn't mind looking like a jackass every now and then.

"I don't think you'd hurt me. I'm not sure you're entirely sane but I don't think you'd hurt me, no." Riley shrugged as Trace sat down again. "I figure I can at least let you talk like you wanted, 'cause I'm sure Ronnie hosed you for the privilege."

Trace nodded, then gestured to the cocktail that still sat untouched on the table. "Is it that you really don't drink on the job or you don't trust that I didn't have it doctored? I can call her back, get you a bottle of water or something that can't be tampered with."

Riley shook his head. "I'm not going to say I didn't entertain the thought of you tampering with the drink, but I really don't drink when I'm working." Trace seemed to relax a little at that and Riley brought his legs up, sitting Indian-style on the bench seat.

"So now you've got me curious. Just what is a man like you doing hanging around strip clubs so much?" Far be it from him to try to deny that Trace was insanely attractive. If he hadn't been a customer, Riley would definitely have given him a second look. "And don't tell me you don't, I've seen you almost every night for at least a month."

Trace grinned, taking another swallow of his beer and giving Riley a look from beneath the brim of his hat. "I might confess to a little bit of idle watching. Of you. Can't help it, darlin', you're a hell of a view." His voice was teasing and light, and despite himself, Riley relaxed as well, leaning back against the plushy cushions of the couch.

Trace glanced around then met Riley's eyes. "I can tell you the story here or what about a cup of coffee when you get off? Nothing freaky, just a cup of coffee. Friendly and safe. And, you know, clothed." Trace gave Riley a slow smile, tilting his head and Riley caught the brief flicker of heat in his eyes. "What about it?"

Riley pursed his lips, eyeing the other man as he thought that over. He might be willing to accept that Trace wouldn't hurt him but that didn't mean he would see him in an environment he couldn't control. This was his turf and they both knew it, and frankly, Riley preferred it that way.

He shook his head, though he smiled to soften the refusal. "Here. You've got time and I'm curious now. I like stories, especially ones I'm the star of."

Trace smiled, taking off his hat and raking both hands through his hair. Riley couldn't help it, he followed the move with his eyes, fascinated by the fall of the other man's thick, chestnut waves even though he knew he shouldn't be. To be honest, there was more than good hair to admire when it came to the cowboy and just the fact that he noticed at all bothered Riley. Trace was, irritatingly, coming very close to pushing almost all of Riley's buttons. Tall, broad shoulders, wide, strong chest and the man wore a pair of jeans in a way that ought to be against the law. And did he have to have such beautiful eyes—dark blue and full of humor and gut-wrenching appeal? Riley could just imagine what the other man's lips would taste like. Whiskey and spice most likely, a combination designed to test one's willpower. Riley forced himself to shake off the traitorous thoughts and focus as Trace nodded and began his story. Tall tale, more likely.

"Truth is, I don't frequent strip clubs. Not normally. You've changed that temporarily, I'll admit. But in general, I don't much see the appeal of paying a man to get naked for me. I prefer the real thing, the honest thing, a body I can touch who wants to be touched." He shrugged, another smile. "I have no problem with what you do, darlin', just saying it's not my usual."

Trace rubbed a hand along his jaw. "Tell you the truth, that three hundred I dropped out there wasn't because I wanted to buy a look at you but to get your attention. Just like I didn't pay for this room for you to dance for me either. I'm a bit old-fashioned in that the first time the man I'm meant to have and who's meant to have me gets naked with me, there won't be any money exchanging hands."

Trace shook his head. "I'm getting off track. It was my birthday last month. My buddies decided a strip bar was just the place to hold my party. You were there and I'm sure I'm wandering into psycho territory again with this, but darlin'...I been dreamin' of you ever since."

Riley raised a brow, keeping his expression friendly. "Your birthday, huh? If I'd known that, I'd have made sure you got something special. So just how old are you that your buddies still think a strip club is the perfect place for a birthday party? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight?"

"Thirty-two, actually."

Riley wouldn't have guessed that, but then he wasn't good at guessing people's ages in any case. "Isn't that supposed to be past the point where you're old enough to know better but too young to care?" Trace's eyes gleamed with mischief again and Riley chuckled softly. "Guess not."

He was trying to come up with a way to be nice about this, because despite Riley's first impressions, Trace seemed to be a straight-up, decent kind of guy and there really wasn't any nice way to turn him down after a story like that. But Riley had to. He couldn't afford to make the same mistake of getting involved with a customer, twice. "I'm going to have to disappoint you. I don't get involved with customers. I also don't get involved with older guys. But hey, if you swing both ways, I know a girl who'd—" He broke off and shook his head a little when Trace arched his brows. "Guess not."

Trace deflated visibly and Riley steeled himself against the unexpected twinge of guilt.

"All right, darlin'. I won't bother you at work anymore." Trace's eyes stayed on Riley's face as he pushed to his feet and pulled out his wallet. Riley opened his mouth to protest but Trace shook his head. "To be honest, I have a feeling that fella might stiff you on what you're owed. So consider this a thank you." He gave Riley another lopsided grin and handed him a few folded bills. "For indulging me for a little while."

Trace bent and scooped up his hat, pushing his hair back as he slid it onto his head then touched the brim and smiled. "You be careful, darlin'. Not everyone's as harmless as me."

Riley watched Trace go, disappointment clear in the slight slump of the cowboy's broad shoulders. He didn't like the guilt that niggled at him. What did he have to feel guilty about? *Nothing*, he told himself as he tucked the money in his back pocket. He had work to do and no time to spend worrying about disappointed looks in midnight blue eyes or the sweet-talking, charming, outrageously sexy cowboy they belonged to.

Chapter Two

Trace surveyed the small, neat kitchen—fresh bagels and just-brewed specialty coffee that he knew was Riley’s favorite. He took a deep breath and glanced over at the slim, pretty blonde sitting at the kitchen table. “When is he coming?”

Jenna Stevens, Riley’s best friend and next-door neighbor, unfolded one leg from her chair and leaned forward to scoop up a bit of raspberry jam with her finger. “Supposed to be here by eight.” Her eyes sparkled up at him as she sucked her finger clean. “Why don’t you call him and see what’s keeping him? Oh wait, that’s right, he doesn’t know you’re here!”

Trace gave her a quelling look. He’d learned that Riley’s best friend got far too much pleasure out of poking at him. Almost from the beginning Jenna had been helping him—since the night she’d caught him watching Riley on stage and approached him, less than a week after his birthday. Trace could still remember the shock—this tiny little woman with her hands on her hips looking up at him and finally shaking her head and declaring him a hopeless case for her best friend. She was right and thank God she’d decided to take pity on Trace and offer her assistance because without it he didn’t have a prayer. Hell, he might not with it either.

She shrugged, reached out to grab the phone off the wall and dial a number then gave Trace a wink as she pushed a button and the ringing sounded through the speaker.

Trace’s breath caught when Riley’s voice pierced the silence of the kitchen.

“I’ll be over in a few minutes, Jen. I just got out of the shower.”

Before Jenna could respond, there was a click and then silence. Trace cut her a sideways glance. “A man of few words, my darlin’.”

Jenna pursed her lips thoughtfully. “He’s not your darlin’ yet, Trace. And you might have managed to win me over, but I can pretty much guarantee Riley isn’t going to be as easy. And by the way, I’m still pissed at you for that stunt you pulled. I distinctly do not remember approaching Riley at work as being part of the plan.”

Trace knew she was right and gave her a teasing smile. “I took a chance. Definitely didn’t pay off and fine, you were right. Happy now?”

The young woman gave him a narrow-eyed glare that lacked the heat of true annoyance. “Fine. Well, if the stubborn man doesn’t realize his good fortune soon, let’s just say I might have to give him a run for his money...if you weren’t gay. Now quit worrying, you’re making me nervous!” She perked up at a knock on the front door. “That’s him, stay here.”

Trace nodded, wiping his hands on a paper towel and trying to calm his racing heart.

He was nervous and it wasn't something he was very familiar with. But then, no other man was as important as this one. Riley had taken over Trace's life in so many ways, right down to his dreams. Not sex dreams either, though there were a few of those to make his nights uncomfortable. No, what had first clued Trace in to the fact that this wasn't about lust so much as it was about having accidentally stumbled upon his perfect match was that the dreams were simple, calm. Things like holding Riley while he slept. Riley smiling at him. Riley entrenched in every part of his life and his home. He tensed as he heard Riley's voice in the living room and straightened, raking a hand through his hair and taking a deep breath as the voices got closer.

"I swear, Jen, if you burned the toast again—" Riley stopped dead as he came through the archway into Jenna's kitchen. He stared at Trace for a long moment before turning to Jenna.

"What the hell is he doing here?" he demanded, gesturing to Trace and shaking his head when Jenna opened her mouth to answer. "Never mind. I don't want to know. I'm going back home and back to bed." He turned to leave but Jenna caught his arm.

"Riley! You're being an ass!"

"And?"

Jenna rolled her eyes and reached up to swat him upside the head, shoving him lightly into the kitchen. "And I happen to know you do have manners. Have some coffee, you'll feel and act more like a human."

Trace sighed as Riley frowned darkly and dropped into one of the chairs, casting him an angry look. Lord, the man was beautiful even when he was being hateful. Jenna gave Trace a sympathetic look and he just smiled at her.

Trace sat down across from Riley, though damn, all he wanted to do was get as close to him as possible. Even with that scowl furrowing his brow and the sneer twisting his pretty lips.

"Now, don't go blaming Jenna, darlin'. You oughtta be real grateful you got such a good friend lookin' out for ya."

Riley snorted. "Yeah, grateful. I'll keep that in mind."

Trace gestured to the bagels and coffee. "I got your favorites." He couldn't quite mask the hopeful tone, hoping Riley might soften a little.

Riley glared at them, though he eyed the coffee longingly. He couldn't seem to resist the smell and rose, crossing to the cabinet to get a mug. "You did bring coffee so I'm willing to give you a pass for a little while," Riley announced, filling the mug and taking a deep sniff. "Oh, Sumatra too. You might be crazy, cowboy, but you have good taste in coffee." Reaching to open the fridge, he frowned and glanced at Jenna. "Didn't I just put some of that mudslide creamer in here two days ago?"

"Last week, Riley. And you finished it yesterday," Jenna reminded him.

"Damn." Riley frowned until his eyes fell on the bottle already on the table. He looked at Trace. "Okay, now you're going to freak me out again. You know my favorite drink, my favorite breakfast and my favorite kind of specialty coffee and creamer. I can blame your accomplice here for everything but the drink. I'm starting to think you left a few pertinent bits out of your story."

Jenna appeared to take that as her cue. She hopped up from the kitchen table and grabbed her purse. "Look at the time. I gotta get to work. Riley, be nice!" She ignored Riley's protests and gave Trace a wink and a wave before bolting out the door. Good thing too, because Trace had a feeling if Riley caught her, she was a dead woman.

Trace didn't say anything as Riley continued to curse, on his feet now and looking like he might just give chase.

"Be a shame to let breakfast go to waste, darlin'."

He arched a brow and smiled at Riley when the other man turned to glare at him. More flies with honey than vinegar, he reminded himself. "C'mon and sit down, Riley."

Trace held his breath, half sure Riley was going to take the opportunity to escape back to his apartment and Trace would be pulling out Plan C to try to talk to him. He had a whole alphabet of plans and if need be he'd work all the way through to the end and start over again. He hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Riley frowned but he finally did sit down again, reached for the creamer and poured some into the cup then gestured with it. "Go on, you've got some serious explaining to do."

Lord, Riley wasn't going to make this easy, that was for sure. Trace smiled and his gaze wandered over Riley's face, beautiful despite the early hour and Riley's surly demeanor. His hair was still damp from his shower, falling in messy waves around his face and Trace knew when it dried it'd be the warm, golden color of summer sunshine. "What's to explain? You said you don't get involved with customers, which is smart, so I'm not a customer anymore."

He had also said he didn't get involved with older men but Trace was hoping that would be easier to get around than Riley's initial distrust. Trace tilted his head and gave the other man another slow smile. "Maybe I didn't make myself clear. I ain't lookin' to fuck you. I ain't lookin' to buy you. I'm lookin' to love you." He took a sip of his coffee. "Just so there's no mistake about my intentions."

Riley shook his head, his gaze hard. "Oh no you don't. You've got plenty to explain, pal, so enough with the declarations of love at eight in the morning and get to the explanations. Like how you found out where I live and who my friends are and how you seem to know so much about me. And how the hell you subverted my best friend, who I always thought was smart enough to recognize a mental case when she saw one." He took a sip of the coffee, eyeing Trace steadily over the rim of the mug. "You can start talking anytime. I'm just dying to hear this story."

Trace didn't say anything for a moment, tapping a finger against the side of his mug and peering into it before lifting his gaze and meeting Riley's. "Is it tiring, being so prickly and rude all the time? Seems like it'd be exhausting to me."

"I'm not—"

"Yes you are. Now I'm wondering if you're like this all the time or if it's just me. The fact is, Jenna can spot a mental case. And yet here I am, alone with you in her apartment, her trusting me to not hurt you and to not steal her stuff or anything criminal like that. So maybe you ought to consider that I'm not crazy or any other disparaging names you might want to call me." Trace exhaled, shaking his head. "I wanted to see you again, that's all. I wanted to bring you breakfast."

Riley sighed. "You didn't answer a single one of my questions. Now maybe you figure that I'm being prickly and rude but when a guy who's been watching me dance for a month all of a sudden shows up at my best friend's apartment one morning with my favorite breakfast, I'm going to be suspicious no matter what your intentions are. So if you want me to think you're anything other than an obsessive stalker, you might want to start talking and tell me just how you seem to know so much about me."

Trace had known it wouldn't be easy but he could be patient. "I might have had a little help. What can I say, Jenna's a bit of a romantic at heart."

Riley's eyes narrowed. "So this is her doing?"

Trace shook his head sharply. "Oh no, this is my doing. She just...helped. She cares about you."

Riley snorted and pushed his coffee cup away. "Yeah, so damn much she invites customers home to try to, I don't know, seduce me or something."

Trace paused, meeting Riley's eyes. "I know you don't trust men but I don't know why. Jenna said that was your story to tell." But she'd also told Trace not to give up. That Riley needed someone to tear down all his walls, show him that he could be safe without them, with the right person. Trace was determined that someone was gonna be him.

After a moment, Riley propped his elbows on the table and gave Trace an incredulous look. "Where the fuck do you come from? Seriously. What kind of person, who claims to be completely sane, does stuff like this?" Straightening, he picked up his coffee mug and started pacing the kitchen, his agitation clear.

After a moment, he turned to face Trace, his eyes sparking and it was hard to pay attention when all Trace wanted to do was kiss him. "Okay, okay. Back up a bit here and tell me one thing. You can't honestly believe that I'm your soul mate based on one look in a strip club, can you?"

Oh no, Trace wasn't falling into that trap. "Would it make more sense to you if the one look had been somewhere other than a strip club? If I'd seen you in a grocery store or at a restaurant or walking down the street, would you think it any more sane to fall in love at first sight under those circumstances?" Trace sighed and shook his head. "No and we both know it. Because you don't believe in love, do you, darlin'? And no matter

where or when or how it happened, you wouldn't believe in it so why's it crazier because I happened to see you at the club first?"

Trace pushed to his feet, setting his mug in the sink and turned to lean back against the counter. "What makes me want to know everything about you? Love. I'm not stupid, Riley, I knew how you'd react to me approaching you, trying to get to know you. Exactly how you did, with snobbery and disdain." He shrugged, a half smile tugging at his lips. "So I had to find another way to get to know you."

"And you thought I'd react better to you just showing up in my best friend's kitchen?" Riley set his coffee cup down with more force than necessary. "You know, at this point, the whys and hows and all that really don't matter. I'm not interested, period."

Trace inwardly flinched. It hurt but he did his best not to let it show. He rose, beginning to gather up the barely touched breakfast.

"All right, darlin'. I can see you're not gonna want to talk any more today." He put the leftovers in the fridge and grabbed his hat off the counter, sighing. "Jenna asked if you'd lock up when we were done. And...I guess we're done for now."

Riley scowled. "We're done for more than now, we're...shit!"

Trace's brows arched. "Problem?"

It took a moment but finally Riley cast him a frustrated look. "My keys are in my apartment. Which is locked. And Jenna has my spare." He bit off every word and Trace had a hard time keeping the amusement inside.

If he had ever doubted that this was fate, he sure as hell didn't now. "Need a ride, darlin'?"

Riley gritted his teeth as he met Trace's eyes, clearly not pleased with this development. Trace couldn't say the same.

"Unfortunately. Please? If you don't mind?" Riley looked like he'd swallowed a lemon saying it but Trace just flashed him a calm smile and nodded. "Thanks. I'm going to give Jenna a call so she can meet me in the lobby of her office." Trace said nothing as Riley made the call, amused by the short, frustrated glances the young man tossed over his shoulder every so often. As if Trace might sneak up behind him and accost him. Not that the thought hadn't occurred to him more than once. After a moment of hushed conversation, Riley hung up and turned back to face him.

"There. If you don't mind giving me a ride downtown and back, I'll pay you for gas and the trouble when we get back here."

Trace didn't argue. "That's not necessary but if it makes you feel better, darlin'." Trace pulled his keys out of his pocket as he followed Riley to the door.

The silence was deafening as they headed down the stairs to the parking lot and Trace stopped beside his truck. Riley snorted derisively. "Now why am I not surprised?"

Trace just grinned at him as he unlocked the passenger-side door, gesturing him inside before rounding the truck to slide into the cab. Riley cast him several sidelong glances and slid a little closer to the door, a move that had Trace biting back a smile.

He was thrilled by the nervous tension he could feel in Riley, knowing it for what it was—attraction Riley didn't want to feel. Well, want to or not, Riley was feeling it and Trace was more determined than ever, despite this morning's setback.

He pulled out of the parking lot, following Riley's directions and turned toward downtown. After several moments of heavy silence, Trace glanced over at his passenger. "Can I ask why?"

Riley frowned at him. "Why what?"

"Why you wouldn't be interested even if we'd met outside the club." He knew it wasn't that he wasn't Riley's type, he could tell he was. Despite the other man's resistance, the attraction between them was clear as day.

Riley looked suspicious before shrugging, as if he'd decided there wasn't any point in not being honest. "I'm not interested in getting involved with anyone. Relationships are tough as it is and I don't care how much a guy tells me he's okay with what I do, it's bullshit. There isn't a man out there who can be okay with their boyfriend being a dancer. They get jealous about it eventually. Or, worse yet, there are some guys who'll use that, who'll automatically assume that a guy's a slut just because he's a dancer and try to exploit it." Riley shook his head, glancing out the window as they headed downtown. "It's too much of a hassle all around and there isn't anybody who could make me want to try it again."

And there was Trace's answer. Right there, tacked on to the end and most people might miss it. Try it again. Riley's heart had been broken, badly. Trace wondered by whom and how but right now that didn't matter. What mattered was Riley wasn't going to let something like that go easily, not when it was so much a part of him at this point that he didn't even really have to think about it. It just was.

A ripple of guilt raced through him. Was he just setting Riley up for more heartbreak? Trace shoved the thought aside a second later. *No*, he assured himself, *I'm not*. Riley deserved some happiness and Trace was convinced he could provide it. Even if worse came to worst, Riley would have good things to hold on to and that was more important in Trace's opinion. Better to have loved and lost and all that.

"I see." Trace nodded. "And dancing is your passion? I mean, you want to dance more than you want love?"

"See, that's what I'm talking about, dancing instead of love, it's always a choice."

Trace gave Riley a sidelong look. "You just said it was. I didn't."

"It's a choice because people make it that way. They can't separate what someone does from who they are. But do I want to dance more than I want love? Hell yes, because dancing is my passion. Not just stripping either, that's just a step on the ladder. Real dancing, like Broadway stuff or backup dancers at a concert. That's what I want

someday. Stripping is...it's a means to an end. The money's good and I enjoy it but it's not my life's goal or anything like that."

Riley glanced over at Trace. "But the problem is, nobody seems to get that. They see what I do and make assumptions and don't bother to go any further than that. It's all 'oh, you shouldn't take your clothes off for money, that's demeaning' or some shit like that. That's my decision to make, not anyone else's. It's called doing what I have to do. It's a job, it's a way to keep my skills sharp while I wait for the right time to go after what I really want."

Trace could hear it in Riley's voice, the old hurt, the shame he didn't want but that others put on him. And it just about broke Trace's heart. "You don't think there's anyone in the whole world of billions of people who would understand that your job is not you? Who would understand that you're beautiful not because you take your clothes off and show your body? There's nobody who would see the beauty in how you move on the stage, not just how you look? And there's not a single person anywhere who can give you the kind of happiness you deserve?"

He was just setting himself up, Trace knew it. Riley didn't want what he was offering, or at least wasn't willing to risk trying to take it. Trace had a hundred and one plans but all of them hinged on Riley eventually giving in, letting him in. Trace didn't have a plan for Riley never relinquishing his walls of steel.

Riley shook his head, turning slightly in the seat to face him as Trace pulled to a stop at a red light. "Even if I did find someone like you described, it doesn't change the simple fact of human nature. People get jealous whether they have a reason to or not, get insecure whether they have a reason to or not. I know for damn sure that if the shoe was on the other foot, I wouldn't like knowing my boyfriend was taking his clothes off for other men."

He raised a brow at Trace, tilting his head curiously. "Hypothetically, let's say I was interested. Say I gave you a chance. Could you honestly tell me that you'd be perfectly okay with what I do, that you'd never be jealous about it, that you'd never wish I'd quit and get a real job?"

Trace met Riley's eyes then looked away as the light turned green again. "Honestly? No. I can't promise that. But not for the reasons you're thinking. I might wish you didn't strip but because you have a gift, Riley, a gift you're wasting on people who don't appreciate it. Not because I'm jealous that other people see you naked. You've more than made clear that looking is all they'll ever get from you and if you wanted to strip for the rest of your life, if you loved it and never wanted another job, then so be it. What really matters, what's really important, would be that you're just mine and while I might worry about you doing what you do, I wouldn't ask you to stop."

Trace sighed and glanced over at Riley. "But that's not what you want to do with your life. So why aren't you doing what you really want?"

Riley shrugged, ignoring the building headache that always came up whenever he thought about this. The real answer, one he'd never admit to anyone else, was that he

was plain and simply scared he wouldn't be good enough. Because what would he do then? Riley wasn't suited to a nine-to-five job and he'd never settle for hooking up with some man who would support him. He'd had that chance. Shaking off the feeling, Riley made sure his voice was light, unconcerned.

"I'll know when the time comes. I've got to save up before I can get there though, California and New York are expensive and I want to be able to devote my time to dancing, not to working some random job to keep a roof over my head. I've got a long way to go before I'll have enough."

Luckily, the uncomfortable conversation ended as Trace pulled in front of Jenna's office building and his best friend sauntered up, looking smug. He rolled down the window and gave her a narrow-eyed look as she approached though he couldn't quite keep the affection out of his eyes.

"Wench. I oughtta punish you for taking off like that." Riley tilted his head and pretended to consider, giving her a wicked grin. "I'll stop sharing my porn collection."

Jenna made a face at him and Riley shrugged, holding out his hand for the spare set of keys. He caught the questioning look Jenna shot at Trace over his shoulder and frowned. He didn't like the feeling of being double-teamed here, not one bit. Shaking off the irritation, Riley waved his hand toward the building. "Go on, get back to work. I'll see you when you get home."

Once she was gone, Trace pulled into the U-turn lane and glanced over while they waited for the light. "I'd planned on asking you if you'd like to go for a hike or maybe horseback riding after breakfast. Should I save myself the turndown?"

Riley hesitated, turning the offer over in his head. He loved to ride and hadn't had the opportunity in years, but the idea of encouraging Trace gave him pause. And not just encouraging Trace, there was the fact that, despite his insistence, Riley could admit to himself at least that Trace was inadvertently pushing his buttons and not just the ones that pissed him off. The man was far more tempting than he should be.

"I love horseback riding. I used to go all the time and haven't had a chance in years." Right now, he couldn't even get worked up over the fact that Trace might already know that, thanks to Jenna. He was too busy trying to convince himself to say no.

Instead, he found himself nodding. "I'd love to go for a ride. We'll still have to stop back at my place though. I need to feed Ginger, my dog, take her out if I'm going to be gone for a while."

Riley could tell Trace was surprised, especially when the light turned green and he didn't react, just sat there staring at him as if he'd been struck dumb. Amused, Riley watched as Trace blinked, finally noticed the light was green and shook his head, chuckling as he executed the U-turn.

"Darlin', yer gonna keep me on my toes."

Riley couldn't find it in him to point out that he had no plans of letting Trace stick around that long. He figured he'd made his point clear enough and surely Trace wasn't pigheaded enough to still think he could change his mind.

"That's what I'm best at."

Trace laughed and Riley decided right then that, despite his initial impressions, he actually liked the man. He was thoughtful, funny, obviously smart and clever and despite looking like the stereotypical cowboy, he didn't seem to be at all narrow-minded or judgmental. Then Trace gave him another of those sidelong looks and Riley was reminded all over again that the man was sinfully gorgeous on top of it. If things were different... No, he wasn't going to think that way. Things were the way they were and Riley had his rules for a very good reason.

Trace grinned and shook his head, cutting Riley an amused glance. "I'm sure that's not all you're good at." He chuckled when Riley rolled his eyes. "Hey, don't look at me like that. Dirty mind ya got, darlin'."

Riley shook his head as Trace pulled into the parking lot of Riley's apartment building. He led Trace back up the stairs to the landing his apartment and Jenna's shared.

"Come on in. It'll take me a minute to finish getting ready and get Ginger situated for the day." Trace nodded and Riley gestured for him to follow, unlocking his door and laughing when Ginger pawed at his knees, scooping her up and nuzzling her neck. "There's my good girl, huh?" He set her down again, unsurprised when she went through the same routine with Trace.

"She'll love you forever if you pick her up. She's really friendly and affectionate. Give me a few minutes to get myself together."

Trace smiled and nodded and Riley could feel those eyes on him as he darted down the hall to his bedroom. Riley began a quiet hunt for his keys, listening curiously. He heard Trace sit down then the quiet murmur of his voice.

"So you'll love me forever if I pick you up, hmm?"

There was a brief pause and Riley inched closer to the door, brows furrowed curiously.

"Do you think you could put in a good word for me and see about your human loving me forever too?"

At that, Riley closed his bedroom door softly behind him and leaned back against it for a moment. He didn't need to hear any more. The fact was, he was in deep trouble and he knew it. Trace was the first man he'd met in more than a year who had stirred him on any sort of level. Combine that with Riley's certainty that he was one of those rare specimens, an honest-to-goodness nice guy, and oh yeah, Riley was screwed. Big time.

Sure, there was a way out. He could just turn up the cold shoulder and drive Trace away but Jenna would likely have his hide now that she was in on things. Besides, it was tiring. On top of that, part of Riley didn't really want to drive Trace away, though

he knew it'd be messy in the end. But...there wasn't any harm in spending time with him, just being friendly.

Decision made, he straightened, pulled socks and sneakers on and tucked a bandanna into his pocket to tie over his hair later. His t-shirt and jeans would be fine for riding and he tucked his wallet and cell phone into his pockets, finally finding his keys in his gym bag. Heading back out to the living room, he grinned at the sight of Ginger sprawled in Trace's lap, in obvious ecstasy as the man rubbed her belly.

"My dog's easy." He grinned when Trace met his eyes. "Easy and shameless."

Trace grinned and covered the little dog's ears. "You'll hurt her feelings."

Riley laughed and grabbed the leash and Ginger scrambled out of Trace's lap faster than you could snap, and scurried over to Riley. Trace rose and wiped his hands on his jeans.

"Mind if I come while you walk her?"

"No, that's fine," Riley answered, bending to hook the leash to Ginger's collar, indulging her with a good ear scratching as she wriggled in pleasure. He glanced up at Trace and grinned.

"See? Shameless." Riley got to his feet and tugged on the leash as Ginger tried sniffing at Trace's boots. "Come on, girl, outside. You can chase the birdie." Trace gave him a questioning look and Riley reached for the basket that sat by the door of the apartment and pulled out a miniature rubber duck.

"This is her birdie. She plays fetch with it whenever I take her out. Come on, there's a fenced-off bit of grass in back we use." Riley led Trace down the hall to the back entrance of the building, laughing when Ginger scampered eagerly down the steps. He undid her leash and pitched the duck out into the yard, turning to Trace as she ran to retrieve it.

"This won't take more than a few minutes, it's too hot out for her to want to run around for very long."

Trace grinned, leaning back against the building and shaking his head. "Don't worry about it. I got a soft spot for pups." Riley watched Trace from the corner of his eye as he let Ginger play, doing his best to not think about how nice it was, how comfortable and easy. The contented smile on Trace's face didn't help either and Riley was relieved when Ginger trotted over and plopped on the back stoop, her signal that she was done playing. Riley cleaned up after her before gesturing Trace back inside. "Almost ready. I just have to make sure she has food and water then leave Jenna's spare in her apartment."

It didn't take long to make sure Ginger was set for the day and Riley admired the view from behind as they headed back to the truck. Broad shoulders, a wide back—Trace wasn't rippling with muscles but there was no doubt he was in shape, his strength gained not from a gym and protein shakes but from hard work. That was something Riley liked in a man and he was beginning to think there would be a lot he

liked about Trace. It was a shame the guy had all these crazy ideas about love, about Riley being his. They might have a nice little fling if it weren't for that.

But Riley had no intention of encouraging Trace on this crazy romantic mission of his, or whatever it was. He didn't do relationships and not even the perfect man could change that. He could do friends though. Friends might be nice.

Trace climbed behind the wheel, glancing over at Riley. "You didn't eat much breakfast. I could pack us up a basket to take with us on our ride. Got some pretty spots for lunch out on the property. Whaddya say?"

Riley raised a brow at that, giving Trace a cool look. "Let me guess. Your property?" Trace nodded and Riley tried to decide how he felt about that. The idea of being that alone with any other man might have made him nervous but he highly doubted Trace was going to try to take advantage of him. He didn't seem the type at all, it'd go against what Riley would bet was a highly developed sense of personal honor. So he nodded, scooting down in his seat a bit to be more comfortable, wishing he'd remembered his sunglasses.

"That'd be good. It's one of my nights off and if Jenna gets home before I do, she'll take care of Ginger." He could practically feel Trace's surprise and Riley glanced over at him with a grin. "Didn't think I'd agree that easily, did you?"

Trace cast Riley a sideways glance. "Can't say that I did, darlin'. You have been pretty vocal about not being interested. But I am certainly not going to argue. Lunch it is."

"Just because I'm not interested in a relationship doesn't mean I can't be friendly," Riley pointed out. It was true. He might not want what Trace apparently did but it was nice to spend time with someone who didn't look down on him for what he did, someone other than his best friend. It'd been a long time since Riley had met anyone he felt like he could maybe trust, but he definitely got that vibe from Trace, and in spades.

Mentally shaking his head, Riley relaxed, idly watching Trace from the corner of his eye as he drove. It was a crying shame the man was so bent on this love thing. Riley would bet anything that the chemistry between them would be insane. He did shake his head at that. It'd clearly been far too long if he was actually thinking about hooking up with a guy who had the kind of morals and standards that he bet Trace did. Riley preferred his sex easy and uncomplicated and Trace had complication written all over him.

The companionable quiet that settled between them was easy though. There wasn't any of that awkwardness and feeling as if he should say something. Riley liked it. Trace pulled off the freeway just before they hit the outskirts of Austin and steered the truck into the small parking lot of an even smaller restaurant. Riley straightened in his seat, giving Trace a puzzled look.

"What are we doing?"

Trace grinned and shut the truck off, reaching across to open Riley's door and give him a wink. "Gettin' lunch. I'm good at a lot of things, darlin', but cooking ain't one of 'em." He pulled away and slid out of the cab, adjusting his hat against the sun.

Riley slid out of the truck and fell into step with Trace, glancing up at him, a teasing light in his eyes. "You can't cook? Here I was starting to think you just might be that rare specimen known as a perfect man." He heaved a mock-disappointed sigh. "There goes my submission to *National Geographic*. The man can't cook, therefore he can't be considered perfect."

Trace burst out laughing and Riley grinned, a small part of him realizing that he liked knowing he could make Trace laugh. It was a real laugh too, not just a snicker or a chuckle or anything like that. He preened a little as Trace shook his head and reached for the restaurant door, gesturing Riley in. Now that was new. Riley hadn't ever had a date – was this a date? – open a door for him before. He kind of liked it.

Trace placed a hand at the small of Riley's back, guiding him to the counter and flashing a smile at the middle-aged woman behind it, a pair of pencils stuck in her beehive. "Hey there, Rhonda, how's Earl feelin'?"

"Like he's always feelin', honey, a decade too old and a dollar short." Rhonda grinned and patted Trace's arm in a motherly fashion. "How're you feelin', sugar?" Her sharp green eyes flicked to Riley and lit up like the Fourth of July. "Well, never mind, I see you're doin' just fine. Who's this?"

Trace grinned. "This is Riley. Riley, this is Rhonda."

Riley wasn't entirely sure he liked the way Trace grinned, all possessive and as though he were introducing his boyfriend or something. But Riley smiled politely and made small talk, willing to let the impression go for now. He'd made it very clear to Trace that there wouldn't be anything serious between them, so it didn't matter what anyone else thought.

Riley shook his head when Trace asked him if there was anything in particular he wanted for lunch. He doubted anything on the menu here would fit into his diet so he'd just do an extra half-hour at the gym tomorrow to make up for it.

Trace got them pulled pork and cornbread and greens to go, plus a half gallon of Rhonda's famous sweet tea. Why it was famous, Riley didn't know. Trace gave her a wink before ushering Riley out with a wave over his shoulder. Trace handed him the bag of food as they climbed back into the truck.

"Here, hang on to this, it's precious." He glanced over at Riley as they merged back onto the freeway heading just out of town. "How long have you been in Austin? I'm pretty sure you didn't grow up here."

Riley shook his head, settling the bag firmly on his lap, keeping one hand on it so it couldn't slide. "Eight years. My parents divorced when I was little and my mom has what she calls itchy feet. I don't think I spent more than a year in any one place from the time I was six or seven until now. We moved here before my senior year of high school

and I put my foot down after I graduated. I wanted to have roots somewhere and I like it here."

He glanced over at Trace, raising a brow curiously. "What about you?" He could have just asked out of politeness but part of him really wanted to know what made Trace tick, what his family was like, what his life was like. Maybe then he could figure out just how to get around this silly idea Trace had that Riley was his soul mate or whatever it was.

Trace pulled off the highway onto a rough access road. "Fifteen years now. My grandparents died just after I graduated high school and left the ranch to me. I was living in Iowa at the time and me and my folks weren't speaking 'cause I had decided not to go to college, so it came at the right time. I moved here and the rest is history."

He smiled and shrugged, turning off the access road onto a private road. "My folks and I have long since gotten back on speaking terms. I think they just wanted me to have a stable income, a steady life, you know? And the ranch gave that to me, so they're happy. So am I."

He slowed as the trees parted to reveal the ranch house and the surrounding outbuildings then stopped in front of the house. "This is it."

Riley peered out the window, impressed by how neat everything was—the driveway, the lawn. He'd almost expected dirt and tumbleweeds. "It's nice. Homey, I guess is the word. It reminds me of my grandma's house in Virginia—it's one of those massive old Colonial farmhouses. That was one of the things I could count on when I was little, we always spent a week there at Christmas and at least a month every summer. That's where I learned to ride."

He handed the bag of food over when Trace opened the door, hopping down from the truck and wishing again for his sunglasses, shading his eyes with one hand. "You've got a lot of land. It must be awfully quiet out here at night." Riley missed that sometimes, though he didn't mind the noise of a busy, bustling city. He figured, when he made it big, he'd have an apartment in either Los Angeles or New York, depending on how things went, but he'd have a house out in the country somewhere too. A place where he could go and get away from the noise and the pace of the city.

Trace smiled as Riley shielded his eyes, reaching over to settle his hat on Riley's head. Riley smiled, adjusting it. That was sweet.

"We'll have to get you one of your own, darlin'."

"Don't you lock up?" Riley asked curiously as they climbed the steps to the porch and Trace swung the front door open. Trace gestured him into the house and shrugged.

"Sometimes. Right now there's hands all over the place so it's safe enough to leave it unlocked. C'mon, let me get this food transferred and we can get going."

Riley nodded, following Trace through the house, tipping the hat back on his head so he could see better. It was just as homey inside as it appeared on the outside. Worn but comfortable furniture, softly faded wallpaper, the hardwood floors sanded and

polished to a dull gleam. There were family pictures everywhere and Riley had to rein in his curiosity so he didn't peek at them.

Trace led him into the kitchen, where he set the bag on a counter and gestured to the table under one wide window. "Have a seat if you want. I've got to find the spare saddlebags." Then disappeared into the front hall.

Riley didn't sit though, wandering the big kitchen instead, trying to pick up clues here and there. There were old grocery lists stuck to the fridge with a magnet, postcards and pictures hanging with them, a few scrawled notes that Riley made himself not read. He might want to figure the man out but he wasn't going to snoop. He could hear Trace digging through the closet and smiled.

"Saddlebags? In the hall closet?" he called.

Trace reappeared, worn leather bags in hand. "You've never been inside a cowboy's house before, I take it. You never know what you're gonna find." He gave Riley a wink and set the saddlebags on the counter, putting some paper plates and plastic utensils in first, then efficiently transferred the food into smaller, more convenient containers and finally poured the tea into a thermos he wedged in.

Trace turned back to Riley as he finished packing their lunch and when Riley saw the heat in those deep blue eyes, he took a step back, rattled by it.

"You know, that hat'll protect your face but it's not gonna do anything for the rest of you. I've got some sunscreen in the bathroom, if you want."

Riley hadn't thought of that and glanced around. "Which way's the bathroom?"

Trace pointed down another hall. "That way, second door on your left."

"I'll be back in a minute then." It was probably a good thing for Riley to get a minute to himself anyway. The look that had come into Trace's eyes when he'd turned had shaken him. It hadn't just been a heated look, though Riley knew desire when he saw it. There'd been real emotion there and that was something Riley didn't know how to deal with. Whatever Trace might feel for him, he clearly believed it was real and Riley knew he was walking a very thin line by trying to keep their association purely friendly.

Riley took a few deep breaths as he found the sunscreen and applied it to his neck and arms and face, careful not to get it in his hair, holding the mass of curls up off his neck with one hand as he rubbed the lotion in with the other. When he was done, he replaced the bottle on the shelf where he'd found it, taking a deep, slow breath.

He could do this. He could spend time with an absolutely gorgeous man and not let it go beyond friendly. He had to. Riley couldn't afford to let his emotions get tangled up again, especially not with a man like Trace who would expect more from him than he was willing to give.

He raked a hand through his hair and replaced the hat on his head, heading back into the kitchen. A practiced smile curved his lips when Trace looked up. "Ready to go? You've got me itching for a nice, long ride."

Trace let out a groan and Riley's eyes widened. He briefly covered them with his hand. "I didn't mean it like that, really..."

"Damn shame." He grabbed the saddlebags, holding his other hand out to Riley. "C'mon, I'll introduce you to the horses and we'll let one of 'em pick you."

Riley studied Trace for a long moment, wanting to be certain he really did understand that Riley hadn't meant that the way it had sounded. But Trace seemed to have recovered just fine, so Riley nodded slowly. "Okay. Lead the way." He didn't take Trace's hand, not wanting to encourage anything, and he didn't miss the long, searching look Trace gave him before he shrugged and led Riley outside, pausing in the hallway to grab a faded Indian blanket from the closet.

Riley followed along after Trace, trying to get his composure back. He was only human and when he'd realized what he'd said a minute ago, he hadn't been able to stop the images that popped into his mind. Thinking like that was only going to get him in trouble and he knew it. No complications, he reminded himself, repeating it in his head like a mantra.

They entered the barn and Riley let out a sigh of appreciation as he approached the first stall and the mare there examined him with curious dark eyes. Trace smiled.

"That's Nestle, she's a sweet girl but she can't be ridden, she's due to foal any day now." He rubbed the mare's nose and gestured Riley farther down. "How good are you on a horse, darlin'? Most of mine are pretty high-spirited but easily handled if you know what you're doing. I've got a couple real gentle ones if you don't feel confident."

Riley chewed his lower lip a little, shrugging. "It's been four years since I've ridden at all, so...gentle would probably be a good idea. I don't need any broken bones." Trace nodded and led him to one of the very last stalls.

"This here's Cinnamon, he's an old sweetheart, easy to handle and won't get impatient with you."

Riley grinned, meeting the gelding's dark eyes, admiring the rusty red of his coat.

"Well, aren't you handsome? You want to take me for a ride?" The horse blew, showing off his teeth, and Riley glanced at Trace. "I'd say that's a yes, wouldn't you?" Trace smiled in return and Riley reined in the surge of desire that wanted to rip through him. Fuck, the man's smile ought to be registered as a lethal weapon.

Riley talked quietly to Cinnamon, watching from the corner of his eye as Trace opened another stall door and led out a beautiful black stallion.

Riley's brows shot up. The horse was huge and dangerous looking to boot.

"This is Raven. He might look like a devil but he's a real softie underneath. Let him sniff your hand, he'll let you pet him."

Riley moved closer slowly, offering his hand to the stallion before shifting to stroke his thick mane, trying not to watch Trace as he saddled the horses. This whole friendly thing was proving to be more difficult than he'd thought. Trace was too appealing for him to be able to ignore the attraction that surged through him and the little touches

were beginning to sneak under his defenses. If he let things go on like this, it wasn't going to end well.

Riley didn't have it in him to ruin today though, not when Trace had already gone to so much trouble. So he'd give him today and then, after Trace took him home tonight, that would be all.

Trace finished saddling Riley's horse, the saddlebags firmly secured in place as well as the blanket. He gave the gelding a firm pat on his flank and turned to Riley. "Need a boost up, darlin'?" Trace bent a little, holding his hands laced for Riley to use to climb up.

Riley placed a light hand on Trace's shoulder to steady himself as he slipped into the saddle, his eyes fixed on the other man for a long moment before he tore his gaze away. It was hot in here and it had nothing to do with the weather. Trace was whistling cheerily as he swung up onto Raven's back and picked up the reins. "C'mon, darlin'. We got all day and all the space in the world."

Chapter Three

"Where to, cowboy?"

Trace glanced back over his shoulder. "Darlin', anywhere your heart desires. But for now, how about a nice leisurely ride along the creek, hmm?" It was soothing, it was shaded and it was cooler than any other path, plus it was a good spot for their lunch when they got around to it. His smile curved wider at the thought of a picnic on the creek bank with Riley. He couldn't ask for a better way to spend the day.

Riley nodded. "Sounds good to me. I'm sure you know all the best spots."

Trace couldn't keep the smile off his face as Riley gave Cinnamon another nudge with his knees, the young man laughing when the horse sprang into a quick, smooth canter. Much as he loved riding, he got a heck of a lot more pleasure out of watching Riley's joy. He looked...carefree. Trace hadn't seen him look anything close since the first time he'd laid eyes on the man. If Trace had his way, Riley would look that way more often.

He nudged Raven to keep pace with Riley, watching him. Damn, he was beautiful, a smile curving those perfect lips...Jesus. Trace figured he had to be a masochist. No, no he wasn't. Because when all was said and done, that beautiful man would belong to him.

Riley seemed to forget about not really liking Trace as they rode. Simple pleasure filled his expression and Trace relaxed, glad Riley was letting their little battle go for the moment and just enjoying the day.

After a while, Riley drew Cinnamon to a stop, taking off Trace's hat and raking one hand through his hair before settling it back on. He turned in the saddle to glance back at Trace as he pulled Raven up alongside. "Which way's this picnic spot? I know it's early still but I'm starving."

Trace smiled and swung down off the horse. "Here's as good a spot as any. Crick looks the same most of the way—a little narrower, a little wider, but mostly the same. That's the good thing about nature, there's something beautiful about every spot, even if it ain't the one you were aiming for to start with."

He grinned easily and reached up a hand, just in case Riley decided he would accept help, or more to the point, accept help from Trace. The man was beautiful but so damn prickly, like one of Mrs. Campbell's prize-winning roses that would shred you to ribbons with their thorns but smelled so sweet and felt so soft and looked so pretty you didn't care.

Riley swung off Cinnamon's back and patted his neck. He stayed where he landed for a moment, locking gazes with Trace.

"You're lucky to have all this so close, to be able to just get away from the rest of the world any time you want. It's so quiet out here. I could almost pretend I'm alone." Riley's smile heated and his voice dropped as he squeezed Trace's hand lightly. "But I'm not."

Riley wanted to play, it seemed. Well, Trace was playing for keeps and hadn't ever been a timid gambler. He reached his other hand up to lift his hat off Riley's head, setting it over the saddle horn and met Riley's eyes again. His insides flip-flopped because, lord, he was so close. And now Riley's sweet, unique scent was sun-warmed and windblown and even more arousing.

"No, darlin', you're not." He slid his free hand into Riley's hair, thumb brushing his cheekbone. "If you want, you don't ever have to be again." His voice was a husky whisper. Their faces were so close that Trace could see the tiny flecks of silver and green in Riley's blue eyes, could make out the faint dusting of freckles across the bridge of his nose and a single darker freckle at the outer corner of his left eye.

Riley stilled, his breath catching before extracting his hand from Trace's and stepping aside.

When Riley turned and met Trace's eyes, his gaze remained heated but there was a new wariness there. Trace took that as the small victory he hoped it was. "Get that food, cowboy, I'm awfully hungry."

Trace smiled, nodding. "Can't have that, can we?" He turned to reach up and unfasten the bags, taking a moment to hobble both the horses before coming over and handing Riley the bags to hold while he shook out the blanket on the thick growth of sun-dappled moss. He took the bags then waved his hand.

"Sit. Let's get your appetites fed, hmm?" He knelt and unpacked the food as Riley sat, occasionally casting the other man warm looks. Trace could have sworn he fell in love with Riley all over again with every tip of his stubborn chin and every flash of his eyes. He was such a prize and Trace wasn't going to let him go.

Riley grinned triumphantly and pushed up to his knees. Trace wasn't quite sure what there was to be so triumphant about until the young man caught his hand. Riley reached up with his free hand and took Trace's hat off, setting it aside and running his fingers through his hair. Well, then.

"Appetites fed, hmm? Yes, let's." Riley's fingers tangled in Trace's hair, seeming to just enjoy the texture of it against his fingers. Trace could hardly breathe, enthralled, and damn if Riley didn't know it too.

He was so close and it would be so easy to take a kiss then and there but Riley must have decided he wanted to draw this out, to really make Trace squirm. He just knelt there, holding Trace's hand, their bodies barely an inch apart, a smile curving his lips, and looked to be waiting to see if Trace took the bait or not.

Trace was having difficulty getting his lungs to function. Somewhere in his lust-drunk mind he wondered what Riley thought the game was. Because if he thought Trace was going to turn down a bit of kiss and tickle, he was very wrong. But he wasn't

going to take, as much as he ached to just lean that fraction of an inch forward and claim those sultry, pouty lips.

Instead he managed to draw a shaky breath, eyes lifting from Riley's mouth to meet his gaze. "What're ya doin', darlin'?"

Riley's perfectly shaped brows arched. "If you have to ask, cowboy, one of us is doing it wrong."

Trace chuckled breathlessly. "Change your mind?"

Riley smiled slowly, letting go of Trace's hand to run his fingers up and down his arm, the touch light, teasing. "You could say that. Did you change yours?" The young man didn't wait for an answer before he brought his hand up to Trace's face, fingers brushing his lips. "That mouth of yours ought to be illegal," he murmured, and Trace smiled. Riley groaned, his eyes narrowing. "So should that."

Riley raised his eyes to Trace's again, his seductive look just about knocking Trace on his ass. Damn, the man was dangerous. "Want something, cowboy? Go ahead and take it. I won't stop you."

Trace tilted his head, bringing his hand up to brush across Riley's cheek, shaking his head, smiling softly. "What I want can't be taken. Can only be given. Are you giving it?"

He knew the answer to that, saw it instantly flash in Riley's eyes. Trace wasn't willing to play that way. He wanted Riley but he wanted all of Riley. Not just his kisses and his touches and his warm, beautiful body, naked and writhing under... Cut that out, he told himself. He forced his thoughts back on track. He wanted more. And he wanted it freely given.

Riley made a soft, disgusted sound and pushed away to sit down. "You're insane. I'm practically offering myself to you on a damn silver platter and you're going to turn that down because I don't...what? Don't love you or something?" He snorted, rolling his eyes. "That's something only a crazy person would do."

Riley reached for the thermos of tea and one of the cups Trace had unpacked. Trace watched, amused, as Riley poured some and took a long drink, as if it were whiskey or something, before he set the cup down and rose to pace along the creek bank. He quite obviously wasn't used to being turned down and didn't like it one bit. Hell, Trace didn't like it either but he wasn't going to leap at the first opportunity and have it be the wrong one. Riley just kept scowling, kicking at a twig in his path before pacing some more.

Trace sighed and watched Riley for a minute. This wouldn't do. They'd been having a good time but it was bordering on becoming awkward and tense again.

Trace pushed to his feet and stepped into Riley's path, catching his hand and refusing to let it go when the other man glared and tugged sharply. Trace pulled him closer, heart flip-flopping as he dipped his head, fingers tunneling into Riley's hair and kissed him soundly.

Never let it be said that he couldn't bend the rules of his own game when the boon offered was so damn sweet.

Riley moaned, his free hand coming up to tangle in Trace's hair as he pushed up to his toes to kiss him back. Oh, Trace was in so much trouble. Desire flowed through him, hot and sharp, as Riley shuddered.

After a few moments, Riley broke the kiss, tugging his hand from Trace's and stepping back, panting lightly and looking as though he wanted to jump right back into the kiss. Trace wouldn't mind that at all, his own breath more than a little sketchy.

"Wow."

Trace smiled. That was a good thing, he figured. His gaze drifted down to Riley's lips and the lure of them, soft and damp from the kiss, was too great. Before he could really think about it, he took a step forward, closing the slight gap Riley had put between them, and took those tempting lips again.

Riley moaned, arms twining around Trace's neck as he kissed him back—no hesitation, no restraint. Trace's cock ached as he got his first real taste of what Riley's unleashed passion would be like. A firestorm.

Stumbling a bit, Trace walked them back in the general direction of the blanket then broke the kiss and sank down onto the blanket with him.

Riley gave him a wicked, inviting look. "Did you decide you'd rather have me for lunch?"

Trace leaned forward, crouched over him, lips hovering over his, urging Riley to lie back fully. "Maybe...just an appetizer," he breathed before slanting his mouth across Riley's and sweeping his tongue possessively inside.

Riley groaned and pulled Trace closer. He bit Trace's lower lip—sharp and arousing—and Trace groaned roughly. He deepened the kiss and Riley seemed to sink into it. That was what Trace wanted, to feel Riley bend to him just a little. The battle was far from over, Trace knew, but just a lull in the skirmish was a welcome diversion.

Riley moaned when Trace broke away and Trace soothed the other man's obvious disappointment by trailing a line of hot, wet kisses down his neck instead. Riley arched and tipped his head back, his hands sliding over Trace's shoulders and his fingers dipped under the collar of his shirt. The touch was electric, sending a shock wave through Trace. It wasn't enough though. As if he'd heard the thought, Riley reached down and pulled the hem of Trace's shirt free of his jeans, one hand slipping under the fabric to touch his skin.

Trace hissed in pleasure and lifted his head, their lips meeting again. Riley took control of the kiss, his tongue tangling with Trace's.

Oh fuck, he tastes good. Like blackberry wine, fresh and intoxicating. Trace shuddered as Riley's fingers trailed up his back, under his shirt. His own hands returned the favor, one sliding between them and under Riley's t-shirt. His fingers splayed, thumb tracing the line of his rib cage.

That got a reaction. Riley's back arched and one long leg came up to hook against Trace's hip, guiding Trace to settle naturally between his thighs. It felt like fucking home.

"Trace," Riley gasped against his lips, body surging closer when Trace's hand slid higher and one finger brushed the young man's nipple.

"Right here, darlin'," Trace whispered in reply, rocking against him.

Riley responded with one hand curled around the back of Trace's neck, long fingers tangling in his hair as the kiss deepened. Their tongues tangled and teeth grazed lips, as if they wanted to devour each other. Abruptly, Riley hooked both legs at Trace's hips, rolling them so he was on top. Trace approved, oh hell yes, he did. He'd had visions of Riley riding him all night long for weeks and this was as close as he'd gotten to the reality. Riley sank both hands into Trace's hair and kissed him hard.

Trace groaned, skimming one hand down to cup Riley's ass through his jeans, and Riley shuddered. It was a breathless search for more skin—Riley tugging Trace's shirt up farther and Trace retaliating with a firm rub of his thumb across Riley's nipple. The other man let out a ragged moan and Trace pulled him closer.

It was right about then that Trace realized if he didn't stop now, he was going to have trouble doing so at all. Riley was too tempting, the attraction far too strong. His hand didn't seem to want to stop touching though. His fingers circled Riley's nipple, tweaking it lightly and the rush of breath Riley let out was what pushed him over the edge.

Panting, Trace broke the kiss. He shook his head sharply as Riley leaned in to try to restart it.

"No...damn, darlin', you're addictive." He could only hope Riley was feeling the craving as strongly as he. By the disappointed look on his face and the hard-on pressed tightly against Trace through Riley's jeans, he thought the feeling was definitely mutual.

"You are a stubborn son of a bitch, Trace Collins."

Trace laughed roughly. "That I am." He sat up, reluctantly easing Riley off him. "We should eat." Something, anything to calm his heart and distract him from the burning desire to grab the other man and forget all about love and forever and his own promises to make something last.

After a long moment of silence, Riley finally nodded, raking a shaky hand through his hair. "Right. Eat."

Trace nodded, despite the ache and the urge to grab Riley and take what those wicked, silvery blue eyes kept promising. Maybe he really was crazy. Or maybe he just wasn't willing to waste another day chasing something that wasn't going to be around any longer than a summer storm. Trace wanted more. He handed Riley a plate and some silverware, gesturing to the various containers. "Help yourself, darlin'." Trace grabbed a hunk of the cornbread and dropped it onto Riley's plate, grinning. "Best part

of it, trust me. Rhonda swears she'll never tell me the secret...like I'm some big cooking threat or something."

Riley opened the containers of food and let out a low sound of pleasure at the scents that wafted up from them. The soft moan made Trace's cock leap inside his jeans. "No, I don't believe you are." He glanced up and met Trace's eyes with another slow smile. "Some things are just meant to be kept secret."

Trace glanced away abruptly, occupying himself pouring a cup of the tea, hands trembling a little before he steadied them and set the cup down to begin fixing his plate. He heaped it high with food and then leaned back on one hand, tilting his head to look up at the sky peeking through the tree cover. He bit off a mouthful of sweet honey cornbread. Damn, he was gonna get that recipe before the chance passed him by.

"What made you realize dancing was your dream, darlin'?" Smiling, he turned his head to look at Riley. "Somehow I've got this image of you in my head as a little blond-headed seven-year-old wanting ballet classes 'stead of soccer practice."

Riley shook his head. "It wasn't anything like that. I didn't get into dancing until I was in high school, my freshman year. We were living in Boston at the time and my school had a dance team, did competitions and all that kind of stuff. I'd never joined any clubs or played sports because we were always moving but my mom said she really liked it there. I thought maybe we'd stay. So I joined the dance team and got hooked."

Riley shrugged, poking at his food with his fork. "But of course, we didn't stay. We moved to Chicago over that summer. But I kept dancing, watched a lot of MTV and practiced on my own. Then after I graduated high school and decided I wanted to stay here, it just seemed smart to get a related job. It's not the kind of dancing I want to do but...it pays the bills and I can save up to make that big move when the time comes."

Trace sighed a little. "I'm not trying to tell you what to do, just saying that I know from experience that sometimes the right time you're waiting for never comes. Maybe you just have to make the right time, ya know?"

He shook his head, holding up a hand in apology. "Sorry, we already talked about that and it's none of my business. So where's your mother now? Do you still talk?" He turned to his side, watching Riley. There were a million things he didn't know about the man and that was just the surface stuff. He could spend forever and never know Riley completely. Unfortunately, he didn't have that long and Riley was determined to make him fight for every second he got. It was all right though, Trace was used to fighting.

Tipping his head to one side, Riley took a bite of his pork. "I think it's Miami. Or Orlando. Somewhere in Florida. She calls me once every few months or so, usually sends me some ridiculous present for my birthday and Christmas together. I think I've seen her once since I graduated and she moved on." He shrugged, shaking his head. "It works for her. I want to feel like I have a home, one that I'm not going to have to leave in a year or six months or whenever she's ready to move on to the next city. I guess that's why I haven't done anything about New York or L.A. I'm comfortable here. I don't want to move again."

Trace smiled knowingly, nodding. "Now that me and you got in common. I can't imagine living anywhere else. Visiting, I got no problem with but this here's home." He tilted his head curiously, hoping he didn't come off as nagging. "Have you looked into, say, some of the arts programs around here? Plays, local musicians, stuff like that? Not instead of your job but in addition to?"

Riley was gifted, even if Trace hadn't seen him dance he would know just by the natural grace Riley had about him. From the way he sat a horse to the way he ate his food to the way he walked. Riley flowed like water, glided almost and it made Trace all but unable to look away.

Riley shook his head. "I never thought about it, honestly. I don't want to be a stripper forever but I need to be dancing. It's an outlet." He met Trace's eyes with a grin. "Hyperactive and all, you know? Dancing keeps me from bouncing off the walls. Jenna says I hardly ever sit still and she's right, I've always got to be moving somehow." He took another bite, gesturing to Trace.

"Tell me something about you. I feel like I'm doing all the talking here and while I could talk for hours, you just might get sick of listening long before I lose my voice."

"I don't think I could ever get sick of listening to you, darlin'."

Riley grinned. "Don't make me prove you wrong."

"All right. Something about me. I can play the piano more than a little good." He grinned at the incredulous surprise on Riley's face and nodded. "Yup. I know, probably not what you'd expect from a roughneck cowboy, huh? But it's a fact."

"I have to know why you know how to play the piano."

Trace snickered. "You make it sound like I learned for some nefarious purpose. Fact is my grandma loved the piano and I'm an only child so it was me who got the lessons my grandma insisted my mother let her pay for. Turned out I was good at it." He shrugged. "Made Grandma happy. I used to play for her when we'd come for a visit. The piano is still in the living room back at the house."

"You'll have to play for me," Riley announced. "There's something awfully sexy about a man who can play the piano." Trace laughed and Riley shook his head, holding up a hand. "Oh, come on! You've seen...okay, no, you probably haven't. *Pretty Woman*. Sexiest part of the movie is Richard Gere playing the piano. I don't even like Richard Gere and that part of the movie gets me hot."

He bit his lip suddenly and Trace knew Riley was realizing what he'd said. Riley averted his eyes and turned his attention to his food.

Trace smiled and nodded. "I'll play for you anytime you want. All you have to do is ask." He scooped up the last bite of his shredded pork with what was left of the cornbread and groaned, flopping dramatically onto his back. "I'm going to explode."

Riley's laugh was light, charming and Trace turned his head to look at him, wanting more of that sweet sound.

"I am...look." He dragged up his shirt, patting his stomach. "I'm gonna bust any second. Watch out, could get messy!"

Riley set his plate aside and scooted over on his knees, poking lightly at Trace's stomach, laughing when Trace groaned and tried to bat his fingers away. "Doesn't look to me like you're in any danger of exploding." Riley's eyes wandered over Trace's exposed stomach before meeting his eyes again. "Matter of fact, you look just fine except for this nasty bruise." Riley's fingers brushed over his side where he'd bumped into the kitchen counter.

Trace tensed and drew Riley's fingers away. "I'm not. I'm gonna bust and it's gonna get messy."

Riley shook his head. "Uh-uh. I've got a perfect cure for whatever ails you." Before Trace knew what the other man had in mind, he was already leaning down and pressing his soft lips to Trace's, the kiss slow and sure. He didn't have it in him to resist that mouth, he just didn't.

Trace caught his breath, insides quaking as Riley slanted his mouth over his, kissing him as though he meant it. Trace brought one hand up, sank his fingers into Riley's hair and lifted his own head to deepen the kiss, tongue sweeping into Riley's mouth to taste him.

God help him, he didn't think he'd ever known anyone who could get him ten sheets to the wind high on just a kiss. But Riley did it. Trace inched his other hand around to Riley's back, not pushing or anything, just wanting to touch him. Lord, he was sweet and hot and enough to cure anything, for sure. Trace didn't doubt for a second that Riley was the fix for everything broken.

Riley moaned into the kiss, easing down to lie on his side next to Trace, their mouths never breaking contact. Trace slid his hand down along Riley's side, over the defined muscles of his rib cage, the lean curve of his waist that Trace could feel through his shirt. He was, plain and simple, heaven on earth and Trace wanted to sink into him and never leave.

Gradually, with grazing teeth and soothing tongues, the kiss broke and Trace opened his eyes to meet Riley's hooded gaze, smiling at the slightly dazed look in his eyes that he was sure matched his own.

He brought his hand up and lightly traced his fingertip along the line of Riley's jaw then brushing over his soft lips, he sighed. "I ain't ashamed to say you make me weak, Riley."

Riley propped his head on one hand. "Good. Because it's mutual." It surprised him. He wasn't used to a kiss having the power to rock him that way and he didn't know how to handle it. How could someone he barely knew make him feel so strongly? Riley refused to believe that it was because Trace was right, that they were meant to be together. No, there had to be some kind of logical explanation.

He wanted to kiss Trace again, so he did. Trace groaned and pulled him closer, his arms sliding around Riley and holding him close. Sliding one leg between Trace's

thighs, Riley rocked their hips together, his cock stirring again. He felt like a teenager, eager to go farther, to push as many limits as he could.

Why not? He and Trace were grownups, they knew how it worked, despite all those silly notions Trace had about love. That wasn't what Riley was after. He didn't have to agree with what Trace wanted from him to enjoy kissing him and touching him. Love wasn't anything more than a fairy tale, anyway. Sex was real and it was a whole lot more fun.

Breaking the kiss, he rubbed his lips along Trace's jaw, stubble grazing his cheek. Riley was usually turned-off by the rough-and-ready type but the look suited Trace. It was sure working for Riley right now. He hadn't wanted anyone quite this much in a long time.

"I'm still awfully hungry," he murmured, lips pressed to Trace's jaw.

Trace let out a rough groan. "You're going to be the death of me, darlin'." His eyes suddenly went more serious than the moment seemed to warrant. "But what a way to go." Before Riley could wonder at the look in his eyes, Trace lifted his head and captured his mouth in a heated kiss. He pulled out all the stops—tongue, teeth and lips coming into play. Riley had never met anyone who took kissing to an art form but that was what it felt like when Trace kissed him.

Trace reached out and wrapped one arm around Riley's waist, pulling him over to straddle his hips just as they were before they'd eaten. Riley lifted his head and grinned down at him, rocking his hips slowly.

"What happened to 'I'm gonna bust', cowboy?"

Trace's grin was boyish, too charming by half and the niggling in the back of Riley's mind kicked up a notch. The man was danger of a different kind and he knew it. Did it stop him or make him pull away? Not a chance.

"It's a different kind of busting now, darlin'. C'mere and lemme show you."

Riley went. He couldn't have resisted if his life depended on it. And the kiss he got was well worth the risk, for the moment at least.

Trace's mouth took over and it seemed as if Riley's whole consciousness narrowed down to the kiss. It was hot and consuming, the kind of kiss that was designed to rock a man right down to the core. Riley definitely wasn't immune. He worked his hands into Trace's hair, kissing him back with every bit of his skill. Trace wasn't the only one who could wreak havoc with his mouth. He rocked his hips against Trace's, bringing their bodies into it. Trace wasn't stupid, he'd realize soon enough that sex with Riley wasn't something he should put off or turn down.

Panting, Trace broke the kiss and Riley's lips curved in a smug smile. That was one hell of an ego stroke.

"So what was that you were saying about showing me? I have plenty of ideas on just what you could show me." Riley trailed his hand down Trace's chest, fingers hovering over the button of his jeans. He was itching to undo it, to really show Trace

what he could do. All he needed was five minutes and the man wouldn't be thinking about love. He'd be lucky if he could think at all.

Trace's muscles jumped under the light touch and Riley's lips curved. He half expected Trace to stop him but when no hand came down to restrain him, Riley took that as permission and deftly undid the button on the other man's jeans.

Their breaths were a matching state of ragged and Riley's heart thumped wildly. Slowly, eyes locked, he tugged down the zipper and Trace didn't stop him then either. Anticipation surged through him, making him ache even more.

"I can show you a lot, darlin'. If you'll just let me."

That was a loaded response and Riley knew it. He chose to ignore the undertones and instead focused on the delicious offer of more. "Like?"

"Like this," Trace replied, reaching down and guiding Riley's hand inside his jeans.

Riley groaned, tongue slipping out to lick the other man's mouth. He cupped Trace through his underwear, thumb rubbing along the rigid length of his cock. "Now you're talking my language," he whispered, moaning as Trace kissed him again.

Spurred on by Trace's encouragement, Riley curved his hand over Trace's cock, stroking through his underwear. He wanted more but as far as he could tell, Trace preferred to take this slowly. Okay, some guys liked that. Riley wasn't one of them but he didn't mind as long as it ended with him getting what he wanted. For the moment he'd just concentrate on getting as much pleasure as he could and on testing Trace's limits. Riley might be willing to let Trace take it slow, but he wasn't above trying to pick up the pace.

Riley rubbed the heel of his hand over Trace's cock, delighted to feel Trace shudder beneath him. He deepened the kiss, pressing his body close to Trace. This would work much better minus both their shirts but Riley wasn't ready to stop touching Trace to get rid of clothes just yet. Instead, he slid his other hand under Trace's shirt, fingers trailing over his skin. Trace's stomach jumped and Riley smiled into the kiss. He would be willing to guarantee that love wasn't anywhere near Trace's mind right now, unless it was loving what Riley was doing.

Trace wrapped his arms around Riley, pulling him down flush against him and Riley couldn't help the tremor that went through him as he was rolled to his back. Oh god, that felt good—Trace over him, his weight pinning him to the ground and all the while Riley's hand squeezed and touched and rubbed the other man's cock.

It wasn't enough. He needed to feel the silky heat in his hand. Riley moaned, shifting his hand awkwardly and managed to ease it down inside Trace's underwear. It was a tight fit, but he didn't care, and neither did Trace, from the rough sounds of pleasure he made.

His cock felt like satin—warm and hard, alive in his hand. Riley's whole body ached for more, it seemed, and he brought his other hand down, shoving at Trace's jeans until they bunched around his thighs and Riley could wrap his fingers around the other man's naked cock.

"Oh fuck," Trace moaned, breaking the kiss to pant heavily against Riley's lips.

"I wish you would," Riley moaned in return, lifting his hips in eager invitation. A few tugs and their clothes could be gone. Riley craved it and damn it, he could tell Trace did too. "What are you waiting for?" he asked, impatience heavy in his voice.

Trace lifted his head and the expression on his face as his mind seemed to clear made Riley wish he hadn't said anything. Trace shifted, easing off Riley and slid to one side, tugging his clothes back into order.

Fuck.

Riley sat up, raking a hand through his hair. He wasn't surprised to find his fingers trembling. His whole body was on fire, nerves feeling raw and exposed. He wasn't used to being turned down.

Trace sat up as well and Riley forced himself not to stare, averting his gaze to the clover growing along the bank of the creek as Trace gathered the remainder of the meal back into the saddlebags. Riley could feel Trace's eyes on him, and after a moment, he turned his head to find Trace holding out his hand, an inviting smile curving his lips.

"Come on."

Riley's brows furrowed. "Come on where?"

"Back to the house. You wanted me to play for you. No time like the present, right?"

Riley bit his lip to hold in the groan, nodding. "Okay. Sure." Honestly, that was the last thing he needed right now but he seemed to have lost the power to say no. When did that happen? He helped Trace fold the blanket and looked around to be sure they hadn't left anything.

As Trace secured the saddlebags and blanket then swung up onto Raven's broad back, Riley realized with a start that the palms of his hands were damp and clammy. He was nervous. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd been this nervous. Actually, if he was honest, he'd have to admit that he also couldn't remember any time when he'd felt so strongly, had his emotions tugged on quite this way. It was more than a little disconcerting.

Ignoring the look Trace was giving him, Riley swung up onto Cinnamon's back and they set off toward the house again. Riley focused on trying to get his composure back into place. He had to be able to handle watching Trace play the piano and not want to throw caution to the wind and just jump the man. It wasn't going to be even remotely easy.

Trace remained silent as they rode back, the sun sinking lower and by the time they approached the house it was beginning to darken, slowly, like long fingers reaching out to tangle around the light and pull it away. Where had the day gone? It'd been a long time since Riley had spent a day with someone and didn't wish he were somewhere else. Other than Jenna, that is.

Trace reached out and caught Cinnamon's reins, guiding him into the barn and as he swung down off Raven, Riley dismounted too, though much more awkwardly. He stepped out of the way while Trace dealt with the horses.

"All set. Come on." This time, Trace didn't give him a choice, catching Riley's hand with a smile.

Riley nodded, swallowing hard and steeling himself as Trace led him back to the house. He had no doubt Jenna was home by now, probably gloating, and knew as surely as he knew his own name that she'd be pumping him for details the moment he got home. He'd like to think he was going to get her back for this but he knew he couldn't. He'd gone with Trace without any urging from anyone and now dealing with the aftermath was going to be his own problem.

Riley shook the thoughts off as Trace brought him into the house, his free hand clenching into a fist. He could do this. He could. It was just a matter of control. The only problem was, Riley wasn't entirely sure he had enough to withstand Trace. The man pressed far too many of his buttons without even trying. If he tried? Oh fuck. Riley was all but sunk, and he knew it.

Trace shut the front door behind them, took off his hat, and smiling, reached over to pluck off Riley's. "We'll have to get you one of your own that fits." He gave Riley's hand a squeeze and a light tug. "C'mon, in here."

The piano was tucked in the corner of the living room, gleaming in the fading twilight. Trace led Riley over and sat him on the bench beside him, and Riley squared his shoulders, reminding himself that he could do this, he just had to keep his cool. Trace gave him a light nudge with his shoulder, startling him. "Relax, darlin'. It won't bite and neither will I."

Trace brought his fingers to the smooth, worn ivory keys, closing his eyes briefly before opening them and beginning to play a slow, haunting melody, the notes tangling together in a sensual dance.

Riley's breath caught in his throat as the first notes filled the air, immediately swept into the magic of the music. He could feel the slow, liquid tugs inside him, the music undoing him in ways he hadn't even imagined it could. Right then, Riley knew he was in even more trouble than before. It wasn't lust he felt, or not just lust, anyway. Trace was opening locks that Riley had been sure were completely secure, undermining the walls he'd built around himself.

Breathless, he said nothing as Trace played, heart aching at the utter beauty of the music, completely defenseless and he knew it. When the last note faded, all Riley could do was stare, meeting Trace's eyes in the shadowy darkness, stricken completely speechless. What was he supposed to say when everything he'd thought he could count on to protect him had been swept away so easily?

"What was that?" His voice was soft, shaky, but he couldn't steady it to save his life. "I've never heard it before."

Trace smiled, reaching a hand up to brush back a stray lock of Riley's hair. "It doesn't have a name. I wrote it."

Riley let out a strangled sound, and tossing caution to the wind, he leaned in and kissed Trace. He knew he shouldn't but he couldn't stop himself. Trace had swept away all his defenses and Riley was acting purely on instinct, offering himself up in a way he wouldn't have dared any other time. Trace's arms slid around him, pulling him closer and Riley didn't resist, pressing against the other man and tipping his head back to deepen the kiss.

It was slow and languid, tongues tangling and teeth nipping gently and when they finally broke apart, eyes meeting in the lengthening shadows of the darkening house, Trace smiled.

Riley didn't let him say anything, just leaned in and gently bit his lower lip. Trace had turned him down twice today. Maybe he wasn't comfortable with outdoor sex but they weren't outside now. He thought Trace was going to be a tough nut to crack. Maybe Riley would have to work a little harder. Usually, guys bent over backward to give Riley what he wanted. He thought the challenge might be fun, a change of pace.

Trace shifted on the piano bench, turning toward Riley and pulling him closer. Riley let him, sighing into the kiss when Trace's arms came firmly around him. He could get used to this, to quiet, sexy kisses that made his heart pound. Riley broke the kiss and met Trace's eyes, grinning.

"Want to take this upstairs, cowboy? Or at least somewhere more comfortable? I want to get my hands everywhere on you." Not just his hands but Riley figured they could start there.

Trace didn't say anything and for a second Riley was worried he was actually going to say no. Luckily, the man wasn't a complete aberration of nature and the next thing he knew Trace was tugging him along behind him. Not far, just across the room to the couch, but that was an improvement.

Riley smiled up at him as Trace pushed him back on the cushions. "This is more like it," he murmured, legs automatically shifting apart to allow Trace to settle between them. Riley refused to acknowledge how good it felt and not in a purely sexual way either.

"You're hard to resist, Riley. I'm like a moth trying to resist the porch light on a summer night."

Riley laughed softly, arching against him. "I like how you put things." It was endearing, very down-home and honest. Riley hadn't run across a lot of honesty from men before Trace.

"I like how you look, stretched out on my couch, darlin'. Like ya fit right here."

Riley would have answered, would have protested, but Trace didn't give him a chance. The kiss was torrid, hotter than any heat wave, and threatened to melt him from the inside out. Determination filled Riley. One way or the other, he wasn't leaving this house without knowing exactly what an orgasm from the soft-spoken cowboy felt like.

Reaching down, he worked Trace's jeans open and slid his hand inside without hesitation. Trace groaned against his lips and Riley smiled.

"You know, my jeans come off too."

Trace's eyes gleamed and he rose to his knees on the couch, hands reaching for Riley's button and zipper. Riley let him, anticipation humming under his skin. And it was worth it when Trace's fingers brushed his cock through his underwear as he slowly drew the zipper down. Riley shuddered, lifting his hips and giving Trace an inviting look.

"Touch me, cowboy. I know I said I wanted to get my hands all over you but I want yours on me too. They're awfully sexy."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Trace murmured, leaning down again to kiss him, his hand cupping Riley's cock, fingers rubbing along the length. Riley shuddered and tugged Trace closer with one hand, stroking with the other. He wasn't going to let the kiss break, wasn't going to give Trace a chance to pull away again.

He slid his free hand around to tangle in Trace's hair. The man's hair was just as sexy as the rest of him. Heavy and thick and the way it fell in a curtain against Riley's cheek when they lay like this made him wonder what it'd be like to feel that hair brushing against his thighs, his stomach, every inch of him.

Trace wasn't hesitant now, kissing him with a possessiveness that made Riley's stomach flip. His tongue was demanding, his hand on Riley's cock even more so as they rocked against each other.

Riley wanted more. It'd been that way all day, it seemed. Him wanting more, Trace withholding it. He had to wonder if that was the man's plan. Wear him down with unfulfilled lust until Riley cracked and promised him anything he wanted, including his heart, if Trace would just fuck him.

It wasn't a bad plan, to be honest, and Riley found himself anticipating each delicious battle.

Hooking his leg around Trace's hips, Riley poured himself into the kiss, putting all that frustrated desire into it. Whatever Trace's plan, it wouldn't work on Riley. He had a plan of his own. He figured he could wear Trace down eventually by reminding him constantly of just how good their chemistry was. Only a saint could keep saying no.

Riley let his hand slide free of Trace's hair, skimming across his shoulder and down his side, fingers dipping underneath the waistband of his underwear. He didn't wait for approval, fingertips skimming Trace's hip and curving around to his ass. The man was built and his ass was sexy as hell. Riley could hardly wait to get all those clothes off him.

Breaking the kiss, he grazed Trace's lower lip with his teeth and their eyes locked. He tugged at Trace's jeans and underwear, getting both down just enough to wrap his hand around Trace's cock. "I've been wanting to do this all day," he whispered against Trace's lips, his heart pounding. He knew, if Trace turned him down now, he would lose it.

"If I recall, darlin', you had my cock in your hand, just like this, earlier."

"It's not the same and you know it. I meant more than that."

Trace's hand eased inside Riley's underwear, the touch sizzling. "Tell me. What have you been wanting?"

Riley's eyes narrowed. "You."

"You got me. Oh, do you ever got me, darlin'." Trace released Riley's cock just long enough to do some shoving of his own and finally they both had jeans and underwear bunched around their thighs, hands on cocks and lips a hairsbreadth apart in the fading twilight. "I want to see you come, Riley."

A shudder rippled through Riley and he nodded, hips lifting into Trace's stroking hand. "You keep that up and it isn't going to be long, cowboy." Had it really just been that morning that he'd been vowing he wanted nothing to do with the man? It was official, he was a fucking idiot. Love? No. Sex? Oh fuck yes.

Riley wanted to see Trace come too, so he tightened his hand and stroked faster. Trace moaned, his hips rocking into Riley's touch. It was sexy as hell and Riley kept his eyes on Trace's face, wanting to see every reaction even as he savored his own. It had been a while since anyone had gotten him this turned-on, especially without actual sex happening. When it did happen, Riley knew it would be explosive, to say the least. Trace rubbed a fingertip over the sensitive spot just below the head of Riley's cock and he gasped, hips bucking.

Trace was awfully good, and Riley was glad, because otherwise, trying to wear him down just wouldn't be worth it, no matter how hot or sexy he was.

"You're damn good at this, darlin'," Trace panted.

"I was just thinking the same thing about you."

Then there was no breath for words as their lips met and this time Riley was just as demanding, lifting his head off the cushion for a better angle, his fingers curling against Trace's ass.

Riley discovered that when he arched, his cock brushed against Trace's stomach, bared where Riley had tugged his shirt up. Oh hell, that feels good. He did it again, cock sliding through Trace's circled fingers, the head rubbing against the warm skin of his stomach.

He slid his hand up along Trace's back, dragging the shirt farther as he went. With a soft grunt of reluctance, Trace broke the kiss long enough to let Riley tug it the rest of the way off and damn, Riley wanted to see him now.

He gave Trace's shoulders a light shove, fingers gone from stroking to idly fondling as his attention was distracted by the lure of strong arms, wide, golden chest and nipples that begged for his mouth.

Who was Riley to deny them? Smiling wickedly, he lifted his head and covered a nipple with a hot, open-mouth kiss.

Trace moaned and Riley grinned against his chest, his tongue flicking over the taut bud of Trace's nipple. Riley closed his eyes to soak up the moment, memorizing the way Trace tasted and the way he felt, lying over him. He wasn't going to mind working on wearing Trace down, not when it meant he'd get more, much more, of this.

Riley had been with his share of guys and they'd all been hot or sexy, but not one of them had pushed his buttons the way Trace did. The man seemed to have his own special brand of hot and it was ridiculously potent. If he didn't have such crazy ideas about love and destiny and who knew what else, Riley just might consider making this a semi-permanent thing. That was rare for him or at least it had been for the last few years. He'd firmly avoided anything and everything that might develop into a relationship.

Pushing the thoughts away, Riley focused on Trace, teeth grazing his nipple before he trailed his mouth across the wide expanse of Trace's chest. He could feel Trace's heart racing under his lips, the pace matching his own. He loved knowing Trace was just as affected as he.

Trace wasn't one to languish and let Riley do all the work though, and Riley gasped when abruptly the other man gave him a push backward and bestowed what had to be the world's wickedest grin on him. Riley found his shirt whipped off and he groaned and arched when Trace bent his head and took one of his nipples into his hot mouth.

Heat. Wet. Oh sweet god, the man was going to drive him out of his mind.

Riley did his best to keep stroking—tighter, faster—and Trace returned the favor. Riley's fingers brushed over the head of Trace's cock and came away with a slight dampness. His tongue tingled, wishing he could taste him. Instead he fisted a hand in Trace's hair and dragged his mouth up to taste his lips in a devouring kiss.

It wasn't going to be long now. Riley could already feel the tingling in his balls, the driving need to come and come hard. He was determined to bring Trace with him and maybe next time it wouldn't be nearly so easy for him to refuse to go farther.

Trace nipped his lip and Riley groaned, his hand curling around the back of Trace's neck to keep him close. Their bodies rocked in an erratic rhythm, the stroking awkward now but it was working just fine. Riley realized that right now he was more turned-on from a hand job from Trace than he ever had been during sex with someone else. The man was definitely potent and that would be easy to get hooked on.

Riley kissed Trace even harder. He didn't want to think. He just wanted to lose himself in all the sensations and pleasure, and there were plenty. Trace's tongue thrust into his mouth in an erotic imitation of sex and Riley moaned, his hand tightening on Trace's cock.

Breathless, he broke the kiss but didn't go far, panting against Trace's lips. He wanted to hear Trace when he came.

"Trace..." Riley hissed, arching hard.

Trace just nodded, panting just as hard, and Riley couldn't wait any longer, eyes closing as the first wave hit him like a tsunami, knocking the breath from his lungs.

Holy shit... Riley dug his fingers into Trace's hair and his hips bucked, cum splashing hot against his stomach, marking Trace too.

Then just as his orgasm began to fade to aftershocks, Trace shifted his hand, wrapped it around Riley's on Trace's cock and made him stroke tighter, faster. It was ridiculously sexy and Riley clung, nipping Trace's lip as he whispered to him to come, how bad he wanted to see it, how fucking sexy he was.

Whether Trace heard him or not, Riley didn't know, but a split second later the man let out a rough shout and stiffened. Long, ragged moans escaped Trace as he came and Riley had never in his life heard anything as sexy as the sounds Trace made. Oh my god.

Riley watched through his lashes as Trace panted and shuddered. He loved seeing it, knowing he was the reason that Trace was breathless and shaking. Trace seemed to gather himself a bit, peering down at Riley.

"I'd write a hundred songs if they could get that kind of response." Trace laughed a little. "And I'll be off you just as soon as my legs aren't jelly."

Riley slid his hand up Trace's back. "I don't mind. I'm not exactly into moving right now myself." Plus, Riley figured this was a win for him, after Trace putting him off twice earlier. He was sure the next time would be easier. Trace wouldn't be so quick to say no, not when he remembered tonight.

It was kind of nice, he decided, Trace sprawled on top of him like that. Awkward and a bit uncomfortable with cum between them and their jeans tangled around their legs but it didn't seem to matter, it was still nice.

Finally Trace shifted, groaning as he pushed up to his knees and stretched behind him to grab a box of tissues on the end table. Riley laughed a little—it was such a weird moment. Usually when orgasm happened the cleanup involved a shower and a second round of sex.

They were silent as each wiped off as best they could, tugging jeans and underwear back up. Trace grabbed their shirts off the floor and gave Riley a sheepish smile as he handed him his.

Their eyes met as Riley pulled the shirt on and suddenly the silence wasn't so comfortable. There was so much tenderness and emotion in Trace's eyes that it was impossible for Riley to ignore.

Riley exhaled, his hands trembling with the emotions that swept through him, his heart pounding so fast and so hard it hurt. "I don't...I don't know what to say, what to do..." He knew he ought to ask Trace to take him home right now, before he could get any more stirred up, but he wasn't anywhere near clearheaded. Plus, the secret part of him that Trace had unlocked and set free was demanding more and Riley didn't have any control over that.

"You're serious, aren't you? About this love thing?" Trace nodded slowly and Riley exhaled again. "Okay. Okay. I...I still don't know what to say. I should but I don't." Love. Real love, the kind that held nothing back, that didn't keep secrets or tell lies or

want him to be anything but exactly what he was. How strange that Riley had wished for exactly that, and now that he had it, had no idea what to do with it.

It wasn't enough though, and he knew that. He didn't really know Trace and his instincts had been wrong before. Riley wouldn't follow them blindly again, he would take his time and make sure he knew Trace inside and out before he let that last lock open.

Trace wrapped his arms around Riley, pressing his lips to the top of his head and smiling. "It's all right, darlin'. You'll get used to it." He tipped Riley's face up and brushed another soft, brief kiss across his lips. "Why don't I take you home? It's been a heck of a day for you, I think."

Riley nodded, tamping down on the part of him that wanted to do anything but go home, that wanted to let Trace wrap him up in those strong arms and never let him go. "I think that's a good idea."

He slid off the couch and straightened, his stomach flipping madly. He'd never felt like this before, had never been so floored by emotion—his own or someone else's—to be this rattled. Even when he'd been certain he was in love— Riley cut that off sharply. He wasn't going there. Not now. This was neither the time nor the place to examine that too closely.

"Yeah, I'm sure Jenna's wondering where I am and everything. It's my night to cook dinner for us." It was a lame excuse and they both knew it. Jenna would have called him long before now if she'd been at all worried about him. Well, she might not be worried but Riley was.

Trace smiled, nodding as he rose and pulled the cover gently over the keys, then turned to Riley. Trace reached for his hand and Riley gave it, sighing as the cowboy pulled him close again, strong arms slipping around him, dipping his head to nuzzle his hair. "Don't be afraid. It's gonna be all right, I promise." He gave Riley a light squeeze before pulling back and nodding toward the front entryway. "C'mon, let's get you home."

Chapter Four

Hairbrush? Where the hell was his hairbrush? There it was, right on top of his gym bag, where he'd left it. Riley snatched the brush up, pacing back and forth in front of his vanity table as he ran the brush through his hair, oblivious to the din of the dressing room, too occupied with his own internal chaos. His eyes kept darting back to the table, to his phone, sitting like a cheerful red beacon right in the center. Riley glanced up at the clock on the wall—nine o'clock. Not too late to make a call. Not unless Trace was one of those people who went to bed at sunset. Riley chewed on his lower lip, tapping his fingers on his thigh as he settled into his chair.

His own reflection stared back at him from the mirror, nearly ready for his first cue of the night, his hair loose in a tousled mass of curls, his skin dusted with shimmery powder and his lips glossed. Riley had taken extra care with his appearance tonight, part of him hoping maybe Trace would show up at the club. But when he'd peeked out from behind the curtain a few minutes ago, there'd been no sign of the man. Heaving a sigh, Riley snatched up the phone and dialed. Jenna had, purposely he knew, left Trace's number on a note on his fridge. It'd been there when he'd come home the other evening. The little wench was far too smart for her own good.

"Hey. Trace. It's, um..."

Riley could all but hear the smile in Trace's voice. "Hey, darlin'. You at work?"

Riley exhaled, feeling as though a weight lifted off his shoulders when Trace didn't make a fuss over him calling. "Yeah. Waiting for my first cue, and...well. I wanted to talk to you. Not about anything in particular, just...talk." He could imagine the preening grin on Trace's face right now, but instead of making him angry, the thought had Riley smiling. "I guess a little part of me was hoping you'd be here."

He couldn't deny that he'd thought about being able to dance for Trace, to see those dark blue eyes of his heat in reaction. He'd looked for Trace yesterday, and the day before too, and had been surprisingly disappointed when he hadn't shown. It was silly, Riley knew, but oh, he loved the idea of Trace coming just to watch him. It did marvelous things for his ego.

"Well, I figured I'd done enough stalking for a couple of days." Trace paused for a long moment, the tone of his voice changing subtly. "Do you want me to come by? I can be there in twenty minutes if you want."

Riley smiled, leaning back in his chair. Just the fact that Trace would come if Riley wanted him to made him happy. "No, you don't have to. I guess I just kind of got used to seeing you here. I was too mad at you to care if you were here or not but after the other day...I guess things are different now." Which was, he figured, exactly what Trace wanted. Riley wasn't averse to the idea of things changing but he wanted it to be

at his pace, on his terms. That pace and those terms had been shaken all to hell the other night.

"All the other boys have been teasing me, asking me where my cowboy is. I take it I'm not the only one who noticed your stalking." His voice was teasing and he hoped Trace would take it as such. Now that Riley had cooled down, he actually kind of admired Trace's tactics and persistence.

Trace laughed. "At least they knew who I was stalking. You, darlin', were adorably oblivious. I wanted to ask you something. I was gonna give you a call tomorrow afternoon but since you called..."

"Dare I ask?" Riley's voice was light, but he was only half joking.

"I was hoping the next time you have a night off you'd let me take you out. I don't figure the other day counted as a date and I'd like to take you on a real one, kind of make up for my unorthodox beginning."

Riley blinked, raking a hand through his hair. "A date? A real date? You mean, like, going out to dinner and stuff?"

Trace's voice was amused when he replied. "That's exactly what I mean, darlin'. A real date."

Riley's heart flipped but he pursed his lips, propping one foot on the edge of the vanity table, rocking his chair idly back and forth, his eyes fixed on the shiny leather of the thigh-high boots he wore. "A real date...I don't even know how long it's been since I was on a date. Unfortunately, I have plans on my next night off."

Trace went quiet, and Riley tapped a finger against his lips, thinking.

"I could do something tomorrow if you'd like. I don't have to be here until eight. If you're up for it, you could come over and I could make us dinner." Riley held his breath. He didn't let people into his life easily and he never had dates at home in his private space. He wondered if Trace realized just how big a step this was for him.

"Do you need me to bring anything?" Trace's voice was easy and Riley relaxed, smiling.

"No, I've got it covered. Just bring yourself."

"All right then. Say, four o'clock okay or is that too early? Not early enough?"

"No, four is fine. I'll probably just be starting dinner at that point but I'm fine with you coming a bit early." A little tingle of giddiness started in the pit of Riley's stomach and he made a mental note to set his alarm clock when he got home, so he didn't sleep too late and not have enough time to do everything that needed to be done.

"I...I'm looking forward to seeing you," Riley blurted out before he could stop himself, but he didn't regret it, couldn't. Not when he could just hear the smile over the phone line. He liked that—no, he loved that—it seemed to be so easy for him to make Trace happy. At the same time though, Riley was well aware of the flip side of that coin. If he could easily make Trace happy, he could probably hurt him easily too, and the

more time he spent thinking about Trace, the more Riley realized that was the last thing he wanted to do.

"I'm glad. Me too, darlin'. I missed you the past couple of days. I'll let you go. You probably have to get ready. I'll see you at four tomorrow. I'm glad you called, Riley. You can call me anytime, don't worry about looking at the clock. Anytime, I mean it."

"Don't tell me that, you just might regret it. I'm one of those people who likes to talk at all hours of the night and I can't exactly go waking Jenna up to listen to me ramble since she works a real job and all. I do have to finish getting ready though."

Part of him didn't want to hang up the phone, wanted to just sit there for the rest of the night listening to Trace, to the warmth in his voice. Riley was already getting addicted to hearing that. It was so new to him, to hear someone speak to him with that kind of care for him, not to mention knowing that Trace actually listened to everything he said.

"I'll definitely see you tomorrow. And, well...the same goes for you. For calling, you know? If I can't see you every day, then I definitely want to talk to you."

Trace's lips curved. "Promise. Be careful, darlin'." Part of him was tempted to say "I love you" before hanging up, the words burning his tongue, but he didn't. He sighed a little when Riley promised to be careful then the phone clicked in Trace's ear.

He set it down, leaning back in his chair and looking around. He loved his house but until recently hadn't really noticed the one bad thing about it.

It was empty.

Trace pushed away from the table and smiled, flipping off the lights as he made his way upstairs. Not for long. Not for long at all. He made a quick detour into the bathroom, meeting his own guilty eyes in the mirror as he washed down a pair of pills before shutting off that light as well and heading to bed.

* * * * *

Trace climbed the stairs to Riley's second-floor apartment, smiling as he heard Ginger start yapping behind the door. Well, he'd definitely sold himself to one member of the household, at least. Shifting the six-pack of beer he carried, he knocked, grinning at the emphatic, increased yapping.

He heard Riley shush the puppy and then the door swung open and Riley gave him a bright smile. Damn, he was a beautiful man. Trace's heart skipped a beat as the young man lifted up onto his toes to brush a kiss across his cheek.

"Hey, you. Right on time. I like that." Riley grinned as he pulled back, holding his hand out for the six-pack. "I'll take that. Come on in."

Trace smiled, handing Riley the beer and stepped inside, crouching down as Riley shut the door to scoop up the little yapping dog. "Hello to you too, half-pint." He grinned, scratching behind the pup's ear before setting her back down and looked up at Riley, then straightened slowly. "And hello to you."

He slid an arm around Riley's waist, drawing him closer and bending his head to kiss him, soft and gentle, before releasing him with a grin. "So what's on the menu, darlin'?" He let his gaze wander over Riley, drinking him in.

"Steak tips with peppers, onions and mushrooms, wild rice and some nice Italian bread I picked up this morning at the bakery down the street. Plus fruit salad for dessert. You don't have any food allergies I should worry about, do you?"

As he spoke, he led Trace into the kitchen, gesturing to one of the stools at the breakfast bar as he bent to put the six-pack in the fridge "Do you want anything to drink? I have some red wine if that sounds good, or water. Or coffee if you'd prefer."

Trace eyed the stool briefly, decided it looked sturdy enough, and settled on it. "Red wine, at least until the beer gets cold." He flashed Riley a grin. "And no, no food allergies." He felt all warm inside again, because he was sure that while Riley certainly would have been cooking dinner regardless, it was clear he'd gone to a good deal more effort than he might have otherwise. Trace loved that.

Riley got the bottle of wine and a glass, poured it and set it on the breakfast bar in front of Trace before he turned to pull out the makings for dinner from the fridge.

Putting water on to boil for the rice, Riley glanced over his shoulder as he unwrapped the already-chopped steak and vegetables, a warm smile curving his lips that lit Trace up inside. It was so...almost surreal, he decided, the way things had happened, had changed. He liked it, though. As much as Trace liked Jenna, he thought Riley needed more than her in his life. It was time the man started opening up some and Trace was more than happy to encourage him to do so.

"So talk to me while I cook," Riley said, glancing over his shoulder, "or I'll start talking to myself and prove that I'm batty. I'd rather not give you a bad impression. Besides, I figure you're way ahead of me in the getting-to-know-you department, so you have to give me a chance to catch up."

Trace smiled while sipping the wine. "Well, I told you how I got the ranch. Hmm. I used to ride rodeo, barrel racing to be specific, but didn't love it enough to do it professionally. It was just a lot of fun. I don't know...what do you want to know?"

There was only one thing he wouldn't share with Riley. He didn't like keeping anything from him but that was something to wrestle with another time, not right now, while sitting in Riley's sunny kitchen with his darlin' smiling so sweetly at him.

Riley shrugged as he heated the skillet, glancing back at Trace again. "Anything. A silly story from when you were younger or talk to me about your favorite music or food or movies. Or tell me what it was like to be in the rodeo. Isn't that dangerous? I mean, it sounds like it would be, animals can be unpredictable." Turning around, he leaned on the breakfast bar, meeting Trace's eyes with a smile.

"Well, I could tell you the story of the time I ran away from home when I was five. Of course I didn't get very far because I wasn't allowed to cross the street by myself so I ended up walking around the block for about two hours before finally going home when I got hungry." He loved the way Riley's eyes danced when he laughed and the

sound of it. Bright and open, something he thought someone like Riley should always be.

"Somehow I can picture that. I tried running away from home when I was nine. Made it all the way to the bus station downtown before I realized I didn't have enough money for a ticket. I was grounded for a month when my mother found out." Riley squeezed Trace's hand lightly, releasing it to poke at the steak and measure the rice into the pot before he turned back to the breakfast bar, taking a sip from his bottle of water. "What in the world made you decide you wanted to run away from home? And where were you going to go?"

Trace chuckled. "I don't know, same reason I wanted to be Spiderman when I was a kid. Because it sounded like fun. What else about me, let's see. I spent a lot of time in detention but I got good enough grades that my folks didn't get on me too bad. Besides, it was mostly for stupid jock stuff like giving kids wedgies and Tping the teachers' lounge. One time, the football team was playing our archrival, and we all snuck over to the other school the night before the game, spelled out our school's name in lighter fluid on the fifty-yard line and set it on fire. We lost but their field was sporting our name for the rest of the season."

Riley shook his head. "Nice one. A bunch of the football players and cheerleaders from my senior class doused the school lawn with soap one night a few days before graduation. It was pouring the next morning and, oh god, it was such an unbelievable mess. Jenna and I snickered for days over our chemistry teacher picking his way up the lawn to the entrance and trying to hold up his pants so they didn't drag in the soap suds and the mud."

Trace watched Riley move around the kitchen with the sort of ease that came from someone who liked to be there. Maybe that was why Trace had never gotten the hang of cooking. He didn't like the vibe of kitchens, small and kind of closed in, with all this stuff he didn't understand beeping everywhere. Reminded him of a hospital room. He didn't like those either.

"You'll have to come cook us dinner at my house sometime. My kitchen gets no use, big as it is with all those gadgets." Trace wanted to insert Riley into every area of his life, from his kitchen to his bed. It was almost a craving, to have Riley there, everywhere, to be able to turn around and see him, hear him, feel him close.

Riley closed the oven door after carefully turning the steak tips to be certain they cooked evenly. "And that's a crying shame, to have a kitchen like that and not ever use it. Not that I'm a gourmet cook or anything but I do pretty well. Jenna says it's because I watch the Food Network at night after I get home, just to have something to listen to. I fall asleep with the TV on, so she says it's like...osmosis or something."

Trace grinned and rose to come around the island, reaching for the other man. "Hey. C'mere." He slid his arms around Riley from behind, resting his chin on his shoulder. "I've missed you."

Trace turned his face into Riley's hair, inhaling the shampoo scent of it. The curls tickled his nose and he smiled, squeezing Riley lightly.

Riley relaxed as Trace's arms came around him, leaning back against the solid warmth of his chest with a soft sigh. Oh, that was nice. Better than nice. It felt so right, more than he'd ever imagined anything could. He cut off his train of thought with a slight shake of his head. Trace was clearly rubbing off on him, with the paths his thoughts had been taking. Riley wasn't sure if that was good or bad, so the only thing he could think of to do for the moment was to avoid it. As much as he wanted Trace, Riley needed to take things slowly. He was aware that it would be only too easy to lose his heart and his head, and he didn't intend to do either.

"I missed you too." There didn't seem to be any point in not admitting that, especially since Riley figured Trace would see right through a denial. Reaching up, he laid his hand against Trace's cheek, just resting it there.

Trace sighed, turning his face to kiss the palm of Riley's hand, eyes closed. "I love you," he murmured. Riley tensed and Trace sighed again, shaking his head and hugging him a little tighter. "I know that freaks you out and I'm sorry, but I can't not say it." He turned his head and nudged Riley's hair aside to press another kiss to the side of his neck, exhaling. "I've been waiting my whole life to say it. I love you."

Riley closed his eyes briefly, letting out a long, shaky breath. Trace had no idea just what he was doing to him with all those sweet professions. Each one chipped away at his walls a little bit more. Or maybe Trace knew exactly what he was doing. Not that Riley thought it was calculated, he didn't imagine that Trace would stoop that low. Either way, the defenses he'd thought were rock-solid a few days ago were beginning to weaken.

"I'm not going to ask you not to say it. Part of me wants to but it's important to you, I can tell. And I like you enough not to want to try to take that away from you, though it makes me uncomfortable. I guess I don't need to tell you I'm not ready for that—you already know." Riley opened his eyes, slipping out of Trace's arms to turn the meat again.

Trace sat back down, chin propped in his hand. "So you missed me, did you, love? I couldn't stop thinking about you. I got you a present."

"You didn't have to do that." Riley couldn't help it, he stiffened, his stomach tightening. "You don't have to get me things." He could practically feel Trace's bewilderment but that was one thing that he wouldn't allow. It made him squirmy on too many levels.

"Promise you won't do that. Promise me." Riley's voice hardened and he turned around to give Trace a long look. "Please."

Trace shook his head. "All right, I won't. It's nothing big, I just got you a hat, for if we go riding again. So you wouldn't have to borrow mine, that's all. I'll take it back if it makes you uncomfortable." Trace's voice was soothing, gentle. Riley imagined it was the same tone Trace would use to calm a skittish horse. "Darlin', you're not for sale, I

know that. That's not what this is. I just thought it'd be a shame if your skin got burned, that's all."

Riley relaxed, the tension in his body easing as he blew out a breath. "Okay. Okay. I'm sorry I freaked like that, it's just...a touchy subject." Trace didn't seem at all bothered by it though, and Riley worked up a smile. "My very own cowboy hat, huh? I can't wait to try it on. Because if you think I'm not going to be angling for another ride very, very soon, you're out of your mind." He leaned over, giving Trace a light squeeze and a brief kiss. "Now you're going to need to let me finish up out here. If you want to go out to the living room, I set the table out there. You can put the stereo on, some music would be nice and I'll be right out with dinner, just as soon as it's done and I get Ginger's food out so she's not begging for scraps."

Trace nodded, pushing to his feet and pulling Riley close again for another kiss, this one a bit deeper, before letting him go with an affectionate swat on his ass. Trace wandered into the living room and a moment later Riley heard the soft murmur of music from the speakers. He got Ginger's dinner into her bowl before dishing the steak and vegetables and rice onto a big platter, retrieving the bread and sliding it onto a pretty plate with a little bowl of softened butter. Everything smelled good, and he mentally crossed his fingers that Trace would think it tasted as good as it smelled as he lifted the plates, carried them into the living room and over to the table. He set them down and met Trace's eyes.

"Help yourself. I'm going to go get drinks and make sure her highness starts in on her dinner, the little beggar. I'll be right back."

Riley scooped Ginger up and took her back to the kitchen. He returned carrying a beer and a bottle of water.

"Is there anything else you need? With your dinner, I mean?" Riley asked. He handed Trace the beer.

Trace shook his head. "No, dinner looks awesome. There is something I'd like though." Riley lifted his brows curiously and Trace smiled. "I'd like you to relax. I eat my own cooking or takeout on paper plates with beer most nights. I love that you went to all this effort, and I'd love it even more if you'd come here, take a deep breath and relax." He grinned and held out his hand. "I'm gonna love you whether dinner's good or not, baby."

Riley let out a breath with a nervous smile. "I don't know about relaxing. Sorry, I know it's ridiculous." He set down the bottles he held and stepped into Trace's arms. It didn't escape him that their bodies seemed to fit perfectly together but Riley tried not to dwell on that. He pressed a kiss to Trace's lips.

He intended for the kiss to be brief, he really did, but before he could even think about it, his fingers were tangled in Trace's hair, a soft moan of pleasure escaping his lips. There is no doubt about it, Riley thought hazily, Trace's kisses are just plain addictive. Slowly, reluctantly, he broke the kiss and took a half step back.

"Dinner's going to get cold if I don't let us eat."

Trace seemed to gather himself, then smiled and nodded, following Riley back to the table. They were silent for a couple of minutes as plates were filled and drinks poured. Riley watched warily as Trace took a bite and sighed, a smile spreading across his face. "If you didn't already freaking own me, you would now. This is damn good."

Riley grinned proudly. "Thank you. I'm glad you like it." He was privately glad Jenna had been at work all day. She'd have been teasing him mercilessly if she'd known he was cooking dinner for Trace when only a few days ago he'd been vowing to have nothing to do with the man. Riley didn't mind admitting that maybe she'd had a point and maybe she'd been right about Trace.

"I still can't believe you can't cook. Then again, no one's perfect," Riley teased, tasting his own food. Trace was right, it was damn good.

Trace propped his chin in his hand, grinning across the table at Riley. "So, are you saying that other than the cooking thing, I'm perfect?" His eyes sparkled, brows lifting slightly in teasing question.

"I...well...that's...um..."

Trace grinned wider, tilting his head. "Because you keep saying that, you know. You said it the last time I mentioned I couldn't cook. So you think I'm perfect. I'm flattered. I think you're pretty damn close to perfect too, darlin'."

Riley smiled, shaking his head with a sigh. "I think you are pretty darn close to perfect. I keep waiting for something to happen, to show me that you're really not, but...nothing does. I know I don't know you all that well yet, and I'm sure you have your flaws, but I don't think it's any kind of secret that I really like you, Trace, though I didn't want to. I think, maybe, given enough time, we could really have something. I don't think you understand quite how big a compliment that is, but it is. Really."

Trace was still grinning, nearly taking Riley's breath away with that gorgeous smile and he felt lightheaded, but in the best sort of way.

"I wanted to hate you, I really did. And not for any particular reason other than that you caught me off guard. I thought no one could get to me. But you did. And the even more shocking bit is that I kind of like it."

Trace shook his head. "Believe me, Riley, I think I know how big an admission that is for you." He glanced down at his plate, a smirk curving his lips. "You know, this is a beautiful dinner..." He got up and came around the table to draw Riley to his feet. "But suddenly I'm not hungry for food, as delicious as it is."

He tugged Riley closer. "You don't love me yet but you will. I know it and you do too, whether you're ready to admit it or not. I told myself I'd wait until you did to make love to you and I intend to keep to that. But there's a hundred ways I can love you, still. If you'll let me."

Riley felt even more lightheaded now than he had a moment ago, his breath catching in his throat and his eyes widening in disbelief. That was not at all what he'd been expecting. Not even close.

"You're..." He could hardly put the thought into words, at once amazed and, oddly, ashamed. "You really aren't going to...until...oh. Wow. I was just joking when I said that the first day but you were serious." He dipped his head, staring down at their clasped hands, his cheeks flushed as he mumbled. "You're something else."

Trace raised a brow at him and Riley shook his head, cutting him off before he could say anything. "No, listen. I...I've just never known anyone who cared about things like that. I've never cared about things like that. And it makes me a little ashamed of myself because I had every intention of trying to seduce you."

Trace groaned softly. "Darlin', I think I'd sell my soul to have you seduce me. Don't be ashamed. Do it—seduce me. I'd let you, to a certain point." He released one hand to slide it down to Riley's ass and pulled him flush against him. "Lay down with me, let me show you."

Riley's body ached. He'd been in a state of near-constant frustration since their ride and that wasn't something he was used to. If he wanted sex, Riley found a way to make it happen. Trace's lips brushed his ear and Riley shivered. "Lay with me, darlin'," Trace repeated, his breath warm against Riley's neck.

Riley met Trace's eyes, the heat there shaking him right down to his toes. It didn't take much thinking to realize he'd never had a look quite like that aimed at him in his life and he'd been the recipient of what he figured was more than his share of desirous looks.

Trace didn't say anything, reaching out to take Riley's hands, their fingers lacing. Trace gave him a slow, seductive smile and Riley's stomach clenched in anticipation as he turned, leading Trace down the short hall to his bedroom.

Once inside, Trace turned and pulled Riley close, head dipping to capture his lips, the kiss slow and exploring as he guided Riley toward the bed and in unison they sank back onto it, arms around each other, tongues tangling.

Riley couldn't believe it. He was trembling, shaking like a schoolboy after he'd just gotten his first kiss. He'd never thought anyone could have that kind of effect on him, never thought he had that kind of innocence left. He'd been sure that he had experienced every level of sex from mind-blowingly bad to rock-his-world good. But with a simple kiss, Trace erased everything Riley thought he'd known. He wasn't sure if he liked it.

Either way, he couldn't help but respond, inching his body closer to Trace's, both hands sliding down over his shoulders to splay against his broad back, the heat of Trace's skin warming him through the thin cotton of the other man's shirt. Part of Riley wanted to get that shirt off, to take some measure of control back, but he was far too entranced by the kiss to even consider it.

Trace broke the kiss slowly and lifted his head, smiling down at Riley before shifting them both higher on the bed to lay their heads on the pillows, bodies tangled together in a lover's knot that Riley might not mind ever getting untangled.

Trace's hand came up and toyed with the top button of Riley's shirt, their eyes meeting as it popped free. Trace gave him a heated smile and bent his head to press a kiss against the skin revealed. The next button followed suit and Trace kissed there too. Repeated it all the way down, until Riley was breathless and his shirt was open, Trace's mouth pressed against his stomach.

Riley's heart pounded as he curled his hands over Trace's shoulders, shuddering lightly as Trace's tongue trailed over his stomach, warm and damp, sensation rippling through him. He couldn't look away, didn't want to. Slowly, his hands shaking a little, Riley reached for the buttons on Trace's shirt, their eyes still locked as he undid the ones he could reach. It was more than enough to give him a view of gorgeous tanned skin, smooth and perfect, dusted with just enough crisp dark hair. Riley slid one hand under the fabric, caressing gently.

"Come here," he whispered, tugging lightly at the shoulder of Trace's shirt. "You're too far away." He wanted to be able to feel Trace's body pressed against his own, to kiss him and touch him. Riley couldn't even get his mind around the possibility of more, not when Trace's kisses alone were enough to make him drunk.

Trace would follow anywhere Riley wanted him to go if he just asked in that husky voice, his hooded blue eyes melting him on the spot. He obeyed, sliding up over Riley and their lips met naturally, Riley's shaky fingers continuing to undo Trace's shirt until it lay open and Trace groaned as long-fingered hands splayed and slid inside.

His own hand slipped under Riley's open shirt to his side. He had such flawless skin that Trace could hardly wait to see him fully naked. He didn't count the times he'd seen him naked at the club. That was different. That Riley anyone could see for the cost of admission and a two-drink minimum. And the intense encounter on his living room couch had been rushed and half-clothed. This was something else entirely.

This Riley...this Riley was his and his alone. Riley warm and soft, lying in his cloud of a bed. Riley willing and open, giving himself to Trace. No one else got that and this was the first time Trace had seen him truly naked in a way that had nothing to do with clothes. Riley had no walls at that moment, none of the shutters guarding his eyes that frustrated Trace so much. He was vulnerable and he was so beautiful it hurt.

Riley moaned into the kiss, his hands pressed flat against Trace's chest. He broke the kiss and gently nudged Trace to his back, straddling his hips and letting his shirt slip off his shoulders.

Trace held his breath, Riley's smile heated and sultry as he leaned down, pressing a kiss to the hollow at the base of Trace's throat, his teeth scraping the skin, his tongue soothing. Trace sighed in pleasure, eyes sinking closed and savoring the lush sensations. Just as he began to relax, Riley rocked his hips and Trace let out a low, ragged moan.

Trace tilted his head back with another moan, hands coming to Riley's slim hips and lifting his own to rock against him in return. "Damn, darlin'...nobody has ever turned me on the way you do."

Riley's head lifted and he gave Trace a questioning, surprised look. Trace grinned, hands skimming up Riley's back to pull him down and nuzzle his lips. "Nobody has ever made me feel the way you do, Riley. Just by existing, you beat everyone else out. It feels like you're all that exists."

He wondered if Riley felt the same way. He got the feeling he might. If so, it was like a miracle to Trace. Riley was a reason to be, to live, to get up every morning. Found when Trace needed it the most. He closed his eyes, lips moving against Riley's, voice a whisper. "You're my breath."

Riley made a soft sound, working his arms under Trace's shoulders and squeezing lightly before pulling back. "You're going to turn my head if you keep saying things like that, you know that, right?" His voice was light, almost teasing, but Trace got the clear impression he was completely serious. Riley had likely been romanced and been complimented in a thousand different ways but Trace hoped Riley knew that his quietly spoken words were sincere. He'd never meant anything more in his life.

"It's...it's the same way for me. I haven't been able to think of anyone but you. I'm not used to that. You're turning my world upside down and inside out."

Trace smiled up at him. "I'm afraid I can't even pretend to be sorry about that. I want to turn your head and take your heart and change your whole life. Because you've already done all three to me and you didn't even know you had."

Trace hadn't lied, it'd been his birthday the day he'd first seen Riley. But more than that, it'd also been the day he'd found out he might not live to see another one. He couldn't even pronounce the disorder the doctor had rambled off a chart earlier that day but he'd certainly grasped the fact that if the only treatment available didn't work...well, time wasn't on Trace's side.

No one had known, and he'd gone because it was expected of him, when all he'd wanted to do was go home and cry and shout at God and drink until he passed out and wouldn't be scared anymore.

Instead he'd sat in the club that night, pretended to laugh, pretended to have a good time and had barely noticed the strippers circulating and occupying the stages. Until Riley. Trace didn't even know what had caught his attention but for no real reason he had turned and looked and there was an angel on his knees in next to nothing, fluffy fake wings and silver sparkles in his hair and not much else. Trace had seen him as a sign. Riley was his salvation, he just didn't know it yet.

"You already are." Riley whispered, his eyes locked on Trace's, his hands shaking. "You already are."

Trace could feel the panic stirring in Riley, and though part of him said to distract him, he somehow knew that wasn't the way to go. Riley was going to have to face his fear eventually, and if Trace continued to distract him from the panic, it'd just be worse when the realization did hit.

He rolled them to their sides, hand coming up to brush back Riley's mussed hair. "Riley, whatever it is that scares you so much about this, about me...one day you're

going to tell me. Maybe not today, and maybe not tomorrow, but I'm going to need to know. You know that, right?"

There were things about him that Riley needed to know too but Trace was praying that by the time he told Riley there wouldn't be much, if anything, to tell. If the treatment worked, and goddamn it, it had to, it would be just another so-did-I-ever-tell-you-I-was-sick-once story.

Riley didn't answer, looking away and closing his eyes, taking a few deep breaths. After a long, silent moment, Riley opened his eyes and met Trace's gaze, a teasing smile in place that fooled neither of them.

"You mean you don't know enough about me already?" Trace didn't smile back though, and Riley sighed. "If we get to that point...yes, I'll tell you."

Trace drew Riley closer and squeezed him lightly, nuzzling into his hair. "Riley, love, I think I could spend the rest of my life with you and still not know everything there is to know about you." He intended to do just that though. However long that ended up being.

He propped up on his elbow and took a moment to shrug out of his shirt. He smiled at Riley and then skimmed his fingers down the other man's bare side. "Do you know the first time I saw you, I thought I was seeing things, thought an angel had landed or something. But then, you know how beautiful you are. You don't need me telling you."

Trace liked telling him though, liked the way Riley's eyes sparkled and it made Trace feel like it wasn't just something he heard every day, though it probably was. As if it meant something coming from him and Trace loved that.

Riley raised a brow, lifting a hand to comb his fingers through Trace's hair, his lips quirking in a half smile. "Me? An angel? Not likely. The costume isn't everything." Then something appeared to click in his head and his smile widened. "That night. That was the first time I saw you. Ronnie thought it'd be a brilliant idea to stick all of us in wings and glitter and little sheer outfits. Talk about mixed-up first impressions."

Riley's smile heated, sliding his hand down Trace's neck, over his shoulder, curling it at his waist and tugging Trace closer, their lips almost brushing. "A fallen angel, maybe. Especially when I think about all the sinful things I want to do to you." He nipped lightly at Trace's lower lip before kissing him, all heat and desire. Trace could barely breathe through the intensity of it and he let the topic drop, smiling and deepening the kiss as he drew Riley flush up against him. His long legs tangled with his own and Trace rolled, stretching Riley out on his back before breaking the kiss, flipping his hair back out of his face to smile down at him.

Riley followed the motion of Trace's hair with his gaze and then his hands. Trace's brows lifted as Riley sighed and just sifted the strands through his fingers.

"Am I missing something?" Trace asked, not sure what it was that had his lover so fascinated.

Riley leaned up to brush a kiss across Trace's lips. "Apparently so. I love your hair. Don't ever cut it. I've always wanted hair like yours, mine is all but impossible to deal with. The curl drives me batty. I straightened it today. It makes it easier to deal with. I'll wet it down before I go to work then blow-dry it so the curls come back. Guys seem to like that look." Riley shook his head, laughing softly. "And I can't believe I'm letting myself get distracted."

Trace didn't mind though. It was nice to lie here, their bodies tangled, and talk, even about the most inane things. "Darlin', guys like that look because it's the 'I just got out of bed, how about you get me back into it?' look." Trace shifted, urging Riley's long legs apart and slipping between them, rocking against him as he took Riley's lips, kissing him deeply, tongue sweeping into his warm, spicy-sweet mouth before lifting his head again and grinning. "It's exactly what I think every time I see your hair that way."

It was funny, Riley seemed to forget that Trace had seen him every day for a month, seen every way he styled his hair, every outfit he had in his arsenal. It was kind of nice, the way Riley acted as if they'd met like normal folks, and Trace didn't know little things like how Riley did his hair for work.

"Of course, that has nothing to do with your hair, for me anyway. Has to do with 'you're mine'."

Riley didn't say anything, staring up him with hazy, desirous eyes. Then he lifted his head, taking Trace's mouth in another heated kiss, hooking one long leg around the backs of his thighs to pull him close and Trace forgot about words and focused on what they were saying to each other with their bodies.

Trace groaned, rocking his hips forward, cock aching and cursing the clothes between them that kept their bodies from completing what their hearts had already started. He tilted his head into the kiss, slanting his mouth across Riley's, sliding his arms under him to roll again, this time bringing Riley back to straddle him and...oh good god, that might have been a bad move.

Because as soon as Riley settled above him, those slim, wicked hips began to move. Hard, fast circles, slow, sensual twists aimed right at him and Trace shuddered, helpless under the other man's instinctive assault.

Riley didn't let up either, his hands sliding up Trace's chest, fingers rubbing lightly over his nipples and Trace let out a muffled groan into his mouth.

Breathless, Riley broke the kiss, meeting Trace's eyes, both of them panting as they stared at each other.

Trace knew he shouldn't, because it was hard enough to resist Riley fully or partially clothed, but he wanted to see all of him. Needed to almost, as if it were a physical thing. Trace slid his hand down Riley's side, their gazes locked, and he got a thrill out of watching the nuances of expressions on his face.

His fingers brushed Riley's stomach and the other man's eyes widened slightly. Trace's thumb dipped under the waistband of Riley's jeans and there was no mistaking the short gasp and the way Riley's teeth caught his kiss-swollen lower lip.

When Trace's fingers tugged open the button at Riley's waist, Riley moaned softly.

"I thought you weren't going to fuck me until I was in love."

Trace grinned, shaking his head. "Just because I'm getting you naked doesn't mean I'm going to fuck you, darlin'. Besides, there's a lot more to fucking than just my cock in your ass." Though Trace knew that would be amazing when it happened. "How far will you let me go?"

"As far as you'll take me," he whispered. "To the fucking moon, if you want."

Trace's eyes gleamed wickedly. He tangled both hands in Riley's hair then pulled him in for another kiss. Riley went willingly, shuddering when Trace slid one hand down his back and into his jeans. Trace groaned as Riley worked his hands between their bodies. A little clumsily, he undid Trace's jeans and slid a hand inside, squeezing his cock through his underwear. Trace's hips lifted, rocking against Riley.

Breaking the kiss, Trace rolled them both again, so Riley was sprawled back against the pillows. His breath caught when Trace tugged his jeans down past his hips. Trace could hardly draw a full breath as Riley pushed to his elbows, kicking off his shoes. His eyes were wicked and hot as he watched Trace pull the jeans down and trail his fingertips down Riley's calves before he tossed the jeans to the floor.

Crooking a finger, Riley met his eyes with a wicked grin. "C'mere, cowboy. It's your turn to get naked now."

Trace slid back up over Riley, eyes closing with a moan as the other man's hands reached down and inside the back of his open jeans, pushing them and his underwear down over his hips. Riley lingered, fingers stroking over Trace's ass.

"Amazing," he breathed.

Trace's eyes opened, lips curving as he tossed his hair back out of his face. "What is?"

"Your ass." With that, Riley gave him a push and slid from beneath him, leaving Trace sprawled on his stomach, jeans bunched around his thighs. "Stay."

Trace chuckled, brows lifting as he glanced back. "Normally I'm not the type to take orders, darlin'."

"And normally I'm not the type to give them. Things change." Riley winked and shifted lower to tug Trace's jeans and underwear down, then removed his shoes.

Things definitely did change. It was what Trace was counting on. He glanced back over his shoulder, watching Riley. He was so expressive, it was fascinating to see. Like right then, Riley was eyeing his ass as if it were a buffet and he was on a diet.

Curious, Trace shifted slightly, spreading his legs a bit and lifting a brow at Riley. Riley grinned like the Cheshire cat and took the subtle invitation. Trace's breath caught

as the other man ran his hands up the backs of his legs, over his ass and squeezed, kneeling between his thighs.

"You're the most beautiful man I've ever known, Trace," Riley murmured and then stole whatever response Trace might have made when he leaned down, spread Trace's ass and swept his tongue across his entrance.

It was like a firecracker going off inside a closed fist. Shattering. It'd been a long time since anyone had gone down on him and Trace had almost forgotten how damn good it felt. He groaned into the pillow and lifted his ass more, shuddering. Holy fuck.

Riley didn't hesitate or hold back, his hands squeezing and kneading as his tongue worked its magic. Trace reached one hand back to tangle in Riley's hair, not to push him closer or anything but just because he wanted to touch him. He couldn't really see him and the need to connect with him burned.

Riley seemed to sense that and one hand came up to pull Trace's hand away from his hair and instead laced their fingers, never once easing up on the sweeping, swirling, sometimes thrusting motions of his tongue.

Oh, Trace was going to turn the tables very soon. His mouth all but watered with the need to throw Riley under him, spread those long legs and tongue him until he came.

Not yet though. Goddamn, not yet.

Trace rocked, cock rubbing against the mattress, the friction desperately needed. Riley moved with him and they settled into a sensual rhythm, flowing back and forth together, Trace getting harder and harder until he swore he could fucking pound nails.

"Riley," he gasped.

Riley must have heard the urgency in his voice, because a second later he had the young man in his arms, their lips meeting in a torrid kiss before Trace pulled back and rolled Riley beneath him.

"My turn."

Riley shuddered hard, his hands closing on the bedspread as Trace moved down, pushing his legs up and apart. He smiled when Riley's breath caught, the other man watching wide-eyed as Trace's hands closed over his hips and lifted them. Before Riley had a chance to think or speak, Trace's tongue swept over his entrance. Riley's hips bucked and Trace's hands tightened on them. He didn't have to say a word, the message was clear and Riley stilled.

Trace glanced up at him, his eyes wicked and Riley moaned as Trace's tongue pushed inside him.

"Just like that..." Riley breathed, his head dropping back to the pillows.

Trace ran his hands up the backs of Riley's thighs, pushing his legs forward against his chest to expose him completely, allowing him full access to that sweet ass. Trace stretched out, his legs dangling off the edge of the bed but he didn't care. All that mattered was making Riley come and hopefully getting the same in return.

His cock rubbed against the mattress edge and Trace ground against it as he licked and thrust and worked his tongue until Riley was writhing and cursing a blue streak. The boy had a vulgar, but talented as hell, mouth. Trace was just proving the same of himself.

"Fuck...goddamn it, cowboy...fuck me, Trace."

Trace lifted his head, lips quirking as he slid one hand over to rub two fingers against Riley's entrance. "Love me, yet?"

His answer was a glare and Trace laughed, shaking his head. "Toss me the lube, darlin'." He grinned when Riley's eyes lit up. "For my fingers."

"Evil son of a..." Riley muttered, voice trailing off as he shoved up to his elbows and panted. He stretched over to the nightstand for a bottle of lube and tossed it down toward Trace.

Trace popped the cap, enthralled by the way Riley couldn't seem to keep still, his whole body seeming to thrum with anticipation. Then, just as he was about to squeeze some lube onto his fingers and really turn up the heat on this evening, the violent buzzing of Riley's bedside alarm clock made them both jump like a gun had gone off.

Riley groaned, shaking his head and rolling over to slap it off, his jaw tight. "I...I set it to give myself time to get ready...for work." He couldn't seem to catch his breath and damn if Trace could blame him. Riley didn't say anything else for a second, his expression one of resigned frustration, and he looked down at Trace, still moving a little against the sheets.

Trace let out a rough breath, letting Riley's legs slide down again. "And you have to work." It wasn't a question.

Riley nodded, cursing under his breath and dropping back on the bed. "Damn it!"

Trace's eyes closed and he winced a little as Riley shifted to sit on the side of the bed. Oh fuck, he didn't want to move. No, scratch that, he did want to move, but only to grab Riley, haul him back and finish what they'd started. It took every bit of willpower he had to not. Instead he sat awkwardly, raking his hands through his hair and then turned, rising onto his knees to wrap his arms around Riley from behind and press a kiss to the nape of his neck.

"At least I know you'll be thinking about me," he teased, squeezing him and letting Riley go. Trace shifted and sat heavily on the edge of the bed with Riley, smiling over at him. "Kinda like high school, ain't it? A whole lot of foreplay that doesn't lead anywhere but to your own hand later on?"

Riley swallowed visibly, his voice more than a little strangled. "Yeah. A lot like that." Trace was fucking thrilled that it didn't seem to be just him affected deeply by what was happening between them, physically and otherwise.

Riley glanced over after a few seconds, his smile rueful. "I'm sorry we didn't get to finish dinner. I can give you the leftovers if you want, they'll be good for a few days and it's got to be better than takeout." He skimmed a hand through Trace's hair.

Trace smiled and shook his head, resisting the urge to turn his head and kiss the soft, warm palm of Riley's hand. "That's all right, darlin'. If I want some more of your cooking, well, then you'll just have to come give my big ol' unused kitchen a whirl, won't you?"

"I might just do that. Now you really need to go, because if you keep standing there naked like that, I'm going to have to jump you. I won't be able to stop myself. And then I'll be late for work and it'll be your fault."

Trace bit back a groan at the mental picture that sprang to mind. He nodded, took a step back, and donned his clothes. "All right, I'll see you later then, darlin'."

Before he was tempted into another kiss, he took one last, lingering look at Riley before inhaling sharply and nodding. "Right. Going now." He nodded again and shoved his hands in his pockets so he couldn't reach out and touch him again, backing out of the room with a grin and grabbing his hat as he headed for the front door.

Trace considered heading home to clean up and then maybe swing by Riley's club to see him dance but decided against it. He didn't want to push too hard now that Riley was beginning to really thaw. He could go a couple days without seeing Riley. Or so he kept telling himself as he let himself out and shut the door behind him.

Chapter Five

"Riley! You've got a minute 'til cue, get that sweet ass in the wings!" Riley swore at the pounding on the dressing room door, hastily finishing his makeup and doing one last check in front of the triple mirror to be sure his cowboy costume, chaps and all, was in place. He dashed for the door, rushing into the wings and skidding to a stop, giving Ronnie a sugary sweet smile.

"Need to get yer head outta the clouds, boy...that's the third time you've nearly missed a cue in the last week," Ronnie growled at him. Riley nodded, but as soon as Ronnie turned his back, he rolled his eyes and stretched, rising up on to his tiptoes, reaching his arms high over his head.

He couldn't deny it, his head was in the clouds lately and it was all Trace's fault. Despite the initial rocky start, the man was romancing him and Riley couldn't get enough.

Taking a few deep breaths as the deejay Zack cued up the music, Riley rolled his shoulders, doing his best to push Trace to the back of his mind. No one had ever occupied so much of Riley's thoughts before, had ever affected him this way. As much as he wanted to, Riley couldn't pretend it away. He could all but feel those chains he'd placed on his heart unlocking and loosening.

Riley snapped to attention as Zack gave him a signal, closing his eyes briefly and focusing his mind on his routine, on his job. The music started and he pushed open the curtains, hitting the stage with a practiced smile on his face. Out of habit, he scanned the audience. It was Monday night, at least half the tables were empty and Riley was beginning to think it was going to be a bad night. But then his eyes unexpectedly found Trace at the back of the club and his smile widened and heated. Riley winked at Trace as he started to dance, inordinately pleased that he was there.

Trace slid off the barstool and moved to a table, off to one side and set a little way back from where Riley moved over the stage. One piece of his costume after another hit the floor, and Riley never looked away from Trace's eyes. It was more than a little weird, to dance and have the man he was...dating, involved with? Riley shied away from the term dating. They'd technically only had one date, not counting the first day when Trace had shown up at Jenna's house. Whatever the term was, it was odd to know that Trace was watching, even though Riley had missed him. Riley moved away from the front of the stage, waving a playful finger at an overly zealous guy who tried reaching for him. Freaking drunk.

The irritation didn't last long though, it couldn't when he had Trace's eyes on him, watching him and heating. Now Riley could look at him and know just what his lips

tasted like, know that kisses from those lips had the power to make him weak in the knees.

The desire in Trace's eyes was more than enough to shake Riley's focus, and though he kept to his routine, their gazes stayed locked and he felt as if he were dancing just for Trace, as if there were no one there but them. Riley was disconcerted to realize that behind the desire, there was the same sense of purpose he'd come to expect from Trace. Clearly, the man wasn't going to take no for an answer. Even more unsettling was the knowledge that between Trace's charm and the chemistry between them, Riley didn't have a prayer of putting up any kind of resistance.

Riley's breath was coming fast now, and not because of the exertion of the dance. Knowing Trace's eyes were on him was incredibly arousing and he was nearly completely hard. Riley just knew Ronnie was going to give him hell when he got backstage. He wasn't playing to the audience nearly as much as he should have been but he couldn't find it in him to care.

Riley blew out a breath when the music ended, gathered up his tips and his costume, met Trace's eyes and mouthed, "Five minutes." He'd let Ronnie bitch him out, then go back to the dressing room and throw his clothes on and come back out to the bar. Maybe slip outside for his break and take Trace with him so they could have a few minutes alone together.

Riley would like to just sit with Trace, have a drink or two, but he couldn't, not with paying customers wanting his time. His tips would plummet for the night if he ignored them in favor of Trace. Not to mention, it'd piss Ronnie off even more.

Riley slipped backstage and sure enough, Ronnie caught him not ten feet from the curtains, ranting and cursing. Riley bit his tongue through the tirade, taking off at the first opportunity to dress and put away his tips and costume. Once he had, he slipped back out into the club, crossing the room to Trace. "Come on. I've got a bit of a break. I've been here for a few hours already."

Trace followed him out the side door of the club and Riley let out a long sigh, not resisting for a second when Trace pulled him close, both hands skimming down his back to rest at his waist, just above his jeans. Riley slid his arms around Trace's neck.

"I'm glad you're here. Really glad." He eased back from the embrace just enough to be able to meet Trace's eyes. "I guess I didn't realize how much it'd affect me to have you watching me now."

Trace gave Riley a considering look. "Good or bad?" Riley rolled his eyes in answer and Trace grinned and slid his hands down to Riley's ass. "Then I'm glad it wasn't just me. My jeans got two sizes too small the second you stepped out on stage, darlin'."

Trace bent his head and kissed Riley, taking a couple of steps to press him back against the wall of the building as his tongue swept into Riley's mouth.

Riley moaned, spreading his legs and tugging Trace closer, rocking against him. He'd have given just about anything to have Trace take him home right now, to be naked in bed with him, kissing and touching and holding him. Sex would be a nice

bonus, but right now, Riley was craving that closeness, that intimacy he always felt in Trace's arms. Breathless, he broke the kiss, panting a little and meeting Trace's desire-darkened eyes. His stomach did handsprings at that look and he swallowed hard.

"Are you sure it's only nine? It can't be midnight so I can get off work and take you home with me?" Riley tugged at Trace's hand to peer at his watch, groaning. "Three more hours. God. I feel like I've been here all night already. Ronnie's been in a bear of a mood and that always makes for a tough night." He trailed a finger down the side of Trace's cheek, meeting his eyes. "Seeing you will make it a lot easier to deal with him though."

"I'm glad you're not mad I showed up unannounced. You said last week how it was weird you didn't see me at work anymore. I figured that meant you might like to see me. Fuck, you looked amazing up there, darlin'. Makes me want to carry you to the nearest bed and see how many times I can make you whimper my name."

Trace's hand slid down Riley's thigh to hook under his knee and lift him closer, their cocks rubbing through their clothes. Trace bent his head and licked Riley's kiss-swollen lips. "Do it. Come home with me, darlin'," he whispered.

Riley groaned, nipping at Trace's lower lip, his body aching, practically screaming for more. Oh, he wanted to say yes, wanted to go inside and tell Ronnie he wasn't feeling well, to get his stuff and go home, but he didn't need to piss Ronnie off any more. He shook his head a little, meeting Trace's eyes regretfully.

"I can't. Ronnie's already irritated with me as it is and I don't want to make it worse." He could see the flicker of disappointment in Trace's eyes and it made him groan softly. "I'm sorry, I want to but I need this job. The tips here are better by far."

Growling, Trace pressed Riley back against the wall. "Darlin', you might be mistaking me for a lamb but let me assure you that there's a wolf you haven't seen yet." He bent his head and nipped Riley's lower lip, sucking it against his tongue before releasing it with a groan. "Let me show you what you got when you let me in."

Panting, Riley stared up at him. What did you say to a proposition like that? Luckily, he didn't have to say anything because Trace's eyes gleamed hot and he bent, capturing Riley's lips in a hard kiss. Riley's heart skipped a few beats. Trace hadn't been kidding about that. He'd never kissed Riley like this before—hard and demanding. It was wicked and decadent and tempting as hell. Trace bit his lower lip and Riley groaned, leaning into him.

Trace broke the kiss, leaving Riley breathless and slid a hand down the back of his jeans. Riley gasped as Trace's fingers encountered bare skin. He hadn't bothered to pull on underwear after his routine and was glad now. The less between him and this man the better. Instinctively he hooked one leg at Trace's hip and Trace's fingers found his entrance, rubbing across it. Riley moaned and Trace nipped at his throat, murmuring against his skin.

"Been thinkin' about doing this for days," Trace whispered, his voice husky and Riley nodded, his hands fisting on Trace's t-shirt.

"Me too. I missed seeing you this weekend." It should probably worry Riley, how quickly Trace was becoming a part of his life and his routine, but he couldn't find it in himself to care at the moment.

Trace's smile was warm, despite the intensity of the moment. "Damn, darlin', I missed you too."

Riley's fingers sank into Trace's hair as his head lowered to kiss him again, and just as Trace's tongue thrust into Riley's mouth, his finger began to ease inside Riley. Riley let out a rough breath, trying his best to relax against the tight burn. It didn't last long. His body wanted Trace inside as much as Trace wanted to be there and before his finger was fully seated, Riley felt nothing but pleasure.

When the kiss broke again, he hissed in pleasure, tilting his hips back to try to get that single finger deeper. Just the penetration was nearly enough to make Riley come in his jeans. He'd been anticipating it so long that it seemed it had been forever.

"Oh fuck," he whispered, trying to keep quiet as he lost the silencer of Trace's lips, which were now trailing down his neck, biting and scraping as they went. His whole body shuddered as if it were cold instead of a sultry summer night.

"Not quite," Trace teased. "Almost."

Then his finger began to thrust, as best it could hampered by Riley's jeans, and it felt so good. So close to what Riley wanted and yet not enough at the same time. Damn the man, it was never enough. Was Trace trying to make him crazy?

No, just trying to make him fall in love. If he kept this up, Riley might just say it if only to finally get the hard fucking he so desperately wanted from his cowboy.

Shuddering, Riley leaned into Trace, trying to get closer. It wasn't close enough and he cursed the clothes between them. "You're evil," he panted, dropping his head to Trace's shoulder, nipping at the curve through his shirt.

"So you've said before." Trace's voice was darkly amused and Riley groaned, his leg slipping down from Trace's hip as he leaned back against the wall. His knees were too shaky to stand like that.

"I mean it. It's not fair for you to tease me like this." Riley bit back a moan, desperately rocking his hips against Trace's body. "Especially if you're not going to follow through."

"Who said anything about not following through?" Trace asked and Riley groaned again.

"I'm on a ten-minute break. Plus, we're in a parking lot. And maybe I'm pegging you wrong but you don't exactly scream exhibitionist to me."

"You're talkin' too much, darlin'. Means I ain't doin' something right."

Riley shuddered as Trace apparently took his ability to still form a coherent sentence as a challenge of some kind. The next thing he knew, Trace had withdrawn his finger and Riley found himself facing the brick wall, Trace pressed against him from behind. It made his stomach flip and he turned his head, panting.

"What are you doing?" Please God let the answer be "fucking you" because Riley would risk bailing on work and possibly getting arrested for indecent exposure for that.

"Shutting you up," Trace growled, sliding his hand back down Riley's pants and thrusting his finger back inside.

Riley ought to inform Trace that more finger-fucking was probably not going to result in him shutting up but forgot what he was going to say when his body was rocked with the electric jolt of Trace's wicked finger finding his prostate.

"Shit...fuck. Trace, someone might...oh fuck."

Trace didn't respond to the half-verbalized concern about being caught. Instead the man turned his face into Riley's neck, sucking and licking, while his finger ruthlessly manipulated him into the equivalent of a quivering mass of nerve endings pinned to an alley wall.

Riley moaned and pressed the back of his hand against his mouth to try to keep the sounds in. Keeping quiet just wasn't going to happen. Just wait until he got his hands on Trace, then the man would regret teasing him this way. The only problem with that idea was that it would be hours before Riley could do that. Riley shook his head. He'd think about that later, he couldn't think straight just now.

Trace's finger kept rubbing at his sweet spot and Riley's teeth grazed the back of his hand as he tried to hold in his gasps and moans. Someone could walk by and catch them at any minute. Riley liked the little thrill of danger—it was turning him on even more. He wanted Trace desperately and the idea of bailing on work was sounding better and better every minute.

"Trace, you've got to...fuck, you've got to stop." Riley panted, bracing his hands against the wall. "My break's almost over."

Trace's growl in his ear made his knees nearly buckle. "Fuck work. Fuck your break. Come home with me."

Oh god. The thought of saying no didn't even occur to him when Trace made that demand all husky and rough in his ear.

A primal thrill jolted Riley. His resistance crumbled and he nodded, the gleam in Trace's eyes taking his breath away. Oh fuck. The man was drop-dead gorgeous anyway, but got him all heated and fired up just might melt Riley on the spot from how breathtakingly sexy he was. This was a side of Trace he hadn't seen before, a rougher, more demanding side, and Riley couldn't resist.

"Okay. Okay. You've got to let me go though."

Trace obliged, triumph in his eyes, and Riley did his best to catch his breath, his heart going a million miles a minute.

"Give me ten minutes or so. I have to talk to Ronnie and get my stuff together...and my place is a lot closer than yours." He gave Trace a wicked grin and ducked back into the club, knowing that his flushed cheeks would actually be an asset to convincing Ronnie that he wasn't feeling well and needed to go home.

Trace swore under his breath, stalking around the building to the parking lot. He paused to steady himself before he jumped behind the wheel of his truck and started it then pulled around to the front of the club. His cock ached almost painfully and he was about to go in and drag Riley out when he appeared. Thank God.

He revved the engine, giving the boy a wicked grin, as Riley climbed in. "Buckle up, darlin'." Riley obeyed as Trace hit the gas, peeling out, and turned the truck toward the highway and his house. He didn't care if Riley's was closer, Trace was going to have him in his bed and lay a claim to him that even Riley couldn't deny.

Riley shifted restlessly as Trace turned onto the highway. He set his bag on the floor between his feet and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "I have to call Jenna, let her know I don't need her to pick me up." Riley gave him a teasing, knowing look. "Be quiet while I do. I'm never gonna live this down as it is."

Trace made a motion as if he were zipping his lips, unable to contain a grin. How could he? His darlin' was coming home with him and by the way Riley slid a hand over to caress and squeeze Trace's thigh, there were definitely going to be some indiscretions occurring tonight.

When Riley hung up a minute later, he leaned over to press a kiss to Trace's neck, seeming unfazed by the speed of the truck. "So I guess I should assume you really liked my costume, huh?"

Trace caught Riley's hand and brought it to his lips, nipping his fingertips. "Look up 'understatement' in the dictionary and you ought to find that very sentence." He cut the other man a quick, heated glance before focusing back on the road. Ogling at ninety mph wasn't a good idea, he figured.

"Actually, I liked you in the outfit. I liked you even better out of it. I'll like you best once you're out of any clothes, period, and in my bed." Naked. His. Naked. His. The mantra repeated in his head. He turned off the highway onto the access road with a slight fishtailing of the truck and a squeal of the tires, grinning at the laugh Riley let out.

The moment Trace stopped the truck, Riley undid his seat belt and scrambled out, moaning when Trace caught him and pressed him up against the front of it, bending his head to nip at Riley's throat. Riley moaned shakily, pushing at Trace's chest. "What happened to getting me in your bed, cowboy? Don't get too overeager on me now."

Trace answered by grabbing Riley's hand and pulling him along behind him. He strode for the front door, barely able to keep himself from pushing the other man to the ground and fucking him then and there.

He fumbled for the key and finally managed to get them inside, tossing the keys anywhere and kicking the door shut. He didn't bother with lights, though he did pause and pin Riley against the wall, both hands sinking into his hair and tugging his head up to claim his lips in a scorching kiss before breaking it and dragging him toward the stairs.

On the second floor, Trace pushed open the door to his bedroom, taking a few steps before tumbling them both onto the rumpled sheets of his big, comfortable bed. Riley

groaned, reaching for him and pulling him closer for another searing, bone-melting kiss, before breaking it with a low, demanding sound.

"We need some lights here, cowboy."

Trace slid his arm under Riley around his waist and hauled him close against his chest, lifting him up higher on the bed so he didn't have to let go to reach up and flip the lamp on. For a moment he couldn't move or breathe—the sight of Riley sprawled under him in his bed made him want to chain him there and never let him leave.

"You look so right here," Trace murmured, sliding over him, between those long legs, mouth coming down on Riley's neck as his hands slid under Riley's shirt to bare, beautiful skin. "You're so right here, with me, you're fucking perfect, baby."

He rocked his hips, hands skimming up to find and pluck Riley's small, flat nipples, feeling them pebble under his touch.

Riley smiled, reaching up and taking Trace's hat off then plopping it on the bedpost. His hands came down to tangle in Trace's hair and they moaned in unison as Trace continued to scrape his teeth on his neck and toy with his nipples.

"I can be even more perfect if you give me the chance," Riley murmured, stroking his hands down Trace's back.

Trace knew Riley meant sex but shook his head and nuzzled the young man's neck. "Not possible." He slid both hands up into Riley's hair, tugging his head back and latching on to the arch of his throat. Riley's moan vibrated against Trace's lips and he growled, the urge to have Riley naked beneath him overwhelming.

He sat back on his heels, bringing Riley with him and the dazed, aroused look on the other man's face did crazy things to Trace's insides.

"I need you naked," he murmured and Riley's eyes lit, making Trace laugh despite the overpowering desire raging through him. Between the two of them—kissing and moaning and touching in between—within a minute they were both naked, bodies tangled together and Trace tumbled them back onto the bed, rocking hard against Riley. "Oh, much fucking better. Goddamn, darlin', I love you."

Riley didn't tense this time, just smiled, touching Trace's cheek and rocking against him before he pushed lightly at Trace's shoulders, smile deepening into a wicked grin.

"Roll over, cowboy. You've seen me naked, it's my turn now." Trace obliged and Riley rose to his knees beside him, his eyes skimming down Trace's body. His expression was one of complete entrancement and made Trace's stomach pitch pleasantly. It was obvious Riley liked what he saw and Trace was vain enough to preen a little. The preening cut off a moment later when Riley swung one leg over Trace's thighs, straddling him and leaning low, nipping at his shoulder.

"And now you're at my mercy, cowboy. How do you like that?"

Trace chuckled, tucking his hands under his head to keep from grabbing Riley. "Darlin', I've been at your mercy since the night I first laid eyes on you." He lifted his

hips with a playful buck and grinned when Riley clutched his shoulders for balance. "I like it...feels like just the right way to be."

He couldn't resist, lifting to his elbows to stretch up and kiss Riley, tongue sweeping across his lips and sinking inside when Riley's mouth instinctively opened for him. Oh, he could kiss the boy for eternity and not get enough.

Finally the kiss broke and Trace smiled up at him, breath coming faster, heart picking up. "Whatcha gonna do with me all at yer mercy?"

Riley grinned, slow and wicked, in a way that had Trace trying to catch his breath. "This." With no more warning than that, he slid down the bed, nuzzling lightly at Trace's hip, glancing up and meeting his eyes. "I've been just about dying to get my mouth on you."

Before Trace could manage to string together a response, Riley shifted, sweeping his tongue over the head of Trace's cock. Both thought and the capability to form a sentence went out the window. Trace tangled a hand in the other man's hair and moaned, his hips twitching slightly.

"Told you I could be more perfect if you gave me the chance."

Trace couldn't answer, could only gasp and let his head fall back. Oh god, the man's mouth was magic. Sin. Perfection. He needed a thesaurus because he didn't have enough words in his vocabulary to cover it.

Trace growled, fingers tightening in Riley's hair. Trace lifted up on to one elbow and peered down at him, eyes flashing. "Fuck, darlin', you gonna play with him or suck him?" He grinned and lifted his hips, shuddering when Riley gave him a wink and took his cock deeper into his mouth. Oh fuck. That settled it—Riley's mouth ought to be registered as lethal.

"Oh damn, yer good at that."

Riley glanced up, meeting Trace's eyes with a wicked gleam in his own, sucking harder. Trace groaned and his body went limp for a second before his hips rocked up. Riley seemed to take that as a demand for more, which it was, and Trace let out another groan as his lover sank his mouth down lower, humming with undisguised pleasure. Riley relaxed his throat, taking him deeper and Trace growled, hand tightening in Riley's hair.

Trace sucked in a sharp breath. Before he even realized he was doing it, he'd pulled Riley up over him, then rolled as he took Riley's lips in a heated kiss, pinning him under him. Riley's long legs spread so eagerly and only at the very last second did Trace snatch a thread of control and not plunge into him. Instead he rocked his hips hard, cock nudging between the firm cheeks of Riley's ass and sliding there, as close to fucking as he could—or rather, was willing—to get.

Riley's cock pressed tight against Trace's stomach and when the kiss broke they were panting hard, sweat slicking their bodies as they rocked and thrust and twisted against each other for the ultimate in friction and the near-ultimate in pleasure. Their

eyes met and Trace groaned at the heat in Riley's, the way his lush lips glistened and parted on desperate pants of breath.

There were no words, only pure instinctive lust driving them on, hands grasping, tongues tasting sweat and eyes narrowed in frantic, hot challenge as Trace thrust and Riley bucked up and the pleasure coiled tight.

Riley gripped Trace's shoulders hard, their bodies writhing together in an erotic duet as the need climbed higher and higher. It was so strong, so intense that Trace would have sworn he could reach out and touch it, both their bodies taut with it.

Wrapping both legs firmly around Trace's hips, Riley arched higher, his breath shuddering out on broken, gasping moans every time Trace's cock rubbed over his entrance. This is pure torture, Trace thought. But intoxicating in its own right.

Trace dropped his mouth to Riley's throat, tongue tasting the sweat, teeth grazing lightly, barely able to focus enough to remember that marking him would be bad. Sweet God, what he'd give to be allowed to. But not yet, so he slid his mouth up and focused on Riley's ear, tongue sweeping the sensitive skin behind, teeth nipping the lobe.

"Darlin'...want you to...come for...me." He gasped, hips thrusting harder, faster, grinding his cock against Riley's ass, deep in the warm cleft, and twisting his stomach against Riley to rub his cock better. "An' then I'm gonna...lick you clean...an' do it again."

Riley groaned, his hips rocking up, nodding as his teeth dug into his lush lower lip. Trace couldn't look, genuinely afraid he might lose all control and fuck him if he did. His eyes closed and he let the pleasure of Riley's ass cheeks clenching around his cock, the sexy sounds he made, the heady scent of the other man surround him, and Riley wasn't finished with his own orgasm before Trace was tumbling along right behind him. He barely managed to pull back enough to come on the sheets, not Riley's ass, as much as he might have liked to.

Trace shuddered, panting heavily, as was Riley. Before either of them could catch their breath, Trace slid down, hands slipping under Riley's back to arch him up and his tongue making a hot, wet trail along skin slick with sweat and come.

Riley tangled a hand in Trace's hair, shivering. Trace glanced up, a slow smile curving his mouth as he licked his lips and watched the shiver race through Riley's body.

"You're way too good at this for my own good," Riley murmured, fingers combing through the wildly mussed strands of Trace's hair.

Trace grinned and swept his tongue across Riley's stomach, the taste of him heady and intoxicating. "What's that, darlin'? Lovin' all over you?" He slid his hands down to stroke Riley's thighs as his tongue continued devouring him. "'Course I am. It's what I was born to do."

Riley was tempted to argue about the idea of Trace being born to love him but only for a moment. The thoughts flew right out of his mind when Trace's fingers rubbed against his entrance and his hips bucked hard in instinctive reaction, his eyes closing as

he shuddered with pleasure. Oh yeah. Much too good at that for Riley's own good. The problem was, Riley couldn't seem to stop, even though on some level, he knew this was only going to make things more difficult, more complicated.

He opened his eyes and met Trace's gaze, a smile curving his lips. Trace's tongue trailed over Riley's hipbone and made him shiver. The steady, seductive rubbing of Trace's fingers was going to have him fully aroused again in a few minutes and while Riley didn't mind that a bit, he was feeling sticky and sweaty and a shower sounded really good right about now. Plus, the idea of Trace all soaking wet...oh, he liked that.

"How about a shower? Together, of course?" His eyes sparkled wickedly as he met Trace's gaze. "I bet you're even hotter all wet."

Trace grinned. "That sounds like a fine idea, darlin'. And I'll leave it up to you whether or not I'm hotter wet."

"I'm sure you are." Pushing up on his elbows, he brushed a kiss over Trace's lips, giving him a wicked grin. "Now where's that shower?"

Trace rose, taking Riley's hand as he slipped out of bed, leading him into the bathroom. Riley took the opportunity to get a good look at the rear view, smirking. The man had quite an ass. Unable to resist, Riley reached out and ran his hand over the bottom curve of it, squeezing a little. Trace started, and Riley grinned, tugging at his hand to pull him to a stop right in the bathroom doorway. "You're freaking adorable. You shouldn't be, all big brute of a guy that you are, but you are. I don't know why I suddenly find that sexy as hell."

Trace's brows arched and he slid both his hands down to cup Riley's ass, lifting him easily. "I am not a big brute. That's not very nice. I'm just large-boned." Riley laughed as Trace faked a sulk.

"You're pretty adorable yourself, even though you try really hard not to be. I see the marshmallow under the thorns, baby." Trace set him down and turned toward the tub. "Now jeez, boy, you want the shower or not? Quit distracting me." Trace flashed a smile and a wink over his shoulder before leaning over to turn the water on.

Riley rolled his eyes. Marshmallow? What the hell was the man smoking? Riley took great pains to be sure that no one got to see that side of him, it was private and something he kept well hidden. Just because he'd given in to Trace in some ways didn't mean the man had gotten in that far. Shaky though his defenses might be, they weren't that shaky. Riley wasn't going to correct him though, that would just make things more awkward than they had to be, more than they already were.

He smiled and offered his hand when Trace turned, straightening up from where he'd been leaning against the vanity, he took it. He stepped close to Trace and brushed a kiss over his lips before nudging him under the spray. "Come on, I'm all hot and sweaty." Once they were in the shower and the glass door closed behind them, Riley tipped his head back under the spray, letting the water soak his hair, sighing in pleasure.

Trace leaned in to taste the trails of water that ran down Riley's arched neck, his hands settling on his waist, thumbs brushing his hipbones as Trace leaned in.

"I could taste you forever. All day, all night, as long as you'll let me." He smiled, lifting his head to nudge Riley's lips with his own, their breaths mingling and eyes meeting. "How long'll ya let me, darlin'?"

Trace didn't let Riley answer, probably knowing it wouldn't be the one he wanted. Instead, Trace took his lips in a heated kiss and slid his arms around him to support him and hold him close.

Riley moaned into the kiss, one leg coming up to hook around Trace's hips to keep him close, barely room for a breath of air between their bodies. He couldn't deny how much he liked this, what it did to him to have his body all wrapped around Trace's. The feelings and the sensations were familiar but entirely different at the same time—more intense than anything he'd ever felt before.

Deep down, Riley knew that this was a bad idea, all of it. Seeing Trace every few days, talking to him every day, letting him get closer and closer...it could end so badly if Riley weren't supremely careful not to cross the boundaries he'd drawn. He couldn't afford to have his heart broken again but he didn't trust anyone else to protect it, to protect him. He could only trust himself.

Finally, Trace broke the kiss, tongue tracing Riley's parted lips, then lifted his head, reaching up to grab the shampoo. Riley liked the idea of Trace washing him from head to toe.

He sighed softly in pleasure as Trace lathered his hair, turning and tipping his head back a little to make the job easier. He closed his eyes, for a moment, completely content. Trace was working the shampoo through his hair, his big hands gently massaging Riley's scalp and he nearly moaned, it felt so good. As Trace rinsed the suds from his hair and started on the conditioner, Riley thought how nice this was, how cozy and comfortable and almost domestic.

Wait. Domestic? What the fuck was he thinking? Furious, Riley jerked away and spun around to face Trace. "I need to go. I have to go home. Now." Oh, he was losing his grip and he knew it. He needed to get in his own space and be alone before he did or said something utterly crazy.

Trace blinked as Riley scrambled out of the shower, stumbling before righting himself and scurrying out of the bathroom. Trace caught up to him in the bedroom, arm snaking around his wrist and pulling him close. Riley cursed, shaking his head, but Trace wrapped his arms around him from behind and held on tight.

"Hey, stop, wait a second...tell me what's wrong. What did I do?"

Riley shook his head, scraping his dripping hair away from his face and wishing for a towel. "Nothing. Nothing. I just need to go home." Riley strained a little against Trace's hold but Trace was a hell of a lot stronger and he couldn't quite break free. "Trace, let me go, please. If you'd rather not drive back to town to take me home, that's fine, but I need to go."

He was trying to keep his voice as calm as he could. He didn't want Trace to think he'd scared him or anything, he just wanted to leave. He wasn't scared. Freaked out, sure, but it wasn't anything Trace was doing. It was that Riley was letting his guard down too far and thinking things that he had no business thinking, not at this stage of the game—not ever. He didn't do cozy or domestic, didn't do committed relationships. Riley knew what he wanted from life and it had nothing to do with love or relationships and the last thing he needed was a distraction.

Trace finally eased his grip and Riley pulled away and grabbed for his clothes, doing his best to ignore the undisguised hurt in Trace's eyes as he dressed.

Trace sighed heavily, looking down and beginning to wearily gather his own clothes. "Riley...will you at least please tell me why? You wanted to stay just a few minutes ago." He pulled his jeans on and tugged a t-shirt over his head.

Riley shook his head, sitting down to pull his socks and shoes on. "I just—I can't. You do things to me, things that I can't handle." He looked up at Trace, his expression carefully blank. "I can't pretend to want the same things you do, and I'm not going to try. It'd be an insult to both of us. I like you, I enjoy spending time with you, and God knows you drive me crazy when you touch me but..." Shaking his head, his voice trailed off. "I can't do it. I can't handle what you want, and I don't want you to think that I feel like you're pushing me, because I don't. But I know you want more and I can't give it to you. That doesn't mean I want to cut you out of my life completely either." Riley sighed and pressed his fingers to his eyes. It was all so goddamn confusing, and the only way he was ever going to get a handle on it was if he gave himself some time and distance.

Trace sat on the edge of the bed beside Riley, keeping a bit of space between them. "Riley, darlin', the only thing I want from you is to have you in my life. I love you, I'm sorry that upsets you but believe me, I ain't expecting you to say you love me too any time soon. I don't expect anything from you except...please don't run away from me. I swear to God, I am not gonna hurt you."

"I can't believe that. I'm sure you mean it, at least right now, but I can't." Riley sighed again, resisting the urge to lean into Trace, to let himself be held. He could practically feel Trace's need to do it but he refused to give in, pushing to his feet and glancing down at Trace. "I need to go home. I don't need you to take me, I just need to get my bag from the truck and I can call a cab."

Honestly, Riley thought that would be best, it meant he'd be alone sooner, meant he'd be able to get his thoughts and feelings in some kind of order so he could start figuring out what he was going to do. He couldn't fall for Trace but his defenses were breaking down, day by day, no matter what he did to try to shore them up. At the same time, Riley didn't know if he had it in him to cut Trace completely out of his life.

Trace swallowed visibly, nodding. "All right, if you're sure." He rose, reaching for Riley's hand. Thrown off guard, to avoid taking it, Riley pretended to be digging in his pocket for something. Trace awkwardly pulled his hand back, rubbing his palms on his jeans and nodding again. "Sure. Come on, I'll get your bag for you and call you a cab."

Riley bit his lip, then nodded. "Okay." He'd been sure Trace would press the issue, and though part of him was relieved that Trace hadn't, another part wondered why. Riley couldn't figure him out. Every time he expected Trace to do one thing, the man turned around and did something different, until Riley just wasn't sure which end was up, and he hated that.

Trace led the way downstairs, turning on a hall light and telling Riley to wait as he slipped out the front door, presumably to the truck to get Riley's bag. Riley pressed a hand to his flipping stomach and closed his eyes, breathing out a sigh. He could almost feel those walls crumbling, and it was scaring him half to death. He was afraid that soon he wouldn't have any defenses at all, and then it'd only be a matter of time before the inevitable happened and he got his heart broken again.

Trace stepped back inside and set the bag on the floor in the entryway, meeting Riley's eyes across the short hall. "Are you sure you want to leave, darlin'? If we were going too fast for you, we can just talk or watch a movie maybe. I could find something for us to eat—"

Riley shook his head. "I'm sure."

Trace seemed to deflate, sighing. "I'll call you a cab, then, darlin'."

Riley nodded once, shocked to find that a part of him wanted to stay, just so Trace would smile at him again and not look so hurt. Riley shook the feeling off as Trace turned down the hall toward the kitchen. He needed to stop this, and now, before it got him into trouble. All he had to do was remind himself of what had happened the last time he'd lost his heart, the last time he'd let someone into his life the way Trace wanted in. Riley wasn't ever going to give anyone that kind of power over him again.

"They said it might be a little while. Do you want something to drink while we wait?"

Riley shook his head, scuffing his toe against the hardwood floors, his eyes fixed on the faded wallpaper of the hall instead of on Trace.

"All right. Riley?"

Riley looked up and Trace tilted his head, giving him an imploring look. "Am I going to see you again?"

Riley sighed. He didn't for one minute think that Trace would just accept a no—the man was too stubborn for that. "I don't know." That was the honest truth. He was so torn and he desperately needed to do what he usually did when he faced a problem, get all the frustration out with something physical, then sit down and think it through logically. He could only do that if he had at least a day or two without seeing Trace, and even then, Riley knew quite well that the answer might not be one Trace wanted to hear.

"Definitely not for a day or two. You're...you're turning me inside out and upside down and I don't know what to make of it and I can't function like that. I'll call you in a few days." That was true too. Riley had spent far too much time this last week seeing Trace and talking to him and thinking about him and it was beginning to take over his

comfortable routine. He needed to reassess those boundaries before he lost the willpower to draw the line.

Trace pursed his lips, his hurt visible. "You know, sometimes something comes your way and you got a choice. You can either grab it and not let it get away, or you can pause, think about it some, debate it and maybe when you go to grab it finally, it's not there anymore."

Trace took a step forward and Riley instinctively took a step back, though the pain in Trace's eyes shook his resolve. "And someday...someday, darlin', you're not going to look at me like I'm dangerous to you. But maybe, while you're doing all your thinking, think about the fact that you don't get to decide who you love. And you don't get to decide how long you get to keep it either. You just gotta take it while it's there and make it enough to last."

Riley glanced up at the sound of gravel crunching in the drive, relief sweeping through him. Trace, however, looked like he wanted to scream in frustration. "Guess it didn't take 'em that long after all." Trace held his hand out, palm up, eyes locked on Riley's. "Stay, Riley. Stay and let me prove to you that there ain't nothin' for you to fear in this house or as long as you're with me. Please."

Riley stared at Trace for a long moment, knowing he should go, he should pick up his bag, turn around and walk away. Part of him wanted to, even needed to, even though he knew it would hurt Trace. But a bigger part of him wanted to stay, wanted to give Trace a chance. If the man really meant it when he said that all he wanted was to have Riley in his life, well then, let him prove it.

Riley figured that if Trace meant that, he wouldn't ever press for more, wouldn't ever ask Riley for something he couldn't or wouldn't give. And, more importantly, Riley could relax, could stop wondering when things were going to change. His defenses still needed some work but Riley had always had a hard time choosing between the things he ought to do and the things he wanted to do.

Ignoring the honking of the cab's horn, Riley put his hand into Trace's, their eyes meeting. He wondered, for a brief moment, if Trace even realized what he was doing to Riley, the effect he was having. Riley hoped he did, a foolish little part of him hoping that Trace could see the silent plea in his eyes, for him to be telling the truth, to not make Riley regret this.

Chapter Six

Trace had never been so relieved in his life, a smile breaking across his face as he pulled Riley close and wrapped his arms around him, burying his nose in Riley's wet hair. "Thank you, darlin'. I promise, you won't regret it."

He held on to Riley and leaned over to open the front door, waving the cab away before shutting it again and smiling down at Riley. "What do you wanna do? You wanna go finish that shower or just sit and talk? Anything you want."

Riley looked up. "If you don't mind, I'd kind of like to finish showering. My hair's still got conditioner in it. Alone though."

He was clearly still a little nervous but Trace didn't think that would change any time soon.

"Is that okay with you? I'll just be a few minutes, I promise."

Trace nodded. "Of course. Go on up." He smiled, watching as Riley nodded and darted up the stairs, glancing back a few times. Trace was utterly smitten, no two ways about it. Head over heels for the man and he couldn't be happier about it. Riley had agreed to stop running. That was more than Trace had expected this soon.

Once Riley was out of sight, Trace headed into the kitchen and gathered up some sweets and bread and cheese and a bottle of wine, thinking a bed picnic sounded good and it'd give them something other than sex stuff to do in bed. Trace was fine with that. He just wanted to be close to him.

Reaching up to pull down a pair of wineglasses, a wave of dizziness struck and he leaned heavily against the counter, eyes closing as he steadied himself. Fuck, he needed to take his pills but they were in the bathroom with Riley and he didn't want to alarm him by bursting in.

So he stood there for a few minutes, clutching the wineglasses and getting his bearings until the dizzy spell passed and he shook his head, clearing the cobwebs as best he could. Gathering up the tray and the wine, he made his way carefully upstairs, cursing the sweat that broke out on his forehead. He could hear the shower still going as he set the tray down and just as he was about to risk it and duck into the bathroom anyway to grab the pills, the water shut off and he couldn't. All right, suck it up, he thought, taking deep breaths and pushing aside the lingering dizziness.

Trace turned at a quiet sound and spotted Riley leaning against the doorjamb, fully dressed again, a soft smile curving his lips. Riley gestured to the tray and the wine bottle on the nightstand. "A different kind of picnic this time?" Trace nodded and smiled a little, trying not to make it seem forced. He held his hand out and Riley took it, allowing himself to be pulled close. "You're a real romantic, aren't you?"

Trace gave him a hug. "Caught me. Don't go tellin' everybody, 'cause I'm only romantic for you." He brushed a kiss to Riley's cheek. "Gimme a sec. Why don't you open the wine?" He flashed Riley a smile and ducked into the bathroom, leaning heavily against the door with a sigh before pushing away from it and pulling open the medicine cabinet.

A handful of pills later, he took a deep breath, flushed the toilet to make it seem as if he'd had to pee and washed his hands, splashing some water on his face before heading back out. The nausea and dizziness pills worked pretty fast, he'd be okay soon, but he couldn't believe he'd nearly forgotten. He supposed it'd turned out to be a good thing Riley had almost left, or else Trace might have passed out in the shower.

"Hey there," he smiled, climbing up on to the bed and leaning back on one hand, taking the glass of wine Riley offered him. "Thanks." He couldn't drink it now though, so he feigned a sip or two and set it aside.

Riley scooted over to give Trace a little more room. His smile was teasing and his eyes wicked as he reached out with his free hand to poke Trace's knee lightly. "So what? You're worried about your reputation if I tell people you're a romantic? What're you gonna do if I do it, huh?"

Trace grinned and lay across the bed at an angle, Riley at an opposite angle, the tray between them. "I don't know but I'm sure I can trust you to keep my secret." He reached for one of the thin slices of cheesecake, smiling as he brought it to Riley's lips and he took a bite. "Just like you can trust me to not tell anyone you skipped out on work to spend a decadent evening in my bed."

He took a bite of the cheesecake, thinking that Riley tasted better but forced the thought from his mind before he went down a path he shouldn't go down right then. "Tell me something about yourself, darlin'. Anything, I don't care what."

Riley arched a brow, a grin playing around his lips. "You mean you don't know it all already?" Trace gave him an admonishing look and Riley laughed lightly, nodding. "Let's see...I wanted to be an astronaut when I was younger, until someone pointed out to me that you need to be really good at both math and science, which I never was. I watched way too many cartoons with space heroes, I think."

"I think every kid wanted to be an astronaut at some point. There was this movie in the mid-eighties about a bunch of kids who went to Space Camp and accidentally got launched into space. That cured me of my whole urge, seriously."

He rolled onto his back, tucking a pillow under his head and reaching out to trace a fingertip up and down Riley's forearm. "When did you realize you were gay? I was fifteen when I figured it out, after too many failed attempts to get laid with girls and realizing it wasn't them, it was me."

Riley tilted his head, sipping his wine as he thought about the question. "I don't know. I never really looked at girls in a romantic way, not even when I got to be old enough to. So I guess I'd say when I was about thirteen. I didn't actually come out until I was fifteen though."

He looked up at Trace and grinned, his eyes sparkling. "Somehow I can't imagine you having any problems getting laid, with boys or girls. It just doesn't fit. You have this confidence about you that's so utterly sexy, like you know who you are and what you want and it's an incredible turn-on. At least it is for me."

Trace grinned, inordinately pleased with that bit of information. "Well, I wasn't born confident, darlin'. Kind of had to work my way up to it. And I'll tell you a secret..." He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "At least seventy-five percent of that ultra-cool confidence isn't nearly as cool as it seems. Half the time I'm sweating bullets." He grinned. "Especially with you because you're more important than anything else. Every wrong turn is a potential dead end and damn if I want to hit a dead end with you ever."

He didn't give up but he didn't always believe he was going to win whatever prize he was after. Hoped and tried but he was never a hundred percent sure his plans would work out. And Riley was definitely his most precarious balancing act. One misstep and he was flying without a net.

Riley didn't say anything, toying with the stem of his wineglass for a long moment before glancing up. "No one would ever know. I mean, I've seen you unsure of yourself but deep down, that doesn't change anything. You are who you are and nobody could take that away from you."

Sighing a little, Riley dropped his gaze again. Trace tilted his head. "Is that what happened, Riley? Somebody made you unsure?" He wished he knew who, not that he could go back and change anything but a good boot to the face was never amiss when dealing with cruel assholes. He touched Riley's cheek, turning his face so their eyes met.

"You're who you are too, darlin', deep down under whatever's hurting you. Nobody can change that—they can just make you forget for a little while." He gave Riley a smile and stretched across to brush a kiss over his lips briefly. "You'll remember."

Riley shook his head. "No. He changed me. I never used to question myself, never used to wonder if people looked at me differently because I'm a dancer. Now I do it all the time because he showed me I was wrong, that most people are going to let my job color how they see me. I thought about quitting, about getting a different job and trying to take college courses on the side so it wouldn't happen. I still do sometimes. It'd be the smart thing to do."

Riley stopped abruptly, shaking his head. "So now it's your turn to tell me something. You're still way, way ahead on that getting to know each other thing."

Trace figured it best to not argue but let time prove Riley wrong. He'd do his part by loving him as long as he could.

So he smiled and let Riley change the subject, tucking an arm under his head and snagging a piece of crusty bread to munch on as he thought. "Hmm, something about me that you don't know. All right, here's something. I was once in a movie." Riley's brows shot up at that and Trace nodded. "Yup, when I was twelve there was a studio in

town filming a movie about a rodeo star and me and my folks were here on one of our summer visits. I don't really remember how it happened. I think it was my grandma's idea and she knew somebody who knew somebody who found out I rode rodeo real good, thanks to my grandma and all the summers and school breaks I spent here with her. Next thing you know there I am on the silver screen for all of about ten minutes, playing this guy as a kid."

He grinned and nodded toward the bedroom door. "I still got it on tape. I'll have to show you sometime and you can get a gander at why I wasn't nearly so confident as a kid."

Riley grinned. "Oh man, I'd love to see that. That's even worse blackmail material than home videos, you know? My mom's got a carton full of those. My dad was always a tech geek and it kind of rubbed off on her. She forever had a camera in her hand when I was a little kid so most of my childhood is immortalized in either video or pictures. It's kind of embarrassing and also makes me really glad my mother isn't around all the time now. She'd probably try to video me dancing or something."

Trace smiled at the idea of a little Riley, all towheaded and big blue eyes, running around in cheesy old home videos.

"I bet you were a sweet kid. Troublesome but sweet." Trace sat up, feeling much more himself now that the meds had kicked in. He shifted off the bed and picked up the mostly empty tray, setting it on top of the dresser before settling back on his side, facing Riley. On impulse, he reached out to tuck a lock of Riley's hair behind his ear. "Will you spend the night with me, darlin'?" Trace could think of nothing he'd like more than falling asleep with Riley in his arms and waking up the same way.

Riley's eyes widened and he instinctively shook his head. That was too much, too intimate. It was a line he wouldn't cross even with casual sex and there was no way he could do it with Trace.

"No I...I can't." If Riley hadn't been taken so off guard by the question, he might have figured out some kind of excuse to use but Trace had surprised him and Riley knew that any reason he came up with would sound exactly like what it was—a lie. With anyone else, a little white lie like that probably wouldn't have bothered him but it did with Trace and Riley couldn't quite figure out why.

Trace nodded, smiling gently. "All right." Trace took Riley's glass from him and set it on the nightstand, shifting up onto his knees and reaching for Riley. Riley tensed, gave him a wary look, but didn't protest.

Trace brushed Riley's hair back from his face, his other hand splayed gently on the small of Riley's back. "Darlin', please stop looking at me like I'm going to bite you. I ain't. I'll take you home anytime you ask. I promise." He bent his head and took Riley's lips in a slow, tender kiss.

Part of Riley didn't want to believe that but he knew better. Trace would take him home if that was what he wanted. He hadn't done anything that could really be taken

as pushing Riley in any sort of way. Riley relaxed into the kiss, one hand coming up to curl at the back of Trace's neck, keeping him close.

Whatever his other faults might be, the man could sure kiss. Riley's brain just about melted every time Trace's lips touched his and it drove him wild. He was a sucker for good kissing and Trace was easily the best kisser he'd ever known. Riley's free hand slid down Trace's back, his fingers idly tracing the soft, warm flesh of his sides, just above the waist of his jeans. He probably shouldn't be touching Trace this way, it was only going to get them both worked up again but Riley couldn't help himself.

Riley melted into the kiss. He couldn't seem to help himself, his lips turning pliant, his body going weak against Trace's. He couldn't contain the soft sounds of pleasure and he had no doubt that if Trace was of a mind to, he could lay Riley out right then and make love to him. Riley didn't think he could manage a protest at this point. When Trace finally broke the kiss, it was all Riley could do just to blink hazily up at him. "C'mon." Trace slid off the bed and tugged on his socks and boots. Riley's brow furrowed in confusion.

"C'mon where?"

Trace rose and held out his hand, smiling. "It's a beautiful night, all the stars are out, thought we'd go for a walk."

"A walk." Riley repeated, a smile playing around his lips. "Out under the stars and moon. How do you get anyone to believe that you're anything but a complete and total romantic?" he teased, slipping his hand into Trace's and allowing himself to be pulled to his feet.

Riley let Trace lead him back downstairs and outside, the hot summer night so much more bearable outside the city and Riley met Trace's eyes with a grin. "If I lived out here, I'd put a bed out in the backyard, I swear. It's gorgeous."

Trace smiled, squeezing Riley's hand and leading him away from the house, down along the long gravel road leading toward the highway. "I wanna show you something." Trace turned off the driveway, following a path only he could see.

"What do you want to show me?" Riley followed Trace, trying not to think about snakes.

Trace smiled and shook his head as he led Riley down a slope to a stand of trees along a creek bank. "You'll see. Used to come here when I was a kid, when I wanted to be alone and not be bothered."

Reaching the trees, Trace led Riley through them, winding and ducking around and under low-hanging branches as the moonlight dimmed under the cover of leaves and cast them into even more darkness.

Then the trees parted, revealing a small clearing, the creek bubbling through the center of it, a hammock strung between two sturdy trunks and a falling-down, crumbling lean-to on the other side of the shallow creek. Trace grinned and gestured to it. "I built that when I was ten. The hammock, that's new. I put it up a couple years ago."

"No wonder you don't ever want to leave, with all this so close. I don't think I'd want to either." This was the kind of place he wanted when he made it big, someplace out in the country where he could go and be by himself, maybe have a few horses of his own and lots of land so he could ride. Someday, Riley told himself firmly. He'd get there and then he'd have everything he'd ever wanted. The silence between them was thick with unsaid things and Riley shook his head. It was unnerving that he could almost hear Trace's thoughts. Stepping closer, he let a smile curve his lips, his arms sliding around Trace's waist. "I don't suppose that hammock's sturdy enough for two?"

Trace grinned. "You're reading my mind, darlin'." He bent to kiss Riley lightly then took his hand and led him to the hammock. Trace turned and sat, turning again to stretch back with Riley nestled snugly against him. "Ah, now this is much nicer than any other time I've hung out in this hammock."

Riley smiled. There was that easy comfort again, but this time he didn't dwell on it, not wanting to spoil things. Instead, he turned and shifted carefully up over Trace the slightest bit, enough to kiss him again. Slow but hot, he put every bit of his skill into it.

Trace groaned into the kiss and triumph swept through Riley as he deepened it, his tongue sweeping into Trace's mouth, exploring. He could feel the heat of desire beginning to build and he let it happen. He'd never felt desire like this before but he couldn't have explained what was different about it to save his life. Riley just knew it was.

When Riley finally pulled slowly back to break the kiss, they were breathless and Trace was giving him an adorably sexy, lopsided smile.

"Well damn, if I show you my tree house what do I get?"

Riley grinned, bracing one hand on the woven ropes of the hammock above Trace's head, lightly stroking his cheek with the other. "Hmm. I don't know. I'm not ready to move yet. I like having you all pinned under me like this." Did he ever. The sheer heat coming off Trace's body was enough to make Riley weak in the knees and having those dark blue eyes smiling at him was doing the craziest things to his insides. He had the urge to kiss Trace again and didn't bother resisting, leaning down and capturing those perfectly kissable lips with his own.

Riley drew the kiss out for as long as he dared, breaking it slowly, regretfully. He couldn't remember ever wanting anyone the way he wanted Trace right at that moment. Sighing, he met Trace's eyes, though his smile was firmly in place and his tone was playful. "Okay. Show me your tree house and we'll see what happens then."

Trace's brows lifted and he tsked under his breath. "Well, all right, but you oughtta know that my tree house is in Iowa. Be happy to take you there but the folks who own that house now might have a bit of a problem with us commandeering their backyard tree for some dirty fornicatin'."

Riley rolled his eyes. "Can you see me in Iowa? I mean, really. I'm so not the corn-fed, farm-boy type. You might get me to Chicago in the summer but that's as close to

the Midwest as I get." His watch beeped and he glanced down at it, groaning. "It's one in the morning. I really ought to go home."

It wasn't that he was tired, Riley was more than used to staying up until all hours of the night for work, but he didn't want to keep Trace up. Although there was the slight advantage that the later he got home, the less likely it was that Jenna would still be awake to pester him with all kinds of questions.

Riley saw the quick flash of disappointment in Trace's eyes but the other man smiled and nodded. "Are you sure?" Riley nodded and Trace gave him a squeeze. "All right, love." He gave Riley a boost as he climbed out of the hammock, then followed, raking his hands through his hair. "Do I get to give you a ride home or are you insisting on a cab still?"

Riley shrugged. "Either way. If it's a problem for you to take me home then I can easily take a cab. Whatever you'd prefer." He knew Trace's answer, just from the way he smiled. "Okay, I just need to get my bag and then we can go."

Trace nodded and took Riley's hand again and they headed back to the house in silence, until Riley remembered something he'd meant to ask Trace earlier. "Um...actually, I'm curious. What are you doing Saturday night? I, ah...one of the boys who used to dance with me is having a get-together at his place, just a small group of people. I got the night off a while ago and I was just going to bring Jenna with me but I'd like it if you came instead. If you're not busy, of course."

He was really, really hoping Trace wasn't. Riley wanted to introduce him to the few friends he had. Maybe it was childish and silly but...damn it, he wanted to show off.

"I'd love to, darlin', but I'm actually gonna be out of town this weekend." The regretful smile Trace gave him didn't fool Riley and he did his best to hide his disappointment, his back stiffening. Trace didn't seem to be fooled by Riley's pretended nonchalance, giving him a soft, teasing smile.

"I'll be back on Monday, we could get together, go for a drive or to dinner. Or maybe you can come over and watch that movie and make fun of twelve-year-old me."

Riley pushed aside the all too familiar knot of I-knew-this-would-happen dread in his stomach and shrugged carelessly. "Maybe. I'm not sure yet what I'm going to be doing on Monday."

Now that was a lie, he had the entire day free but damn if he was going to tell Trace that, not now. He wasn't going to play this game again with a man, wasn't going to make himself available whenever Trace wanted him and not ever get the same consideration in return. He'd been there before and refused to go there again. Riley slipped his hand out of Trace's as they stepped up onto the porch, giving him a tight smile.

"I'll just go upstairs and get my bag. It'll only take me a minute." Turning, he took the steps two at a time, waiting until he'd turned the corner to let his shoulders slump a little. Damn it. He'd known he was setting himself up but he hadn't been able to resist, had hoped maybe he'd be wrong and Trace would want to go. So much for that fantasy.

Riley pushed his hurt feelings down and retrieved his bag, his face cool as he came back down the stairs. "We can go whenever you're ready."

Trace stepped forward, touching Riley's cheek and Riley stepped smoothly out of reach.

"Riley, I'll only be gone for a couple of days. I'm very sorry I can't make it to your friend's party, I really am. I don't want you to think I don't want to go, I do. I just can't."

Riley tilted his chin and shrugged. "It's fine. Don't worry about it. Have a good time. Can we go now?"

Trace was silent for a long moment and when he finally spoke, his voice was resigned. "Sure. We can go now."

Riley nodded, not meeting Trace's eyes as they left the house and got into the truck, keeping his teeth clenched so he didn't speak and make a bigger fool of himself. He turned to look out the window, eyes fixed unseeingly on the midnight blue sky, to have something to look at that would keep his eyes off Trace.

In a back corner of his mind, Riley recognized that he was being immature and that he ought to let this go but he couldn't do it. He didn't know how to be rational when he'd wanted to believe so much that everything Trace said was true and the first time he really took a chance on letting the man in, he got shot down. He supposed the silver lining was that his hurt feelings would remind him just how bad an idea it was to get involved any further.

Finally, Trace pulled into the parking lot of Riley's apartment building and Riley let out a sigh of relief, digging for his keys.

Trace frowned, reaching a hand out to touch Riley's shoulder but Riley slid out of the truck too fast, bag over his shoulder, and slammed the door shut without a backward glance. He stalked up the walk and took the steps two at a time, aware that Trace still sat in his truck, watching. Riley let the door close behind him, pitching his keys across the room with a scowl. Asshole. Whether he meant himself or Trace, Riley didn't know.

Chapter Seven

Trace sighed, turning his cell phone over in his hands. It was Thursday, three days since he'd left Riley at his apartment and so far he hadn't heard from him once. Riley wasn't answering his calls, wasn't returning his messages and Trace was reluctant to just show up at his apartment or at the club. He wasn't sure what to do next and it was driving him a little crazy.

He left tomorrow for Chicago and he was beginning to think he wasn't going to get to talk to Riley before then, smooth things out. He realized what a shit feeling it must be for Riley. He knew it'd been a big risk for him to invite Trace to the party and for it not to work out...well, he knew it'd hurt Riley. Had he any choice, Trace would have forgotten about his trip and stayed.

With a heavy sigh, he flipped his phone open and dialed Riley's number from memory, pacing the length of his living room as it rang once, twice, three times and resigned himself to leaving yet another message that would go ignored.

Just as he was beginning to mentally put together a voice mail message he hoped might convince Riley to speak to him, the ringing stopped and so did his heart.

"Okay, I'm answering. Go ahead and talk."

Trace blinked, the acid tone surprising him. He hadn't been expecting it. He hurried to gather himself and took a breath. "I've missed you." It was the foremost thought on his mind—how damn hard it had been to go these three days without seeing or speaking to Riley. "And I'm sorry I hurt you, it wasn't my intention at all."

He sat on the arm of the couch, fingers idly toying with the fringe on his grandmother's blanket. "Damn, darlin', I missed you something terrible. Why haven't you returned my calls?" He tried for a teasing tone. "Haven't you figured out yet that ignoring me doesn't work very well?"

"I've been busy. You're not my whole life, you know."

Trace winced but held his ground because he knew Riley was lashing out at his own preconceived notions of a Trace who didn't exist. One who wanted to take advantage of Riley, though how the other man was managing to convince himself that Trace was out to take advantage of him, Trace wasn't quite sure. If he'd wanted sex he could have had it from the beginning. Riley knew that.

"All right. You're angry." He got a disgusted snort for that and his lips twitched in amusement. Even pissed off, Riley was enough to bring Trace more joy than anyone or anything else. "Would it help if I said I've been miserable the past few days? I've been pining, darlin', really. It's pitiful. You should see. I think tomorrow I might try ashes on my forehead and rending of garments."

There was a muffled snort of laughter and then a heavy, angry sigh. "Really, my heart's breaking for you." Riley's voice was biting and Trace winced. "Okay, I'm sorry, that was uncalled for. But I am still angry, so maybe it'd just be better for both of us if you waited until you get – until after the weekend to call me again."

And with that, Trace figured out what the real problem was. It wasn't so much that he'd said no, it was that Riley didn't believe he was going out of town. Oh lord. And there was no way to refute the belief without actually lying to Riley, something he had promised himself he would not do. Omitting was one thing and he felt guilty enough, but lying was another and he wouldn't go that far. If it came down to it, he'd tell Riley the truth before he'd lie.

But he couldn't bring himself to admit the truth to get out of this bind. The truth might end up hurting Riley and costing Trace a lot more than this bump would. He couldn't risk it.

"Don't you miss me too, darlin'? You wanna go a whole week without seeing me?" He couldn't help being a little hurt by that. Plus, well...he wasn't too proud to admit he was afraid. He was going to be alone for three days, the procedure was supposed to be pretty bad and he'd pinned his hopes on going with a smile and a kiss fresh in his mind, Riley waiting for him to come home. He needed that.

Trace held his breath as silence reigned for a long moment. Finally, Riley let out another heavy sigh. "Maybe I do miss you. A little. Ginger misses you something fierce though. She's made it clear that my belly scratches just aren't good enough. Maybe you should come over and see her. It'd make her stop whining at me at least."

Trace let out a soft sigh of relief. "Now good for you?" He was already on his feet and heading for the door, grabbing his keys before Riley could change his mind. Luckily, he didn't and Trace grinned at his affirmative response. "I'll be there in twenty minutes. I love you, darlin'."

He wasn't hurt when Riley didn't really reply to that, just mumbled something about seeing him soon before hanging up. Trace shut his phone and tucked it in his pocket, climbing into the truck and sending up a spray of gravel and dust as he gunned it down the drive.

He made it in less than fifteen, as it turned out, courtesy of his lead foot and eagerness to get there before Riley could work his temper back up and duck out without seeing him. He was relieved to see Riley's car in the parking lot as he pulled in. He took the steps two at a time and grinned at the happy barking he heard before he even knocked. The door had no sooner opened than Ginger was darting between Riley's legs to paw at Trace's knees.

"It's a good thing she's as teeny as she is or I'd be on my ass," Riley complained as he gestured Trace in and closed the door behind him. "It's insanely hot. Do you want something to drink? I have some iced tea and plenty of water and I think Jenna might have left a jug of lemonade in the fridge too."

Trace smiled and shook his head. "No, darlin', I'm fine, thanks." He bent to scoop the pup up, scratching behind her ear and leaning in to brush a kiss at the corner of Riley's mouth. "You look gorgeous." He doubted it was possible for Riley to look any other way, truthfully.

He had to admit though, he liked the blush that crept across Riley's fair complexion, wondering if it was because of the kiss or the compliment. Maybe both, he decided. He chuckled when Ginger lapped at his chin, deciding he couldn't complain about another ally in this battle of theirs. Every little bit helped and if Riley wanted to use the dog as an excuse to see him, to protect his pride, Trace wasn't going to argue.

Riley shook his head at the dog's antics then met Trace's gaze, sighing. "How is it that I can be mad at you but still want to be around you?" Trace opened his mouth to give his opinion on that question but Riley held up his hand. "Rhetorical question, don't bother." Setting down his untouched bottle of water, Riley pushed to his feet, pacing to the window and leaning against the sill for a moment before turning back around.

"So, where are you going?"

It was clear Riley didn't believe Trace was really going out of town and that stung his pride. Of everything he might be, he'd never been a liar. Trace took a breath, setting Ginger down with a final scratch to her chin before focusing on Riley. "Chicago. I'm heading out tomorrow afternoon and I'll be back Monday morning." He braced for more questions, for Riley to ask why he was going but Riley just pursed his lips and nodded, looking away.

Trace sighed and rose, crossing to stand in front of him. "I'm very sorry I can't come to your friend's party. I'd love to meet them some other time." He didn't doubt that Riley questioned the truth of the statement but it was true nonetheless. He'd like to meet anyone Riley considered important to him and he'd like to introduce Riley to his own friends and family as well.

Riley shook his head, backing up and going to pick up his water bottle again, actually taking a few sips this time. "Don't worry about it. It's not like we're talking about some group of popular, influential people or anything, it's just a bunch of strippers, that's all. You won't be the first person to not be interested and I'm sure you won't be the last. So whatever."

Trace frowned and turned as Riley wandered across the living room, idly adjusting things here and there, as if trying his best to act as if he weren't bothered.

"Riley, I said I was interested and I apologized. What more can I do?" He racked his brain for an idea, finally landing on something that might work. "What about next weekend, you and I could have a barbecue out at my ranch, invite your friends, Jenna, whoever's going to be at this party. Anybody you like. I'm not just blowing smoke up your ass here, darlin', I'm interested in anyone who's important to you and I don't give a fuck about what they do for a living any more than I do about your job. It's a job. It's not who you, or they, are."

He wished he could just hold Riley until he was healed of whatever and whoever had hurt him so bad that he thought there wasn't anything redeeming about him besides his face and his body. When the truth was, there was so much about Riley to love that if Trace had a hundred years he still wouldn't scratch the surface of it all.

Riley shook his head, bracing his hands against the breakfast bar. "Please. Just let it go. It's not just about whether or not you want to meet my friends, it's that I wanted – Never mind." He cut off with a sharp shake of his head, straightening and going to get his water again. "Just let it go. I'll live, believe me."

He might not like it, because damn it, he'd really hoped Trace would be different, but he would live with the disappointment.

Trace shook his head, striding forward, both hands coming out to capture Riley's. "No. No, tell me what you wanted. Riley, darlin', I'll give you any damn thing you want, you should know that by now."

Riley pressed his lips together and shook his head, trying to tug his hands away, but Trace gently held on.

"No, stop that. Tell me what you wanted, Riley. If it wasn't just me meeting your friends, what was it? What was it you wanted the party to prove to you?"

"I needed to know you'd be there for me if I wanted you to. That this wasn't just going to be you deciding you have time for me and me dropping everything for you," Riley blurted out. He dropped his gaze, still trying to tug his hands free. He couldn't believe he'd said that and he needed the man to stop touching him so he could think straight before he revealed anything else and opened up even more.

Silence reigned for a few long moments and when Riley finally risked a look up at Trace, he was surprised to see an expectant, sympathetic look on Trace's face, as if he actually cared and wanted to hear more. Riley sighed softly even as he realized he shouldn't be surprised. Lightly, he tugged his hands again, meeting Trace's eyes. "Will you let go? Please? I'll explain but I need to move."

Trace obliged and Riley raked his hands through his hair, backing up gratefully. "My last relationship—my only actual relationship—the guy I was seeing would do that. He expected me to always be available for him, no matter what, but if I were to suggest he go to a party with my friends or drop by in the middle of the day, I got shot down. So I stopped asking. Plus he never wanted to meet my friends. He was too good to spend time with strippers."

"I'm sorry you took it that way. Unintended or not, I'm sure it had to hurt, and I'm sorry. I don't want you to ever think your wants and needs aren't as important as mine, Riley. If anything, they're more important. I'd like it if you'd try to believe me when I say that if it was at all possible, I would be there and be thrilled to be included in your life in whatever way you'll let me be."

He bent a little to meet Riley's downcast eyes with a soft smile. "Will you give me another chance, darlin'? I promise you I won't let you down and if you could just see your way clear to believe that promise even a little, I'd be happy."

Riley gave Trace a long, long look, trying to gauge the truth of that. Trace didn't flinch, didn't squirm, didn't look away and finally, Riley nodded, satisfied. "Okay."

He wanted to give Trace another chance, he liked what was developing between them and even if it never came to sex because of Trace's silly romantic notions, Riley would be more than okay with that. Trace had proven to him the other night that he could make Riley feel things he'd never felt, even without sex, and he genuinely liked Trace and enjoyed spending time with him.

Trace's smile widened and Riley couldn't help smiling back, hesitantly taking a step forward and twining his arms around Trace's neck. Warmth swept through him when Trace wrapped him up in a close hug, nuzzling into his hair with a sigh.

After a long moment, Trace eased his hold, though he didn't let Riley go completely, one arm staying around his waist as he leaned down for a kiss, lingering and warm, before pulling back. "I love you, baby."

Chapter Eight

So...what? You're in love with this guy now?

Joey's teasing voice echoed in Riley's mind like a mocking mantra. Riley glanced around his darkened apartment, the digital clock on the end table glowing three a.m. and it seemed to mock him too.

Was he in love with Trace? He knew his friend had just been teasing. Joey hadn't meant it in a nasty way and Riley couldn't even be angry. He couldn't blame Joey for thinking it either, not when Riley had spent pretty much the entirety of the party that night in full-on mope.

He pushed away from the front door, locking it behind him before making his way down the hall to his bedroom.

You're in love with this guy now? Over and over, the question repeated itself and Riley realized again, just as he had two hours earlier when it'd first been asked, that he didn't know the answer.

Was he? A month ago, a week ago even, the answer would have been an unequivocal no. Now...he wasn't so sure. And that alone was enough to nearly send him into a panic attack.

Without even thinking about it, Riley bypassed the bed and headed for the closet, dragging down a pair of suitcases and flipping on the light. He couldn't be in love with Trace. He refused to be. No ifs, ands or buts about it. Love was not on the agenda.

So why couldn't you say that when Joey asked? his inner voice asked and damn it, Riley didn't have an answer for that either.

Shaking his head, he set his jaw and tossed clothes into the suitcases. At first he didn't even know where he thought he was going to go, until he remembered one of the other dancers mentioning in passing a friend who worked out in California and was auditioning at an open call next week for a semi-famous pop star's upcoming tour. And just like that, the plan clicked into place.

Riley would go to California. He'd go to that audition and he'd get on that tour. Hadn't Trace been telling him all along that he ought to start chasing his dreams? So...he was just doing what Trace had said he should.

At least, that's what he told himself. He told himself that the entire time it took to pack, while he was buying a plane ticket online, even while he was arranging to drop Ginger off at her favorite pet hotel until he could either have Jenna pick her up or he could send for her in a couple weeks, tops.

But by noon, exhausted and sitting at the airport terminal waiting for his flight, his excuses began to run thin. Trace would be crushed. Jenna would be furious. Suddenly

Riley had no idea what the hell he was doing. But it was too late to stop now as his flight number was called over the loudspeakers.

It would be fine. It would work out. And Trace would get over it.

But will you?

Another answer he didn't have.

* * * * *

Trace peered up at Riley's apartment building as he climbed out of his truck, a smile curving his lips. He probably should have called before coming over but he'd missed Riley too much to settle for just hearing his voice on the phone. Despite his exhaustion from the flight and the harrowing weekend of treatments, there was a bounce in Trace's step as he climbed the stairs to Riley's second-floor apartment. He was just about to knock when he heard Ginger start barking. That pup had surely taken to him and sensed him coming now. Trace took that as a good sign.

It took him a couple of seconds to realize the sound of her barking was coming from Jenna's apartment, not Riley's, and he deflated a little. Riley must be out. Trace thought for a moment, wondering if he ought to head home and wait for Riley to get back, leave him a message maybe. But then he decided that Riley might not be gone long and if Jenna was home she might let him hang out until then.

So instead, he knocked on her door, a smile growing at the escalated barking from within. He heard footsteps and a muttered, "Shut the hell up, dog!" before the door swung open.

Trace grinned at Riley's best friend. "Hi, Jenna, I hope you don't mind me coming—" He cut off as Jenna gasped and grabbed his arm.

"Get your ass in here!" she ordered as she tugged him inside.

Trace hissed a little as her fingers clamped down on the spot where the last IV had been and her expression changed to one of concern. Trace shook his head with a weak smile. "It's all right, what's going on? Is Riley out?"

Jenna snorted and slapped both hands on her hips. "Yes! Out of his goddamn mind and if you don't get your ass to California and snap him back into it I'm going to resort to calling his mother!"

Trace blinked, startled, and took a half step back. "California? What's in California?"

"Riley!"

Trace felt as if he'd stepped into a strange alternate universe and shook his head. "What? Why is Riley in California? Are you sure?" Which was a stupid question and Jenna told him she thought so too with a roll of her eyes and arched brows. "All right, you're sure. What's he doing there?" Riley hadn't mentioned a trip. Trace was sure he'd remember and surely Riley wouldn't have been so upset that Trace had been out of town for the weekend if he, too, had planned to go away.

Jenna threw her arms out to each side. "Hell if I know! He claims he's auditioning or something but the fact is he's running! From you!"

Trace stilled, heart sinking. "What? He went to California to...get away from me?" What the hell had happened? Things had seemed fine, a little tense over the party thing, but fine.

Jenna gave him an exasperated sigh. "No, you idiot, he went to California to get away from what he feels for you. As in, love. Don't tell me you're not fully aware that he is head over heels in love with you."

Trace liked the way that sounded. Or would have if it hadn't been attached to "he went to California". "Well, no, I know he is. I hope anyway. He sure seems to be even if he won't admit it. He went to California? For how long?"

"Forever, or so he claims! Trace, he paid up his bills for the next few months, packed his clothes and left! I just bailed poor Ginger out of the doggie hotel earlier today because he finally got the nuts up to call me and tell me what was going on. He didn't even take the time to say goodbye."

Trace had to sit down as it finally sank in. Riley was gone, really gone. He hadn't even said goodbye. Trace had spent the entire weekend looking forward to coming back and seeing him and Riley had been planning his getaway.

"Where the hell were you? I left a dozen messages on your voice mail!"

Trace shook out of his daze and looked up at Jenna. "I was in Chicago, like I told him I would be. I didn't have access to my cell." He hadn't even bothered to get a hotel room. Most of his time would be spent in the hospital anyway, so he'd just gone ahead and let them admit him for the full visit.

Jenna sat down, sighing heavily and placing her hand on Trace's thigh. "You have to go get him. He's being an idiot and you're probably the only one who can talk some sense into him."

Trace let out a humorless laugh. "From the sound of it, I'm the last person he wants to talk to right now." He shook his head, raking both hands through his hair and pressing the heels of his palms to his temples, a headache of epic proportions starting. "What am I going to say to him?"

"I don't know. I really don't. He's a stubborn, prideful pain in the ass but we love him and you're in love with him. He has to come home." Jenna's lower lip trembled and Trace felt like an ass for not realizing sooner how much she must be hurting too. Riley was her best friend.

He reached out and she came willingly into his arms, sniffing, her tears wetting his shoulder. "Shh, it's all right, I'll go. I'll bring him home. I promise." Ginger was pawing and mewling pitifully at his foot and Trace sighed. They were both relying on him to bring Riley home and Trace wasn't even sure he could get Riley to speak to him.

But he had to try. He wasn't giving up on that man and he'd be damned if he let Riley give up either.

Chapter Nine

Trace's stomach leapt into his throat as the cab neared Riley's hotel. Scratch that—motel. Cheap motel in the heart of L.A. Alone. Jesus Christ, he was going to hug the man and then kick his ass for being so stupid and risky. Didn't Riley realize there were people, two in particular, who cared what happened to him?

Trace impatiently tapped his fingers on his thigh, exhaling as the cabby pulled into the parking lot of what must be the shiftiest-looking place in the whole city. At least to Trace's eyes. He paid and climbed out, duffel over his shoulder, filled with what he'd taken to Chicago. He hadn't had time to go back to the ranch and pack another bag.

Checking the information he'd scribbled down on his rushed drive to the airport, Trace glanced at the building and spotted the right number on the second floor. His jaw set and with a determined stride, he took the stairs two at a time.

It took several minutes of knocking before the door swung open and Riley pinned Trace with a look.

"I'm going to kill Jenna. If she sent you out here because she thinks I'm making a mistake, you can just go right back to Texas. I'm not leaving."

Trace's brows shot up, unable to hide the sharp disappointment and hurt that stabbed through him. "Jesus, Riley...do you ever think about what you say before you crush a man with that tongue of yours?" He swallowed and shook his head, shouldering his way into the room and grateful that at least Riley didn't start yelling for the cops, not that it'd do him much good in a neighborhood like this.

"I'm not here to take you back to Texas." His shoulders slumped and he met Riley's eyes with a rueful shrug. "Part of me wonders what I am here for. I was worried. So is Jenna."

Riley sighed and closed the door, locking it. "I get that she's worried and that you are. I spent three hours on the phone with her this morning trying to make her understand why I'm here, why I left, why I didn't tell her before I did. I've got an opportunity and I have to take it. Jenna knew it was going to happen eventually."

He met Trace's eyes, shrugging a little. "You're the one who kept saying I ought to stop wasting time and go after my dream. So why are you here? I'm doing what you said." His tone was defensive and a spark of hope ignited. Riley sounded guilty, as if he did know exactly how stupidly he'd acted and might even regret it.

Trace sighed, deflating and sinking down onto the edge of the bed. He was exhausted, still weak from his treatments and here against doctor's orders and Riley didn't know why. It'd probably never even occurred to the stubborn bastard.

"I'm here because I love you, Riley." He looked up at Riley, the surprise evident on the other man's face, and Trace's stomach sank even more. It had never seemed as hopeless as it did right then. "That never occurred to you, did it? When you were planning all of this, running off to California without so much as a 'see ya, sucker', did it occur to you even once that I love you and what I'd feel?" He shook his head, genuinely unsure. "Do you even care, darlin'?"

Maybe he really was deluding himself. Maybe Riley thought he was a pathetic loser with not a shot in hell of winning his love. Maybe he'd imagined it all in this warped, vulnerable state of mind he'd been in for a while now. He'd never really stopped to consider what he would do if his feelings were genuinely not returned.

Riley scuffed his toe on the faded carpet, dropping his gaze. "It's not that I don't care how you feel, it just..." He paused, raking his hands through his hair and meeting Trace's eyes. "It scares me. Not just the way you feel but the way I feel. And I'll admit that's part of the reason I left. I didn't know what to do about the way you make me feel."

Pacing to the opposite end of the room, Riley turned and met Trace's gaze again. "I thought getting away was the answer, that you'd give up if I was fifteen hundred miles away. But you're here, so...yeah, I was totally wrong." Crossing the room again, Riley crouched down in front of Trace, clasping his hands. "You're different from anyone else I've ever been involved with. You challenge me and make me feel things I'm not sure how to handle, things I'm not entirely comfortable with. I wasn't prepared for that. I kept telling myself I could handle it, handle you, but I can't. I missed you like crazy. And it scared me. I don't...I don't like needing anyone. You're different. You're important even when I don't want you to be."

Trace couldn't not reach for him, the uncertainty in Riley's eyes breaking his heart. He urged Riley up to sit on the bed beside him. "I came because I need you too, Riley. And because I really want to believe we have a chance — a real one."

He reached up and touched Riley's cheek lightly, sighing. "I'd do damn near anything for you and if what you need is to be here, then here's where we'll be. If it's for me to leave you alone, well..." He swallowed hard, aching at just the thought. "I'd do that too."

He looked around and shook his head firmly. "But I'll be damned if I'm leaving you alone in this place. We'll get you a room somewhere better, find a sublet if we can in a better neighborhood. Then...if you want me to go, I'll go. But I want you to know something, Riley. If you ever change your mind, if you decide you might like to try with me, or just want to talk, as long as I live, I won't ever turn you away. If you don't believe anything else, believe that."

Riley didn't say anything for several long moments, brows knit like he was trying to get the words out but was having trouble making them come. Finally, he shook his head, slipping his hand into Trace's. "I don't want you to leave me alone. I thought I did. I mean obviously, I came all the way to California but...I was wrong. I knew it just

as soon as I saw you. Hell, to be honest, I knew it before I got on the stupid, fucking plane."

Reaching up, Riley smoothed a hand over Trace's hair, his touch gentle. "You look exhausted. You must have come out here as soon as you got home." Trace nodded and Riley sighed. "I'm sorry. I know you and Jenna were both worried but...I felt like I couldn't wait. I think I kind of needed that to motivate me. I'm sorry it worried you."

Trace was so relieved. He'd been expecting a battle to the end but Riley seemed to have been waiting for him. As if he'd not only known he was making a mistake but somehow known Trace would come after him. He gave the young man a tired smile, turning his head to kiss the palm of Riley's hand. "Don't be sorry. If this is what it took for you to realize that maybe having me around isn't so bad, then I'm glad you did it."

Riley gave him a skeptical look.

"Okay, so grateful might be pushing it." He pulled Riley close, feeling like all the empty parts of him left by the doctors and the traveling and the worry were all filling back up now that Riley was safe and sound in his arms. And happy to be there from the quiet sigh he let out as he leaned against Trace.

"So...California. Can't say as I've ever been. This should be an adventure." He gave Riley a pat on the back and a kiss to his tumbled hair. "Now let's get you packed up and we can take the adventure to some part of the city that has less chance for bullets to make close acquaintance with our vital organs, huh?"

Riley smiled, nodding. "Give me ten minutes," he promised, crossing to the teeny closet and beginning to tug his clothes off the hangers. He neatly folded them. "So how was Chicago? If I remember right, the summers were almost as brutal there as they are back home."

Trace gave Riley a rueful smile. "Brutal is the right word for it, yeah." He rose and slipped into the bathroom, partly to help gather Riley's things, partly because he felt guilty for not telling Riley the whole truth. "Chicago sucked. And I missed you. Thought about you the whole time."

There was a slight pause then. "Maybe next time I could come with you."

Trace smiled, nodding though Riley couldn't see him. "I'd like it if you came. I'll be going back in two months." If things went the way he hoped, it would be for a follow-up to tell him everything was fine. The first procedure had to be done there, but the weekly maintenance transfusions would be in Austin at his doctor's office on an outpatient basis. And if things went well, he'd tell Riley because it would be all over. If things didn't go well...he'd still tell Riley because if the treatment failed he wasn't going to have very long and he'd need to start preparing Riley, and himself, for that.

Riley wondered what was in Chicago but he figured if Trace had something to hide, he wouldn't be willing to take Riley along. Maybe he had friends there or it was something to do with his ranch. That seemed likely, so he didn't ask. For once he was going to trust this man who had never given him a reason not to, so he just kept folding and before long, he had everything tucked back into his suitcases. Gathering up his

toiletries, he dumped the armful of bottles and tubes and sprays into his duffel bag, grinning when Trace came up behind him and pressed a kiss to the side of his neck.

Turning in Trace's arms, Riley reached up to cup his cheeks, giving him a concerned look. "Are you sure you want to leave now? You honestly look like you could use a nap, at least for an hour or so." He doubted Trace would agree to that, it'd be best if they were out of here before it got any later in the day, but Riley felt like he ought to at least put the option out there.

Trace shook his head. "I'm fine, darlin', just tired. I've been on a plane for most of the day. Let's get us a nice hotel room for the night and then you can coddle all you want. I kinda like the sound of that, actually." He grinned wickedly and slid his arm around Riley's waist. "Would you be my nursemaid, darlin'? And if the answer's yes, can I get a sponge bath, maybe?"

He laughed when Riley gave him a shove and a disgusted but amused roll of his eyes. Trace grabbed two of Riley's suitcases and his own duffel while Riley took his laptop bag and the other duffel and Trace led the way out into the bright sunshine.

Riley wanted to argue—he couldn't afford a nicer hotel room but he knew arguing would be a waste of time and effort. Trace wouldn't listen, anyway. Besides, his protests would be halfhearted. Sleeping on that lumpy old mattress had made Riley long for his own bed at home.

"I can handle more than this, you know. I'm not the one who's been flying around the country all day."

Trace pretended not to hear him and Riley gave up, muttering under his breath about stubborn cowboys. Trace just chuckled and started down the stairs.

Riley shook his head, following Trace and gesturing to the little office. "I'll need to check out and get my refund and all that first."

Riley ducked inside to take care of his paperwork, shielding his eyes against the bright glare of sunshine as he came back out and tucked his wallet carefully away. "Let's get a cab. They're not too hard to find."

Once they were in the cab, he eyed his cell phone and gave Trace a look. "I should call Jenna, let her know you did your white-knight routine." His eyes sparkled with amusement and Trace snorted. "It'll wait though," Riley decided. "I really am glad you're here. And I really am sorry you had to come all this way to prove to me what a jackass I am."

Trace smiled widely, reaching out and tugging Riley closer across the seat as the cabbie got on the freeway and proceeded to risk life and limb crossing four lanes without a glance.

"I'm damn glad to hear you say that, love. Well, not the jackass part, but the rest is nice." Trace leaned forward to speak to the cab driver through the partition. "Remember, we're not looking for the Hilton, but not the Bates Motel either. Something nice and in between, huh?" The guy gave him an annoyed look in the rearview and Trace's brows lifted as he sat back. "I guess talking is outlawed or something."

Riley was trying not to laugh, lips pressed tightly together.

"Seriously, did you see the look he just gave me? You'd think I asked him 'how much for head?'"

Riley snickered and leaned against Trace's shoulder, taking Trace's hand and lacing their fingers. He liked that, the way they seemed to fit so perfectly together, Trace's hand all wrapped around his. He glanced up at Trace. "I didn't realize how lonely I'd be until after I got here and was unpacked and everything. It was so quiet without Jenna next door and without Ginger and without you calling or stopping by. I didn't like it one bit."

Plus, Riley was scared as hell about this whole audition thing. He didn't really know if he was good enough, just because he could rake in awesome tips at the club didn't mean he had the right kind of skills to actually get a spot on a tour. He'd been trying not to think about that, the idea that maybe he wasn't good enough literally made him sick to his stomach.

Trace smiled and slipped his arm around Riley's shoulders, dropping a kiss to the top of his head. "I'm glad I'm here too. Damn, I missed you, darlin'. So tell me about this audition Jenna says you're here for. Who's it with and what's it for?"

Riley settled back against the seat, oddly comforted by the feel of Trace's arm around his shoulders. "It's for an open spot as a backup dancer for Amelia King's upcoming tour. It's an open audition, which means anyone can come in and try out."

Riley knew how uncertain it all sounded. It had given him pause too, but it was an opportunity to do what he wanted to do most and since he was already here, albeit for all the wrong reasons, he couldn't ignore that opportunity. It'd be stupid to. He couldn't spend the rest of his life stripping and had no desire to. He wanted to be more than that, needed to be.

"I'm sure they'll love you, darlin'."

Riley smiled wistfully, reaching up to touch Trace's cheek. "I hope so. I really, really hope so." He breathed a sigh of relief when the cab pulled up in front of a Holiday Inn.

Trace had their stuff all loaded onto a luggage trolley by the time Riley finished paying the cabbie. He smiled as the driver pulled away then pressed a kiss to Trace's cheek. "Come on, let's get us a room. You look exhausted."

Trace nodded, going so far as to let Riley help him pull the trolley behind them into the hotel. However, when Riley tried to talk Trace into letting him pay for at least part of the room, Trace ignored him. He was too glad to be out of the rattrap and to have Trace there to argue.

Once they'd reached their floor, Trace led them down the hall and swiped the card, pushing the door open and the two of them wrestled the cumbersome trolley inside. Trace sighed and leaned back against the door, lifting his hat off and tipping his head back with a light thud. "I could sleep for a week."

Riley shook his head, taking Trace's hand and guiding him to the bed, pulling the covers free before gently nudging Trace down on the side of the bed. "Go on, lie down. I'll come and curl up with you in just a second." A nap sounded like a brilliant idea.

By the time Riley finished unpacking, Trace had stripped and made himself comfortable, his eyes half closed already. Riley crossed the room and closed the blinds before stripping out of his own clothes and slipping into bed beside Trace, their bodies twining around each other. Oh, this was going to be nice, sleeping like this. Riley had decided he loved the way it felt to have Trace all wrapped around him. He yawned, pressing a kiss to Trace's shoulder.

"Get some sleep, cowboy. I'll be right here when you wake up, I promise."

Chapter Ten

Slinging his bag more firmly over his shoulder, Riley bypassed the bank of elevators at the hotel, opting for the stairs instead, a grin fixed firmly on his face. He figured today was officially one of the best days in a good long while, starting out with waking up all wrapped in Trace's arms. It had set the tone for the day and his audition had gone beautifully. He'd been floored when the choreographer had told him to come back tomorrow for a second round but had managed to keep his cool. Barely, but he'd managed.

Now though, there was no need to keep his jubilant mood under wraps. Riley grinned as he swiped his keycard and swung the hotel-room door open. Trace glanced up from the TV, giving him an expectant look and Riley dropped his bag, letting the door shut behind him and crossing the room to bend over Trace's chair.

"They want me to come back tomorrow," he announced, practically bursting inside, unable to resist leaning down and kissing Trace soundly. "Two hundred people showed up and they only picked fifty to come back. And I'm one of them." He couldn't even form an appropriate response to how that made him feel. Riley didn't think he'd ever been as excited in his life.

A grin spread across Trace's face and he let out a whoop, pushing to his feet to drag Riley into a huge hug. "That's my darlin'! I knew they'd love ya."

Trace gave Riley another squeeze and set him back on his feet, pulling back to give him a grin. "That calls for a celebration."

Riley cringed a little and hesitated. "I don't know, Trace, it's just a second audition, they might—"

Trace cut him off with a shake of his head. "They might love you tomorrow too. Either way, we're celebratin' tonight. C'mon, I always wanted to see the California beach. We'll find a quiet bit of beach, just you and me, then grab some dinner. Wherever you want."

Riley smiled, unable to resist Trace's infectious enthusiasm. He decided for once to let the nerves go and just enjoy a little bit of pride. He deserved it. "That sounds perfect. Just let me take a five-minute shower. I changed after the audition but it's so hot out it didn't make much difference." He gave Trace a quick kiss, got fresh clothes from the drawer, smiling when Trace came up behind him and nuzzled his neck, one arm wrapped around Riley's waist. He loved it when Trace did little things like that.

"Five minutes, I promise." Riley pulled free and ducked into the bathroom before Trace could protest. He stuck to his word and was out of the shower in five minutes flat, a towel hooked around his hips as he dealt with his hair.

Riley jumped at the tapping on the door then turned and opened it. "Okay, so five minutes for the shower and a couple more to get dressed. Unless you want to stay in and celebrate, that is..." He didn't try to mask the suggestive tone of his voice.

Trace gave Riley a teasing smile. "In love with me yet?" He leaned in and stole a kiss. "No? Then hurry up so we can go!"

Riley shook his head as he closed the door again, pulling his hair back before tugging on a tank top and cargo shorts. He opened the bathroom door and Trace glanced up, a grin curving his lips.

"Very nice, darlin'." Trace gestured to his own jeans and t-shirt and obligatory boots. "I wasn't exactly expecting California when I packed."

Riley shook his head. "It's okay. It should start cooling down soon." He slid his feet into sandals and tucked his wallet and key into his pocket before giving Trace an expectant look. "I'm ready whenever you are, cowboy."

Riley let Trace take his hand as they headed downstairs. He kept thinking about Trace's teasing question. No, he wasn't in love yet, but Riley couldn't lie. He could already see the imaginary drop ahead, knew he was dangerously close to taking that last tumble.

Every little thing Trace did and said pushed him closer and Riley was doing his best not to resist, though part of him wanted to. He knew deep down Trace was different, knew this wouldn't be like the last time he'd fallen for someone. After weeks of fighting Trace, Riley could almost start to believe all those promises the other man was making, even the unspoken ones.

Trace laced their fingers as they stepped out of the hotel into the bright sunshine and waved over a cab just pulling into the entrance area. Trace climbed in behind Riley, instructing the driver to head for the nearest beach, then turned to Riley. "So tell me all about it. What's a real Hollywood audition like?"

Riley let out a long breath. "Long. Boring. Nerve racking. I waited most of the morning for my turn, alternating between being bored out of my mind, wishing I had brought a magazine or something and wanting to throw up. Then there's two minutes in front of the choreographer and his two assistants and a video camera. Then more waiting, more boredom, more nerves while everyone else finishes up before they decide who's getting called back and who's not."

He shook his head. "I thought I was going to go nuts. They didn't call my name until almost the end. But when they did, I thought I'd misheard. I felt so bad for everyone who didn't make it through."

Riley had been so worried he'd be one of those people—still was, as a matter of fact. But he didn't want to think about that now, didn't want to spoil the flush of triumph and the simple pleasure of just being with Trace. "So what did you occupy yourself with all day while I was gone? Daytime TV is notoriously bad, so unless you found something else to do, you must have been bored out of your mind."

Trace chuckled. "Actually, I napped a lot. Still recovering from all that plane time, I guess." He smiled and squeezed Riley's hand. "I'm so proud of you, darlin'."

Riley's chest tightened. It'd been a long time since anyone had said that to him and coming from Trace it was pretty darn important. He leaned up and pressed a quick kiss to Trace's lips, shifting closer against his side. Even if he wasn't really sure he'd done anything that was worth being proud of, he was happy that Trace was. "Thank you. I just...I hope it works out."

Of course, if it did, he and Trace were going to have to work something out, depending on how things happened. Riley knew that Trace couldn't spend all his time here and probably wouldn't want to. He had a home, had responsibilities and it was something that would have to be taken into account. If, of course, things got that far. Riley wasn't worried about that right now though. Trace was here and that was what mattered most.

It struck him as ironic that a week ago he would have pushed Trace away, wouldn't have wanted him there for what might end up being a huge turning point in his life. Up until the moment he'd left, Riley had been sure he was doing the right thing by putting distance between him and Trace. But Riley had known deep down inside that he was wrong. Not that he'd admitted it, but he'd known.

Trace nodded, smiling. "It'll work out. Gotta think positive, baby."

They fell silent for a while, just enjoying each other's company and watching the buildings and other cars fly by. When they arrived, Trace handed some bills to the driver and climbed out, tipping his hat down a bit more to shield his eyes from the slowly setting sun. Riley smiled when Trace took his hand.

"Too bad we don't have a blanket or something, we could just sit and watch the sun set. That'd be nice," Trace said. And romantic too, something Riley had come to expect from Trace. "This is perfect though. I sat around waiting all day, which was the worst kind of torture, believe me."

They walked down the beach, idly watching a couple of kids winging a Frisbee back and forth until their mother called for them. "I always wanted a brother or sister. Being an only child wasn't much fun. Was it just me, or...nah, I bet you weren't lonely like I was. Your family didn't move around like me and my mom did," Riley said, glancing up at Trace.

Trace smiled and gave a light tug on Riley's hand to stop them walking. He glanced around, then sat, tugging off his boots and socks and wiggling his toes in the sand before reaching a hand up to Riley, who was smiling amusedly at him.

"Who needs a blanket? You afraid of a little sand?" Trace teased, pulling him down to sit back against his chest, arms around his shoulders. This is nice, Riley thought. It was warm but not uncomfortably so now with the sun sinking. "As for your question—I don't know if lonely is the right word. I always felt a little...out of place. My folks weren't the country, ranch-living, nature types. They wanted me to be a doctor or a lawyer or something nice and conservative and make lots of money. It was my

grandmother who really inspired my love for the outdoors. I loved visiting her at the ranch because it was so different from my parents' world. I always knew that's what I wanted to do – work outside with animals."

Trace shrugged and sighed. "They loved me and I loved them but they never really understood me. All I wanted was to ride horses and raise cattle and be outside. The thought of being chained in some office was enough to make me break out in hives."

Riley nodded in agreement, balancing part of his weight on his hands as he leaned back in Trace's arms. "Yeah, I know that feeling. Luckily my mom never questioned my decisions about what I wanted to do, at least not to me. Granted, I didn't tell her that I was working at the club until a year after I actually started. I don't know what my dad would think – don't much care either. He dropped out of my life a long time ago. But I always kind of hoped that my mom would find someone else and have another kid so I wouldn't be so lonely. It never occurred to me that it'd be a good long while before I could actually play with a younger brother or sister. But we moved around so much and even though I made friends easily, I couldn't ever keep them."

Riley kicked off his sandals, watching as they landed at crazy angles a few feet away, sighing in contentment. Tipping back his head to meet Trace's eyes upside down, he smiled. "But I'm not lonely now. Jenna's been there for me for the past few years and I don't know what I'd have done without her but there was always this empty spot in my life. Now there's not because you're here. And it feels really good."

Trace didn't say anything but Riley didn't mind, straightening to gaze out at the ocean and the sun setting against it. Trace turned his face into Riley's hair, silent for a long moment before he gave Riley a tight squeeze and pressed a kiss behind his ear. "It feels perfect."

That it did.

* * * * *

I'm sorry, you're just not what I'm looking for.

The words echoed in Riley's head with every step as he drew closer to the hotel doors, his stomach tied in knots. Trace would be nearly as upset as he. He'd been so happy last night, so proud and Riley hated knowing that he was going to spoil that, hated the knowledge that now Trace was going to be disappointed.

Even a week ago, Riley knew he'd have hidden the news from Trace, would have evaded and talked around things and done everything in his power not to let Trace know what had happened and how upset he was but he couldn't even consider it now. There was no way Riley could hide this and he didn't want to. He needed Trace, needed to be told that everything was going to be okay, needed to believe that someone still thought he was good at something. And for once he wasn't afraid of that need.

He took a deep breath as he slid the keycard through the slot on the hotel-room door, stomach pitching a little. When Trace looked up and lifted his brows in question,

Riley just shook his head. The flash of disappointment in Trace's eyes was exactly what he'd been dreading and he looked away. "I wasn't good enough."

Trace was across the room before the words finished being spoken, drawing Riley into his arms. Riley accepted the warm embrace, sighing heavily.

"So...yeah. I didn't make it through. They had us all do this big group routine and I thought it was okay but...it wasn't. And I asked why but all they told me was that I wasn't what they were looking for." Riley hated that. They could have at least given him something, so he could improve or...just something. "I was afraid that was going to happen. In the back of my mind. I mean, I've never had any real training, never had to learn a routine like that and do it on a moment's notice. I guess — I think I knew this was how things were going to turn out but I had to try."

Trace nodded. "And do you know what that makes you, darlin'?"

"A loser?" Riley tried for a self-deprecating grin but had a feeling it came out more like a grimace.

Trace smiled and shook his head. "No. It makes you brave. And it makes me so proud of you I could bust somethin'."

Riley shook his head, raking his hand through his hair. "But I didn't make it."

"I know. But you tried. You gave it your best shot and you did something most people never do. Do you know how many people live their whole lives and never even try to fulfill their dreams because they're afraid?" Trace brushed a kiss to Riley's lips and gave him a tight squeeze. "You did good, darlin'. You did real, real good."

Riley found that, as devastated as he'd been the moment he'd been cut, it was hard to hang on to that when Trace was standing there looking like he could burst from pride. Even though Riley hadn't made it. He shook his head with a slow smile. "You really don't care."

Trace shrugged. "Well, I wouldn't say that. I care that you didn't get what you wanted. But no, I don't care in terms of it affecting how I feel about you or anything. Why would it?"

For the first time, Riley didn't have an answer for that. Why would it, indeed. Trace really did love him and if he hadn't known it before he for damn sure knew it now.

"Trace...I think I want to go home."

Trace's brows shot up and he pulled back, giving Riley a concerned look. "But it was just one audition. Riley, I don't want you to give up so fast and then regret it later."

Riley shook his head, moving to sit on the couch and Trace followed him. "Look, let's be honest here. You and I both know the audition was an excuse to run away from my feelings for you. I'm certainly not proud of it, but it's the truth. Regardless, I learned something."

"What's that?" Trace looked wary.

Riley leaned closer, pressing a soft kiss to Trace's lips, his free hand sliding into Trace's hair as he deepened it, unable to resist. Warmth spread through him, not desire,

but just warm contentment, a knowing that he was right where he belonged. Not here in L.A., but in Trace's arms, with him, close to him. It felt more right than anything ever had. Riley's breath caught and he broke the kiss, leaning back to look at Trace.

"I love you."

Trace froze, staring at Riley and forgetting how to breathe. He had not been expecting that and for once found himself without a plan, without a proper response, only able to gape at the other man.

"You...I'm sorry, you what?" Immediately, he snapped out of the daze and shook his head, grabbing Riley's hands and grinning. "Ignore that, I heard you just fine. I just don't know what to say. I love you too, obviously but..."

The stuttering and stammering ended abruptly and a grin broke across his face. Tugging Riley against him and tumbling him back on the couch, their faces close, his hands came up to cup Riley's cheeks. "Say that again. Keep on sayin' it. I might make you say it all night."

Riley grinned up at him. "I love you. I love you. You know, I might just keep saying it whether you ask me to or not." Riley shook his head and lifted up to press a kiss against Trace's lips. "Tell me," he murmured, craving the words.

Trace didn't hesitate, lowering his forehead to Riley's. "I love you."

Riley's lips curved and he wrapped his arms around Trace, squeezing his shoulders. "I love you too."

Trace closed his eyes with a sigh. It was going to take some getting used to, hearing Riley say those words. Trace sat up, bringing Riley with him and then tugging him to his feet.

"Where are we going?" Riley asked, giving him a confused look.

Trace gave him a wicked look in return. "To bed. You're mine now, darlin', and I mean to make that official in every way." He tugged Riley closer and sank a hand into his hair, this time the kiss no longer gentle but possessive and claiming. His. He'd been waiting a lifetime for this man and he wasn't going to wait a minute longer.

Riley's arms tightened around Trace's neck and Trace walked them both backward toward the bed.

It was silly to be nervous, he knew, especially since neither of them were anywhere near virginal. But this wasn't just sex and they both knew it. This meant something more than a quick release of mutual desire, meant more than a few hours tangled with someone he barely knew. This was why he'd wanted to wait, so that this first time would be special for both of them, no matter how old-fashioned that might sound.

Trace broke the kiss, guiding Riley the last foot or so to the bed and tumbling him back onto it. He felt as though it were the first time he'd been allowed to touch Riley. That day by the swimming hole when he'd tasted him for the first time, the same night when he'd found out what Riley's skin felt like under his fingertips and all the other intimate moments... None of that came close to this, to finally hear Riley say he loved

him and know he meant it. And to finally make love to him. Trace would have waited forever if that's what it'd taken, but thank God it hadn't.

He slid his hands under Riley's shirt, pushing it up slowly and bending to press open-mouth kisses to the warm, silky flesh. He tasted vaguely salty from the sweat he must have worked up at the audition and out in the heat but it only added a layer of spice to his sweet skin and Trace breathed him in like air.

"Riley..." he whispered against the other man's stomach, lifting his eyes and meeting his gaze. "You know I ain't gonna let you go now, right?"

Riley's lips curved and he tangled one hand lightly in Trace's hair, his voice playful. "I sure hope not, cowboy, with all the big talk you've been doing. I'd be disappointed if you changed your mind now."

Trace laughed, heart pounding, as weeks of sexual tension came to a head inside him and it was like being in the eye of a hurricane, just waiting for that moment to snap. And then their eyes met and Trace growled, slanting his mouth across Riley's—possessive, hard.

Riley's arms came around his neck and the other man's fingers caught his shirt, dragging it up as their tongues tangled. Breathless and panting, their lips parted long enough for both their shirts to end up tossed to some unknown corner of the room before they came back together, hands greedy.

Riley twisted under him, his movements wanton and sensual and Trace's lungs burned with the seeming inability to draw a full breath. He didn't care. Who needed breath when there was Riley?

"Trace..." Riley groaned against his mouth. "Hurry..."

He didn't need to be told twice, sliding both hands between them to jerk open his lover's jeans, shove them down in rough, hasty motions until his hand was filled with hard, silken flesh that throbbed with need. Trace's mouth watered and he grinned wickedly down at Riley. That was all the warning the other man got before Trace slid down his body and took his cock deep into his mouth.

Riley groaned, his hips bucking and he sank his hands into Trace's hair. "Finally," he breathed.

Trace's heartbeat sped up as the other man squirmed under him and pleasure whipped through them as he worked Riley's jeans farther down. He wanted Riley naked under him, the sooner the better. Riley slid one hand out of Trace's hair and down his neck, fingers splaying on his shoulder and flexing, his lean hips lifting as Trace sucked him deeper.

Riley gave his hair a gentle tug and Trace glanced up, meeting his lover's eyes. "Trace, please, you're killing me here. I've waited so long for this."

Trace grinned. "It's going to be worth every second of the wait, darlin'. I promise." He gave Riley's cock a firm squeeze and Riley tipped his head back against the pillows, groaning.

"Trace, for God's sake, please."

Oh, Trace liked that. The "please". It made his stomach pitch and his cock clamor to get out of those restricting jeans. He lifted his head after another minute or so and grinned up at Riley. "Say it again."

Riley arched toward him, letting out a rough moan. "Say what?" It appeared Riley too was having trouble thinking.

"Say it again," he repeated, tongue swirling around the flushed head of Riley's cock.

"Fuck, Trace, please, I don't..."

Trace grinned. "There you go...I like that word on your lips, darlin'." He rose onto his knees, hands coming down to the button of his jeans.

Riley surged up and batted Trace's hands away, shifting to his knees as well and claiming Trace's lips in a heated kiss as his long fingers tugged Trace's jeans open. "You're evil," he hissed, teeth nipping Trace's lower lip.

Trace slid his hands over Riley's chest and stomach as the other man made short work of the denim and underwear between them. "I never claimed not to be."

He caught Riley under his arms and gave him a push back onto the bed. Trace kicked out of his jeans as Riley did the same until there was nothing but air between them, and not much of that. Their lips found each other again and Trace stretched to the bedside table, tugged open the drawer, and felt around blindly for the condoms and lube he'd put there.

Riley laughed when the kiss broke and he saw the evidence of Trace's positive thinking. "You were that sure, huh?"

Trace shook his head with a grin. "Nope...but I'm prepared."

Riley tugged him down for another kiss and arched against him. "Well, thank God because if you don't fuck me soon I'm going to just have to take matters into my own hands."

Trace grinned. "I might not mind that so much." But he had no plans for making Riley wait any longer. It'd been too long coming and Trace didn't think he had a shred of patience left.

Riley ground his hips against Trace's. "I just bet you wouldn't." Before Trace could blink, Riley nabbed the box of condoms from his hand and tore it open. Only fumbling a little, he got the foil open and gave Trace a wicked look as he reached down between them to roll the condom on. Trace groaned as clever fingers stroked and caressed briefly before Riley reached for the lube.

But Trace was a step ahead of him, already slicking his fingers. Trace's stomach tightened as Riley watched, his chest rising and falling rapidly with his hitching breath. Seeing the other man, once so cool toward him, all but burning up with need for him did crazy things to Trace's insides, setting his heart to racing in his throat.

"Trace, hurry. I need you."

Trace grinned and Riley lifted his hips, bracing his weight on his elbows to watch as Trace first stroked the lube onto his cock and then leaned forward, their gazes locked as he reached between Riley's thighs. When he slid a finger inside, the other man moaned, hips lifting in encouragement.

The sensation of Riley so tight and hot around his finger gave Trace a delicious preview of what it would feel like to finally be inside him. He bent over Riley, capturing his lips as he worked his finger inside him. After a minute he added a second alongside it. No matter how needy they were, he was going to try not to rush and definitely didn't want to hurt him.

"Trace," Riley murmured, muffled against Trace's lips. "If you don't fuck me in the next five seconds, I'm going to kill you!"

Trace laughed, nipping his lip sharply. "And then you'd have no fun at all, darlin'...almost, just hang on."

He twisted his fingers, seeking Riley's sweet spot and when he found it, the other man let out a rough shout of pleasure. Oh yes, that was it right there. Trace's cock bobbed and nudged Riley's inner thigh, eager to be inside him.

A third finger pushed in a second later and Riley's breath hissed through his teeth, panting against Trace's cheek as their lips hovered a hairsbreadth from each other.

"Oh goddamn...Trace, I swear to God—"

Trace moaned roughly. "I know...you're going to kill me."

Riley nodded frantically, his hips lifting to encourage Trace's fingers to sink deeper. He was hot and snug and there wasn't any resistance—his body was relaxed and ready. Trace withdrew his fingers a second later and grasped his cock, guiding it into position.

"Oh darlin'," he breathed, tongue slipping out to taste Riley's upper lip, tangy with the sweat that beaded there. "Hang on to somethin'."

What Riley held on to was Trace, inhaling sharply as he sank inside. Moaning, Riley tipped back his head, tightening his grip and bringing his legs up higher. Being inside Riley felt just as good as Trace had known it would.

"You've been holding out on me all this time, cowboy. I sure hope you haven't been getting my hopes up for nothing," Riley teased.

Trace smirked and drew his hips back, holding for a long, aching moment, then thrust deep inside, pulling a moan from Riley. "How's that, darlin'...that what you were after?"

Riley's response was to hook his legs at Trace's hips, matching his rhythm easily.

"Oh damn," Riley panted and Trace shuddered when Riley clenched hard around him.

"What was that about holding out on you?" Trace teased, one hand shifting to slide into his lover's messy, blond curls.

"Forget I said anything." Riley laughed, pulling Trace closer and quickening his pace. "Just fuck me, Trace, or I really am going to have to get rough with you."

Trace obliged him, bracing his hands firmly on the bed and thrusting harder, faster. Riley moaned, his hips arching. Sweat slicked both their bodies as they moved together, skin slapping against skin in an erotic beat.

Trace groaned, fingers clenching in the sheets in the effort to rein in his desire enough to make this as good as he knew it could be. He wanted Riley to look back on this years from now and think he hadn't ever had a first time like that. A last first time, if Trace had anything to say about it.

He shifted one hand, hooking Riley's leg over his arm to lift it up and out, allowing Trace to slip even deeper than before. Riley kept clenching, his body twisting under him and toward him and it was enough to drive Trace right out of his mind.

"Fuck, darlin'..." He forgot whatever it was he'd been about to say, fingers stroking Riley's thigh as his other hand gripped the sheet and his hips snapped hard and fast. There'd be plenty of time to make love, right now all Trace wanted was to fuck him until they couldn't move and then find the energy to do it all over again.

Riley's fingers dug into his back, bunching the muscles in an unconsciously rough grip. Trace growled in response, bending his head to nuzzle the other man's neck, teeth scraping the sweat-dampened flesh. That got him a wicked-sounding moan and Trace grinned, doing it again, a bit harder this time.

"Oh fuck," Riley gasped, clenching tight enough to drag a groan from Trace. If the man got any tighter Trace wasn't going to get his dick back.

Riley clung, his fingers curling and slipping a bit on Trace's back. They were both too far gone after all the buildup and waiting. Riley wanted it hard and fast and Trace wanted the same thing. Deep thrusts had him rubbing against Riley's sweet spot with every move, dragging ragged moans and panting gasps from his lover.

"Damn it, Trace..." Riley groaned, grinding his body shamelessly against Trace's. "Please!"

He didn't know if Riley was even asking for anything in particular but Trace's thrusts quickened anyway and his lover bucked, hands clenching on his shoulders. Neither of them would last much longer, not at this rate, and he doubted he could slow down now. And if he did, Riley would probably have his hide.

Trace's breath caught as Riley dropped a hand from his shoulder, sliding it between their bodies to curl his fingers around his own cock. Oh damn, that was hot and Trace wished he could watch, making a mental note to have Riley do that sometime—stroke himself off while Trace watched. As it was, his lover couldn't really stroke now, they were pressed too tightly together for that.

Trace's stomach was slick with Riley's pre-come and he deliberately tightened his abs, giving Riley more friction. He was rewarded with a moan and a buck of Riley's hips. Almost, oh fuck, almost. He could feel the orgasm building in his balls and he damn well refused to get his before Riley. He lifted up enough to work a hand between them and closed his fingers over Riley's—around his cock.

Just the touch of his hand had Riley panting harder, letting go so Trace could do the touching. Riley's fingers instead clutched at Trace's back and shoulder. "Oh god...Trace..."

That was a sound he'd never forget—Riley all but whimpering his name in the midst of mind-blowing sex. Trace squeezed his lover's cock, unable to get enough room between them to stroke him but it didn't seem to matter, the squeezes and rubbing of his thumb apparently were more than enough to give Riley all the pleasure he could take.

"I know, oh damn, darlin', I know."

Harder, faster. He pressed his forehead to Riley's, their eyes meeting in a locked gaze as their bodies raged closer and closer to the edge. There was no breath for words but the silence was heavy, unspoken urgings and pleas and worshipful endearments hung between them, understood innately.

Riley dug his fingers into Trace's shoulders and Trace's heart pounded like a drum, keeping time with their frantic pace. He was right on the edge, his control like a frayed thread, on the verge of snapping. Panting, they strained closer, bodies tense and trembling.

He wanted to come so much, wanted that absolute pleasure and satisfaction. At the same time though, he didn't. He wanted to prolong this for as long as possible—the intensity and the anticipation. Maybe it was the weeks of buildup or maybe it was just Riley but he'd never felt anything like this.

Their rhythm was mostly gone now, replaced by frantic thrusts, their bodies slipping and sliding together. Riley was so close, Trace could tell, and he wasn't far behind, his orgasm building and gathering.

Trace's desperation matched what he could see in Riley's eyes. The ultimate, primal need to come. He snapped his hips harder, thrusts erratic, their bodies inching along the mattress with each surge.

Then, like a flash that ignites a forest fire, it hit with an intensity nothing had prepared him for. He was torn between watching Riley come and being lost in his own rolling, almost numbing orgasm. Riley clenched and arched, his cock throbbing in Trace's hand as he came, hot and wet between their tightly pressed bodies.

Trace was right there with him, tensing and choking on a half breath as he came so hard flashing bursts of light behind his now-closed lids blinded him.

And then, as the aftershocks rippled through them, it was as though his bones melted and they sagged to the mattress. For a moment Trace couldn't even worry about his pressing weight, nor did Riley seem particularly concerned.

After several long moments, he managed to gather enough energy to move, rolling off Riley and reaching down to automatically peel off and dispose of the condom in the trash can beside the bed. His arms weren't empty for long though, as Riley shakily grabbed a handful of tissues to wipe his stomach clean before turning to his side and curling against Trace.

"Holy shit," Riley breathed, and Trace nodded.

"My thoughts exactly, darlin'."

"That, uh...damn, that was worth waiting for." Riley glanced up at him with a teasing smile. "Don't you ever make me wait like that again though."

Trace pulled him a bit closer, his other arm coming up above his head as he continued to try to catch a full breath. "Not a chance." After several moments of silence, and once he did manage to catch his breath, Trace glanced down at his lover. "Are you sure you want to go home?"

Riley nodded, fingers idly toying with the light dusting of hair on Trace's chest. "I'm sure. I love dancing but this is... I guess I wasn't prepared for the rejection. It's not as if it's never going to happen again either. I'll figure something out but when it comes down to it, maybe that's why I never went after it before, like you said. I maybe knew deep down I didn't have the thick skin necessary." He glanced up with a wry smile. "Sorry you had to follow me all the way out here for me to figure that out."

"Hell no, Riley. It was worth it." He gave Riley a meaningful once over where he lay, naked and rumpled from their fucking. "I mean, look what I got out of the deal. You. Not a bad trade-off, I'd say."

Riley arched his brows, propping up on one elbow. "Well...there is this one other problem."

Uh-oh. Trace held his breath. "What?"

"Did I mention I canceled the lease on my apartment?"

Well then. Looked like he'd gotten more than a lover out of the deal—a roommate too.

Chapter Eleven

Trace glanced up at the sound of a car approaching, smiling and tipping his hat back as Riley's car appeared at the end of the access drive in a cloud of dust. The other man had been talking about selling it, a sporty little BMW convertible wasn't exactly practical for a ranch set a mile back off the highway, but Trace suspected it might also have something to do with the fact that the car had been a gift from someone—Trace didn't yet know who.

He set the rake against the tree trunk and dusted his hands off as he approached the front of the house, tugging off his work gloves. He wasn't much good out on the property lately and his doctors had suggested he not overexert himself, so Trace had decided there was no better time to get to handling all the yard work he usually let slide. Riley still didn't know anything was wrong and if Trace had his way, he never would. Just another three weeks of treatments and there'd be nothing to tell anyway. Or so he told himself.

Still, he kept thinking about the evening on the beach in California. Riley had said he wasn't lonely anymore because of him. If Trace had doubted whether Riley had fallen in love with him by that point, he hadn't after that. And as much as the knowledge lit Trace up inside and made him happier than he'd anticipated, it also made the guilt rise up and slice at that happiness.

What if that spot he'd filled for Riley went empty again? What if the treatments didn't work and...what if? He'd been so sure it was the right thing, that it really was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all but maybe Riley wouldn't see it that way.

For the first time, Trace was truly more than a little afraid Riley wouldn't understand and maybe wouldn't feel the same acceptance of the situation as Trace did.

Reaching the drive just as Riley pulled to a stop, Trace tucked his work gloves in his back pocket. Riley popped the trunk before getting out and Trace lifted it open, hefting out the first box. This was the last of Riley's things. It was official—he was moved in and Trace couldn't be happier about it. Trace thought Riley was still a little uncertain about it but after five weeks it was beginning to be more comfortable. Trace, though, was thrilled that his house wasn't so empty anymore.

"Hey, darlin', how's Jenna?" She had been hanging on to the last few things for Riley at her place.

Riley rolled his eyes, reaching into the trunk for the second box of stuff, adjusting the duffel, with the last of his clothes, over his shoulder before leaning across the boxes to give Trace a quick kiss. "Giving me hell, just like she does all the time lately." His

eyes sparkled as he and Trace fell into step on the front walk. "She can't stop talking about how she was right."

Riley smiled as Ginger raised her head and barked from where she lay on the porch in a patch of sunshine. He climbed the steps and set the box he carried down to kneel and scratch her ears while Trace moved the boxes inside then took the duffel bag from Riley's shoulder as he straightened.

"She loves it out here. So do I." Riley slid his hands into his pockets and met Trace's eyes, nodding to the rake in the yard and the work gloves tucked into the pocket of his jeans. "Are you busy right now? I kind of wanted to run some things by you. Do you have time to take a walk, maybe to the clearing?"

The clearing had become one of their favorite spots since the hammock was large and sturdy enough for both of them and they'd spent more than one afternoon there in the past two weeks, just talking and getting to know each other. Riley had been threatening, jokingly, to camp out there when Trace's parents came in for a visit next month, that he wasn't ready to meet them, but Trace refused to let him out of it.

Trace nodded, coming back out to the porch after depositing the duffel. "'Course. You wanna go now?" Riley nodded and there was something in his eyes, a hint of nervousness, or maybe it was excitement, Trace wasn't sure. Whatever his lover wanted to talk to him about, it was important. "All right, let me just grab a couple bottles of water. It's wretched hot today."

He dipped back into the house and got the water bottles out of the fridge, jogging upstairs quickly to duck into the guest bathroom, where he put some of his stuff, and took his pills before hurrying back outside. He grinned at Riley and tossed him one of the waters. "C'mon then, let's walk."

He bent to scoop Ginger back inside before they headed out. She was too little to be allowed to roam free out here on the ranch, too many wild animals and snakes and such. She'd pout, maybe pee on the hardwood and then get over it.

Riley nodded and slipped his sunglasses back on before slipping his hand into Trace's as they headed through the fields. Trace tried not to be distracted by the way his lover was nibbling on his lower lip in thought but it was difficult and he ended up having to look away.

"Well, I've been thinking a lot. Now that I'm pretty much all moved in and my stuff's sorted out, I'm not going to have much to do. I can't go back to dancing and I really wouldn't want to but I need to have something to do." He lifted his sunglasses as they stepped onto the path through the woods, meeting Trace's eyes. "I can't just let you support me. I don't feel right about it. Besides, even if I were okay with it, I'd be bored senseless within a few weeks."

Trace frowned as they walked, glancing at Riley. "You want to give up dancing altogether? Darlin', I know they turned you down and all but —"

"No, oh no, that's not what I meant!" Riley smiled and squeezed Trace's hand. "I meant stripping. I don't want to do that anymore, can't really even if I wanted to, thanks to being such a flake and running off like that."

"Oh...oh okay." Trace nodded, relieved. He'd been afraid there for a second that the audition rejection had made Riley want to not dance anymore, period. "Okay, well, I get not wanting to laze about the house, so what did you have in mind?" He nodded back toward the house. "I could maybe find something for you around the ranch. I dunno though, darlin', you don't strike me as the manual-labor type." He grinned and brought Riley's smooth hand up, kissing the soft palm.

Riley shook his head. "I'm not, believe me." They reached the clearing and Trace pulled him into the hammock, their bodies pressed together and Trace's arm curved around him.

"I was talking to Jenna about being bored and she mentioned that a girl she works with does some work with the cultural center downtown. Jenna thought it might be something I could do, so I went to check it out. They're looking for someone to help out all-around, do some work with the theater troupe, help out with their summer camp. I think it's something I could do. The pay would be all but nonexistent but it'd be better than nothing."

Riley nibbled on his lower lip again, tilting his head up at Trace. "What do you think? I mean, I'm not asking you for permission or anything like that but I just thought, you know, we're living together now...I ought to include you in stuff like this. I'd probably end up being gone for most of the day, at least during the week."

Trace tilted his head, thinking about that. He'd gotten used to Riley underfoot all day and under him all night but if he had to trade one, he'd definitely prefer Riley be gone during the day than the night shift he used to work. Besides, it would make Riley happy and that was what mattered most.

"I think it's a great idea. You're right, you'll get bored here before long. I think you should do it. As long as you understand one thing, darlin'. Do whatever you want as long as it makes you happy. One amendment—as long as it makes you happy and doesn't involve breaking up with me."

Riley smiled, tapping Trace's lower lip lightly. "Believe me, that's the last thing on my mind. I'll call them back later to set up an interview and all that, they need to make sure I'm not some kind of psychotic freak before they let me near all those kids. I was worried that working as a stripper might blow my chances but Jenna's friend didn't seem to think it was going to be an issue. I'm actually really excited about the idea. They want someone who can do something creative with the kids besides just arts and crafts, which is good because making things out of popsicle sticks and glitter is not my thing at all."

Shifting slightly, Riley pulled Trace's arm tighter around him, letting out a soft hum of contentment. It was too bad it was so insanely hot or Trace would be tempted to stay

right there all afternoon. Riley seemed to be of the same mind because his sigh was disappointed.

"I guess we should probably head back."

Riley somehow wasn't surprised when, in response to his suggestion, Trace's eyes flashed wicked and hot. Uh-oh. That look spelled trouble. It didn't take a genius to know that.

"What is that look for, cowboy?" He smiled, feeling wonderfully calm for the first time in a very long time. He laid all the responsibility for that at Trace's feet. For once, Riley felt as though he was really home.

"Well...we could go back to the house. Or..." His voice trailed off and his lips curved in what could only be described as a boyish smile, full of mischief. God, how had he ever resisted the man?

"Or?"

"When's the last time you went skinny dippin', darlin'?"

Riley laughed. "A long, long time ago."

Trace grinned, sliding one arm around Riley's waist and giving his ass a playful swat. "Then I think we ought to remedy that. Let's take a dip."

"That sounds like a perfect idea to me," Riley agreed, grinning. Kicking his sneakers off, he sat down on the grass to pull off his socks.

"Darlin'? Are you sure about all this?" Trace asked, and Riley blinked up at him.

"About going skinny dipping?"

"About giving up on dancing, on your dreams," Trace said gently, and Riley sighed, leaning back on his hands and looking up at the sky.

"You know, I've thought about that a lot. I think I'm doing the right thing. Mostly because I think I always knew dancing wasn't going to work out for me." Riley pushed to his feet again, pulling off his shirt and undoing his jeans.

"How do you figure?" Trace sounded confused, and Riley couldn't blame him. He'd been confused himself, but he'd had plenty of time to think this over in the last few weeks.

Riley sighed and shrugged. "I guess the audition was kind of a wake-up call. Not the kind where I really thought I had what it took and then somebody told me I didn't. More the kind where I realized I've always known I don't have the kind of ability or passion to dance professionally."

Trace finished stripping and held out his hand. "They could have been wrong, you know. People make mistakes."

Riley shook his head, taking Trace's hand and following him into the cool water. It felt like heaven in the heat of the afternoon. "No, they didn't make a mistake, Trace. It's hard to explain, you know. You lie to yourself because you don't want to admit the truth. I told myself I was just dancing until I could do something 'better', 'real dancing'.

Like an excuse. I didn't want to admit that I was stripping because it was good money and it was easier than actually figuring out what I was going to do with my life."

Riley smiled and sank down in the water, sighing in pleasure. "The truth is, I don't know what I want to do with my life. Maybe go back to school, maybe not, but I do know and have always known deep down that I wasn't going to dance professionally." He gave Trace a rueful smile. "I just couldn't admit it until I found someone who didn't care if I stripped or flipped burgers or stocked shelves. That's you, by the way."

Trace nodded, smiling. "I figured. I don't care what you do, Riley. I just want you happy and whatever it takes to do that, consider it done."

Riley grinned, pulling Trace closer. "Right now, it's you. I was happy before, but..." he trailed off and shook his head. "No, scratch that. I wasn't really happy. I guess content would be the right word. I worked and saved quite a bit of money, spent lots of time with Jenna and some with my other friends, but I knew deep down that I wanted something different. I just didn't know what. Turns out you were it all along, even when I pretended you weren't."

Trace smiled and slid his arms around Riley's waist, hands cupping his ass under the water. "I like hearing that, darlin'."

"I like telling you. I love you." Riley tipped his face up to meet Trace's lips in a slow kiss. It was too hot to go fast and he had half a mind to keep Trace right here until the sun went down. Trace's hand moved over his ass, fingers rubbing over his entrance. Riley moaned and broke the kiss, pressing his lips to the curve of Trace's shoulder.

"Have I mentioned lately that you're far too sexy for my own good?"

Trace tangled a hand in Riley's hair. "Only about once a day."

Riley lifted his head and grinned. "It bears repeating."

Trace didn't answer, instead he dropped his mouth onto Riley's and kissed him until he couldn't think. Trace was good at that. He also wasn't very good at handling compliments and tended to kiss Riley silent when he gave them. It was endearing and one of the many little things about the man that made Riley fall in love a hundred little times a day.

Lord, he was a good kisser. That was definitely on the list of reasons to love him. Trace kissed him as if he were memorizing his taste, as if he wanted to devour Riley and never forget what a kiss with him was like. It made Riley's stomach turn over pleasantly.

"Christ...you drive me crazy, darlin'," Trace murmured, breaking the kiss.

Riley nodded, panting softly and trying to press closer. "The feeling is most definitely mutual." He tipped his head back, looking up at Trace. "I feel like a naughty teenager. Skinny dipping with the guy my momma warned me about. Tall, dark and dangerous."

Trace gently pressed one finger into Riley. "And you're a walking wet dream."

Riley grinned. "Oh really? Did you have many about me?" Trace swatted his ass and he moaned, tilting his hips back to take Trace's finger deeper inside him. "I bet you did."

"Smartass," Trace muttered, capturing Riley's lips with his own.

Riley forgot all about teasing Trace and threw himself into the kiss. He knew that was exactly what Trace had intended. Wrapping himself around Trace as best he could, Riley slid both hands up Trace's back. He couldn't ever seem to touch the man enough.

Trace broke the kiss and Riley met his eyes, panting. "You know, I could tell you not to start things you can't finish. But it just so happens that I have a condom in my wallet, so we don't even have to go back to the house."

"What man doesn't?"

Riley tilted his head up at him. "You gonna let me go so I can get it?"

Trace appeared to consider that then shook his head. His finger sank deeper into Riley and began to slowly thrust. "Not yet. I'm not done playin' with ya."

Riley shivered and slid his hands up into Trace's damp hair. "Now that is one area where you'll get no argument from me."

Riley moaned as Trace's finger thrust, shallow at first but deeper and more firmly after a bit. He wondered where they could finish this. His gaze fell on an outcropping of rocks on the other side of the creek, just the right height to bend over.

"Trace."

Trace murmured in reply.

"I want you to fuck me over there." He gestured to the rocks and his smile was seductive when he looked up at Trace. "I want you to bend me over right there and fuck me so hard anyone within a twenty-mile radius will hear me."

And there went Trace's breath, whooshing right out of him with that wicked proposal. His mind flooded with images of just that, Riley bent over those rocks, skin damp and golden in the sun, demanding more, ass reddened from the force of Trace fucking him so hard.

"Goddamn, boy. You have the best ideas."

Riley's lips curved. "I know." He tugged Trace down and kissed him again. Trace decided that he simply couldn't think of a better way to spend the rest of the afternoon. He was exactly where he wanted to be.

He worked a second finger inside Riley and the other man broke the kiss on a moan, scraping his teeth across Trace's lower lip. Riley slid a hand between their bodies, wrapping his fingers around Trace's cock and stroking lightly. Trace groaned and Riley grinned, whispering against his mouth.

"I like playing with you too. It's actually my new favorite thing to do."

Trace liked that idea. As far as he was concerned, Riley could play with him any damn time he pleased.

“Consider me your own personal playground, darlin’.”

Riley wrapped his arms around Trace’s neck, tugging him down to nip his lower lip lightly. “I already do.”

Trace captured his mouth in a heated kiss, more demanding than before, possessive. He could never get enough of the man, and thank God the feeling appeared completely mutual.

His fingers moved inside Riley, gently—he didn’t want to hurt him. They didn’t have any lube and he almost considered stopping to go back to the house but he had a feeling Riley would kick his ass if he stopped now. He’d go slowly, be careful, and then he’d fuck Riley just as hard as his lover wanted.

Riley moaned into the kiss and tightened his arms around Trace. Trace slid his fingers deeper, rubbing them against Riley’s sweet spot and a minute later, Riley broke the kiss, gasping. “I think you’d better let me go get that condom now.” He squeezed Trace’s cock again, stroking a few times. “I want you like crazy and it’s really in your best interests to give me what I want.”

Trace nipped his shoulder, sliding his fingers gently out of Riley. “Pushy. Go on, go get it.”

Riley grinned and Trace watched, eyes devouring him, as he headed for the creek bank, stepping out and getting his wallet from his jeans. Condom in hand, Riley waded back into the water and over to the rocks where Trace was waiting.

He couldn’t resist the young man, it seemed. Trace was used to that by now and as Riley stopped in front of him, condom triumphantly offered to Trace, he chuckled.

“I adore you.”

Riley smiled, pressing up against him. “I know.”

And that was what mattered most, Trace figured. Riley knew. Until recently, Riley wouldn’t have even recognized love, let alone come to expect it and not question it. Oh, Trace was no fool, he knew those insecurities lurked but he’d spend the rest of his life giving Riley far more reason to believe the good things than the bad. However long that was.

He plucked the condom from Riley’s fingers and set it on the rock. “C’mere,” he growled, tugging Riley closer and then turning him, one hand sliding up to Riley’s nape to urge him forward.

Riley bent over the rock, turning his head to watch Trace as his hands slid down Riley’s sides to his hips. Riley groaned, rocking back against Trace and pressing their bodies together. “Now what are you going to do with me?” His voice was a seductive taunt.

Trace grinned, mischief spurring him as he leaned over Riley and scraped his teeth over his shoulder. “Exactly what you wanted me to, darlin’. But not yet.” Trace slid his fingers back inside Riley, making him moan as his hips bucked.

"God, you just love making me wait, don't you?" Riley panted, bracing his hands on the rock.

Trace licked a hot path down the side of Riley's neck. "I'll admit, I do like seeing you get all impatient and fired up."

Riley gave him a baleful glare over his shoulder. "Yeah, well, I'm there already. Please, Trace..."

It was the please that did it. How could anyone blame him for being unable to resist that? He bent forward over Riley and slid one arm around his waist as he reached for the condom with his other hand.

"Bossy," he murmured affectionately against Riley's ear.

Riley nodded. "Guilty. Fuck me, cowboy."

Trace moaned, tongue slipping out to tease the tender skin behind Riley's ear. "Your wish, my command, darlin'." He lifted his head to tear the condom packet open with his teeth then deftly rolled it over his cock, one-handed.

Riley shuddered as Trace guided his cock against his entrance. "Oh fuck..."

Trace smiled. "Almost. Relax for me, darlin', this is gonna burn for a minute."

Riley nodded and blew out a ragged breath as Trace pushed slowly inside him. Riley leaned against the rocks and tilted his hips back, moaning as Trace's cock slid deeper.

"I love the way you feel..." he murmured, bracing his weight on his hands and rocking his hips back slowly. He closed his eyes, shuddering when Trace's cock was finally buried deep. Trace held still and soaked it up for a moment then Riley reached down to cover Trace's hand on his hip with his own as they began to move together, slowly at first.

Slow didn't last though. It was hot, the water was cool and the passion between them sizzled. What started out slow and sultry always seemed to end up hot and hard. Explosions were pretty much guaranteed.

Trace's hips picked up the pace and Riley let out a pleased moan of appreciation.

"You always know...just when to stop loving and start...fucking," Riley panted, clenching around him at the same time.

Trace growled roughly and slid his hands along Riley's arms to his wrists, pinning them lightly against the water-smoothed rock. "Do I? Maybe 'cause you tell me."

Riley cast a confused look over his shoulder, panting softly. "I didn't say a word!"

Trace shook his head, leaning in to nuzzle his parted lips. "Didn't have to. Ya tell me other ways."

Trace dipped his head to trail his tongue along the curve of Riley's shoulder, his hips slapping against his lover. Riley tilted his head and panted, his hands curling into fists. It felt just right to be inside Riley. He felt just right in a lot of other ways too, but this was at the top of the list right now.

"You feel...so good," Riley panted, clutching at the rock with both hands. Trace smiled, lifting one hand and pushing Riley's hair aside, then scraping his teeth lightly over the nape of Riley's neck. Riley shuddered and moaned, circling his hips back against him.

"You feel like heaven, darlin'," Trace panted and Riley turned his hand to catch Trace's fingers. The little bit of intimacy was perfect, even in the midst of hot, hard fucking and Trace loved it.

He held Riley's hand tightly, the other sliding down his wet side to curl on his hip and keep him from slamming into the rock as Trace pounded into him from behind.

He bent his head and dragged his tongue across Riley's shoulder. Sleek, clean from the water, warmed by the sun and their fucking. He tasted like everything good in the whole goddamn world.

"Yer the best thing that ever happened to me, darlin'. I swear..." he murmured, breath panting against Riley's skin. His hips sped up, harder and faster, just the way Riley had asked for it and just the way they both liked it best.

"Oh fuck...Trace..." Riley groaned, clinging to his hand, his head dropping to the smooth surface of the outcropping, like he didn't have the energy to hold himself up, all his muscles gone to water. Trace loved that, loved knowing he could make his darlin' weak in the knees for him.

"Like that, don't you?" Trace panted and Riley moaned in answer, clenching his muscles.

Trace shuddered hard. Riley was just too good at pulling out every sensation and multiplying them. Their fucking turned into an erotic call and response, with Trace thrusting into him and Riley clenching, repeated over and over. The intensity seemed to climb every time, until Trace felt as if he were going to lose his mind.

"Trace..." Riley panted, squeezing Trace's hand.

"Right here, darlin'," Trace managed through gritted teeth. Right there was the only place he wanted to be. All the times he'd imagined fucking Riley, all the nights he'd lain in bed getting himself to orgasm, nothing had prepared him for the reality of it. He still wasn't used to the intensity of the desire he felt, the pleasure of being inside Riley. Trace had a feeling he'd never get used to it.

"Harder," Riley demanded, driving his hips back.

Trace groaned, hand tightening on Riley's hip. There'd be faint bruises when they were done, the kind he knew he'd catch his lover admiring in the mirror later. "Demanding little shit, ain't ya?"

"You love me that way."

"Hell yeah, I do." No question. He gave Riley what he insisted on, hips snapping harder, the water sloshing and slapping around their thighs with the force of their motions. If it kept up that way, their little afternoon delight would be over in no time.

"You'd better. It's not likely to change any time soon."

Trace pressed his lips to the back of Riley's neck again, sucking and nibbling at his skin. Riley moaned and closed his eyes, rocking his hips back in time with Trace's thrusts. It hadn't taken long for them to learn the rhythm of each other's bodies. Trace loved how easily they fit together. Then he shifted so his cock rubbed over Riley's sweet spot on every thrust and was rewarded with a hard buck of Riley's hips and muttered curses that would make a sailor blush.

Want turned to need, tinged with urgency. Riley clutched at Trace's hand, his movements growing erratic.

"Oh...oh fuck..." Riley shuddered, his eyes closed tightly.

Trace felt the same way. He scraped his teeth across Riley's nape, wishing that he could see his face, watch him when he came. Another time. Very soon, if he knew them.

"Right there....with ya, darlin'...oh fuck, Riley..." He released Riley's hand reluctantly, then slid it down and around to Riley's front. Riley shuddered in anticipation and when Trace's fingers closed around his cock the other man let out a rough shout, hips bucking.

"Trace...Trace, fuck...hurry, hurry."

That was his cue. Riley was close, damn close, and Trace began to stroke him tightly, driving into him over and over. His own orgasm wasn't far off.

"Trace...Trace..." It seemed that was all Riley could get out. Trace didn't mind a bit—he thought his name on Riley's lips was the most beautiful thing in the world. His baby liked to chant it to the heavens and Trace loved every second because he knew without a doubt that he was all Riley thought of, the only thing that consumed his mind at times like that.

Then, abruptly, the rising orgasm became an orgasm he couldn't stop if his life depended on it and he fought to keep stroking, tight and fast, groaning.

"Riley...come on, baby..."

Riley let out a rough sound, a relieved, grateful sobbing breath and Trace knew his baby had been waiting for him. *Goddamn, I love him.* It was the only thought in his head as he came hard and deep, burying his cock inside his lover and holding him close. For Trace, it was like the final volley of fireworks on the Fourth of July, one explosion after another, each one bigger than the one before.

Riley shuddered as he came, hot and intense. He braced his hands firmly on the rock, his whole body trembling.

"Oh fuck," Riley whispered, propping his head on his fisted hands. Trace was leaning over him and was still panting, his breath hot against Riley's neck.

"You can say that again." Trace's voice was rough and husky, breathless. He slid his hands up over Riley's sides and Riley straightened, leaning his head back against Trace's shoulder. Trace splashed water over him and Riley gasped.

"We should probably get back," Riley murmured.

Trace nodded. It really was too hot to spend the day outside. Even in the shade it was oppressive. He eased out of Riley and dropped a kiss on his mouth. He could taste the tang of sweat on his upper lip and it made his heart pick up, tongue slipping out to taste a little deeper, then sinking into his mouth.

Riley moaned and melted against him. That was something Trace hadn't expected. Once Riley had let go of his reservations, he'd let go of them all. Trace had never had anyone so completely surrender to him. He'd more than once had the stomach-flipping idle thought that Riley wouldn't say no to anything. Were Trace a different kind of man, he might just take major advantage of that.

When the kiss broke, Trace smiled down at Riley, one hand coming up to his face, his thumb brushing his soft, damp lower lip. "C'mon, let's get back before you go and turn my head away from the work that still needs doin'." He took another, harder kiss as a promise that he'd be picking up, later that night, right where he was leaving off. They climbed out of the water and began tugging their clothes back on.

Riley grinned, taking Trace's hand and pulling him close even as he started to move away. "And what if that's exactly what I have in mind?" he teased, his eyes sparkling. Trace's stomach flipped end over end. "What're you gonna do about that, cowboy? You and I both know you can't resist me."

Trace groaned softly as he finished dressing and watched Riley do the same. The man was right, he couldn't resist and his arms slid around Riley's waist in proof of the fact. "You're evil. Evil, wicked seducer come to test my willpower."

Riley laughed, the sound soft and arousing. "And you fail every time."

Trace tugged Riley against him. "Then let's get our asses back to the house. We stay out here much longer and I'm gonna be passing out of heatstroke that's got nothing to do with how hot you are."

Riley moved ahead, tugging lightly on Trace's hand and he followed like the love-struck sucker he was. The man had him on a leash and they both knew it and Trace couldn't think of a single reason why that was a bad thing.

Chapter Twelve

Trace paced anxiously. The doctor was late, as usual, and he despised being cooped up in the little exam room with all its metal things he didn't recognize and charts of internal organs. Whatever happened to making the customer comfortable? If he was a doctor, he'd damn sure not put plastic livers and drawings of brains in his exam rooms.

His thoughts were rambling and he knew it—anything to distract himself. This was the last transfusion and all he could think about was how much he wanted this to work. Not even for himself, though he sure wasn't too high on the idea of dying any time soon. Most of all, though, he kept thinking about Riley. And the more he thought about it, the more he got to know Riley, the less he believed that Riley would eventually be okay if the worst happened and the treatments didn't work.

Trace had begun pursuing Riley with the belief that it was better for both of them to know what real love was, even if it was taken away. But he was beginning to think he had been searching for an excuse to make claiming Riley all right with his conscience. Riley would be devastated. Trace didn't know if he'd bounce back and damn if he wanted to make either of them find out.

So the treatment had to work. That was all there was to it and if the doctor would hurry up and get in there, Trace would tell him just that.

As if he'd heard Trace, the doctor chose that moment to step into the room, a friendly smile on his face and a chart folder in his hand.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Collins. How are we feeling today?" Dr. Reynolds took a seat on the rolling stool and gestured Trace to the chair beside the table.

Trace heaved a sigh and took the seat, heel bouncing impatiently. "We're feeling like this is a pain in the ass."

Dr. Reynolds chuckled and nodded, setting the charts down beside him. "I'm sure it feels that way. I meant, how are you feeling physically?" The older man looked at Trace expectantly.

"Tired. I'm not used to being so tired, seems worse than last week. Had a dizzy spell a couple days ago but it passed pretty quick. How soon will we know if this worked? If I'm better?"

Dr. Reynolds pursed his lips. "Well, we'll do the final transfusion at the lab next door as usual today and I want to schedule a follow-up on Monday in Chicago when we'll run some final blood work that ought to give us our answers by the end of the day."

The doctor gave Trace a serious look, the kind you never really wanted to see on the face of a man who held your life in his hands. "Trace, I want to reemphasize how

important it is that you be prepared, just in case. The treatment has an eighty-five percent success rate, which is very high and gives us a lot of hope, but you need to prepare yourself either way." He scribbled on the chart and cast Trace a sidelong glance. "Have you told your family yet? Loved ones, friends?"

A stab of guilt made Trace squirm and he shook his head. "No. No need to worry them when there might not be anything to worry about after Monday, right?" His parents' visit was when he planned to tell everyone, if the treatment didn't work. He couldn't bring himself to bring everyone down by coming clean about this stupid sickness when it might go away. He couldn't even pronounce it. Thrombotic thrombocytopenic purpura. What kind of a name was that, anyway? It was as if doctors purposely made shit confusing and foreign sounding to scare you even more.

Dr. Reynolds sighed and gave him an admonishing look. "All right, I'm not going to lecture you today because we've had this discussion. Let's get on with it, then. Go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I'll send Lucy in to take you next door to the lab." He rose and gave Trace's shoulder a kind pat. "Just relax, you know the routine by now."

No worries, it will work. He told himself that as he followed the maze of halls to the adjoining lab. And when he reclined back on the table in the outpatient room, he closed his eyes and did what he did every time. Pictured Riley with his sunshine smile.

* * * * *

Riley slipped his CD wallet into his messenger bag and straightened, glancing out the front doors of the cultural center and ruffling the hair of the young girl who stood beside him. "Mom's late today, huh, Aimee?" Most everyone else had already gone home but he'd volunteered to stay late with the kids whose parents were usually the last to pick them up, due to schedules. Hopefully Aimee's mother would be there soon. Riley needed to get home and start dinner.

"Mom's not picking me up today. She has her yoga class. So Daddy's picking me up instead. He's gonna take me to Grandma's 'til Mommy's done," the little girl announced, twirling a lock of her blonde hair around a finger. "I hate going to Grandma's. I can't do anything there."

Riley smiled and hunkered down next to Aimee, keeping an eye on the front parking lot. "I always liked going to my grandma's house when I was your age. She's got lots of horses and I loved to ride." Maybe that was something he and Trace could do tomorrow, take a ride out to the swimming hole and spend the day there. Riley would keep it in mind.

Aimee sighed mournfully and shook her head. "Nope, no horses. Just lots of icky-smelling flowers and breakable stuff and books. Daddy has a computer there for work but I'm not allowed to touch it. He says I'm too young but I'm not, I'm nine years old and Mommy lets me use the computer at home. There's Daddy now."

Riley glanced up as a car pulled into the lot, looking over his shoulder to signal the receptionist that he was leaving. He turned back as Aimee pushed the door open and her father stepped out of the car. Riley's jaw dropped as he got a good look at the man approaching the building. Of all the people he'd hoped never to see again, Sam Franklin was right at the top of the list.

But here he was, just the way Riley remembered him, if a little older. Their eyes met as Riley followed Aimee outside, and after a long moment, Sam crossed the distance between them. Riley bit back a groan and a curse, mindful of their audience, hitching his bag a little higher on his shoulder.

Sam smiled at his daughter. "Aimee, princess, go wait in the car. The air-conditioning is already on." Aimee nodded and obeyed and Riley gave her a wave before he met Sam's gaze, one eyebrow arched. "This is the last place I expected to see you, Riley. You look good." Sam held a hand out but Riley stepped back, his eyes narrowing.

"Don't." He shook his head and shoved his hands in his pockets.

Sam let out a sigh. "Really? You're still mad? Riley, you really have to learn to let things go."

Riley's brows shot up. "Are you seriously lecturing me right now?" He shook his head again. "You know what, I'd say it was nice to see you but it really isn't, Sam. I'd appreciate it if your wife picked Aimee up from now on."

"Ex-wife," Sam said as Riley turned away.

"Fine, ex-wife, then."

Sam followed him a couple of steps. "Don't you want to know what happened?"

Riley stopped walking and turned, giving the other man an incredulous look. "Um...no?" Why the hell would he care why this cheating, lying, no-good son of a bitch had broken up with his poor dupe of a wife? Probably got caught cheating again.

"Leigh caught me cheating."

Riley couldn't help it, he laughed. Partially because he'd just been thinking that exact thing and partly because he realized suddenly that all the angst and hurt he'd carried around over this man was not only wasted...it was gone. All this time—years spent believing he just wasn't good enough, that he was unlovable, when the truth was, it had nothing to do with him.

Sam scowled at him. "You think that's funny?"

Riley straightened, his smile fading as he shook his head. "No, Sam. I think it's sad."

He turned then and walked away. It wasn't him Sam couldn't love. It was that Sam didn't love anyone but Sam. That fact was so blindingly clear now, he wondered how he could have ever missed it at all. And how had he ever, for a second, thought Trace could be anything like that man?

Riley grinned suddenly, a bounce in his step as he jogged across the parking lot to his car, which was now a rugged, fun, candy apple red Jeep, so different from the sleek, cool BMW he'd traded for it. Kind of like his life—he'd gone from sleek and cool and lonely to rough around the edges, fun and happier than he'd ever been.

He was tempted to pick up his cell phone and call Trace just to tell him how much he loved him but decided instead he was going to get home, cook his man a good meal and for the first time he was going to be completely honest. Trace wanted to know why Riley had been so resistant at the beginning and Riley figured now was the perfect time to tell him. Because after a whole lot of time spent living in fear, it was finally crystal clear that there was no boogeyman under the bed. And even if there was, whatever lay under the bed didn't matter nearly so much when he had a man who loved him in the bed beside him.

Chapter Thirteen

Riley was smiling by the time he got home. The thirty-minute drive back to the ranch with his stereo blaring had been just what he needed to plan his talk with Trace. He could hear Ginger start to bark as he climbed the porch steps to the front door and it opened before he reached it. Riley grinned when Ginger dashed out to circle his feet happily and Trace smiled at him from the doorway.

"Hey," Riley murmured, leaning in to kiss him then scooting Ginger back inside, closing the door behind him. "Sorry I'm late. I had to stay until all the kids were picked up. Um...let me start dinner then I want to talk to you. I'm starved and I'm sure you're hungry."

Trace nodded, following him and taking a seat at one of the stools along the breakfast bar. Riley busied himself gathering everything he needed, feeling Trace's concerned gaze on him.

"Everything all right?"

Riley gave Trace a smile and a nod. "It is now that I'm home with you."

Trace smiled and Riley paused to cross the kitchen and press a quick kiss to Trace's cheek, meeting his eyes. "I love you." Trace's face all but glowed and Riley fell in love with him all over again. Shaking his head, he went back to his dinner preparations, deftly slicing vegetables for the chicken stir-fry he had planned.

"How was your day? Did you get everything that you needed to do taken care of?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder. Trace had said he had some errands downtown, not to mention the usual ranch work. Trace nodded and Riley smiled then cursed as the knife slipped and he sliced his finger shallowly. Shaking his head, he threw away the pepper he'd been slicing before going to the sink to run his finger under cold water.

"Okay, so maybe cooking dinner right now is a bad idea," he told Trace, watching as he rinsed away the blood. "Is it okay with you if we talk first? I'm a little distracted."

Trace slid off the stool and came around to tear off a paper towel, gently taking his hand and wrapping his finger. "Yeah, come on." He led Riley to the living room and sat on the couch beside him. "What's going on?"

Riley took a deep breath, meeting Trace's worried eyes. "I ran into my ex today. The one I told you about before I left for L.A. It was his daughter who was the late pickup."

Trace's brows knit. "What happened?"

Riley shook his head. "Nothing awful, I promise." He squeezed the folded paper towel over the cut, actually eager to tell Trace everything. That alone was such a huge change. Normally he'd pretend nothing had happened. "It actually turned out to be a

good thing. Because...do you remember telling me that eventually I'd need to tell you why I was scared? Why I kept pushing you away?"

Trace nodded and Riley blew out a long breath. "I told you then that I would but I didn't really think it'd ever come to it, or that things would ever be serious enough between us that I'd want to. But I was wrong about that. I was wrong about a lot of things."

Riley smiled a little. "Well, I think it's time I told you everything. I met Sam not long after I started working the club. He came in one night, alone, sat way back in a corner and wanted a private show. He was charming and sexy and a slick talker and I fell for every single line. I let him come home with me that night."

There was a flicker of understanding in Trace's eyes and Riley offered him a small smile. "So, yeah, that first night...it wasn't just because of you. The whole situation made me uneasy because that was exactly how everything got started with him."

"And there I was, charming and slick and wanting you to meet me after— Damn, I couldn't have chosen a worse way to approach you." Trace's voice was regretful and Riley nodded.

"Yeah, it wasn't the greatest beginning. But anyway, things got hot and heavy with Sam and me really quick. Sam would come by my place, usually in the late afternoon before I had to work, sometimes late at night, after I'd get out. He told me he was married to his job. His family owns big shares in some oil company and he's got some kind of executive position. I believed him. After all, it left me free to do pretty much as I pleased with my days. I thought it was the perfect arrangement. Sam was always buying me things too, or leaving money at my place, then swearing it wasn't his when I'd try to give it back to him."

Riley flushed, shrugging. "I'm not exactly proud of it but I didn't really argue. I loved the attention. After a few months, it had gotten to be a comfortable routine. I wanted him to meet my friends but he made constant excuses—he had to work late, he was going on a business trip, he had a meeting. Things like that. So I told myself that our time was our time and he just wanted to spend it with me, not socialize with strangers. I made excuses for him."

He felt so stupid sometimes, still. He really should have known and maybe he had but just hadn't wanted to admit it. Either way, he couldn't help feeling more than a little foolish. "Then came Christmas and by that time we'd been together for more than six months. I wanted him to come to Virginia with me, to meet my family. He wouldn't, he said he had his own family obligations. So I thought it meant he wanted me with him but when I brought it up, he acted like I was insane or something. That was our first fight." Riley turned back to Trace, his lips quirked in a wry smile. "I bet you can guess what my Christmas gift was."

Trace nodded. "I bet I can. Can I ask something?" Riley nodded and Trace looked up at him. "Why did you keep it, if he was such an asshole and all?"

Riley's lips thinned. "I guess the same reason some divorced folks still wear their wedding rings. To remind myself that was all you end up with when it comes to love. A nice car and a broken heart." Riley met Trace's eyes and gave him a small smile. "For the record, I don't believe that anymore."

Trace looked relieved and Riley got up to toss the paper towel into the trash. Hooking his thumbs in his belt loops now that his finger had stopped bleeding, he idly paced the length of the living room rather than sit back down. He had too much nervous energy buzzing around inside. "After that, things pretty much went back to normal. I still saw him three or four times a week, was still convinced that despite the little bumps, we really had something. Was still convinced I was in love with him."

Riley sighed. The next part was the most humiliating and he sat back down beside Trace. "That was, until we'd been together for almost a year. Sam unexpectedly came by one day, in the middle of the morning, woke me up. He sat me down and told me he wanted me to quit dancing, to move. I, being the naïve kid that I was, jumped to conclusions and thought he meant he wanted me to move in with him, which I would have done in a heartbeat. I wasn't so sure about quitting dancing though. There was a lot of talking in circles but what it finally boiled down to was that he wanted me available to him at all times, on a moment's notice. He'd pay my bills, give me an allowance, whatever I wanted and all I had to do was be his own personal, kept boy."

Riley swallowed hard, dropping his gaze. Even now, the knowledge that someone he'd cared about had thought so little of him stung. "Needless to say, I didn't like that idea. I put my foot down and told him the only way I would do that was if he moved in with me. But he couldn't do that, wouldn't do it. He didn't want to tell me why at first but I kept pressing him and finally he lost his temper and told me. He couldn't do it because he was married."

Trace had expected something like that, as the story had gone on. He was sure Riley hadn't expected it though, and how that must have hurt him. Part of him wanted to hunt the bastard down for what he'd done but most of him just wanted to hug Riley, so that's what he did. His heart melted when Riley sank into the embrace without protest and then turned to lean back against him.

"He was a fool, Riley. He could have had it all with you and he fucked it up by lying..." Trace's voice trailed off and his eyes closed.

It hit him like a ton of bricks then, what he had to do. He'd told himself over and over that not telling Riley was for his own good, not worrying him when there might not be a need, but now...he couldn't lie to him anymore, by omission or otherwise. He took a deep breath and pulled back a bit, meeting Riley's eyes. "I need to tell you something, darlin'."

Riley tensed, though he met Trace's eyes and tried to smile. "I swear to God, if you tell me you've got a wife and kids somewhere..." Trace shook his head and Riley let out a soft sigh of relief, though his gaze was wary. "What is it?"

Trace hated that look, one he hadn't seen in a couple of weeks and he hadn't missed it at all. Now it was his turn to want to pace but he made himself stay put beside Riley.

"The night I first saw you was a bad one for me, Riley. I didn't want to be there but it was expected and so I went. I'm damn glad I did now because I might have not found you otherwise, or maybe it would have taken longer. And I didn't know if I'd have longer."

Riley's brows snapped together in a frown and Trace shook his head. "There's no nice way to say this and there's no easy way to say it. I'm sick, Riley. I found out that day, my birthday, that the disorientation and fever and random bruising I'd gone to see about wasn't just an iron deficiency like I'd thought. It was a blood disorder, a deadly one, and I had it. I might still."

He winced and gave Riley an imploring look, flinching when Riley pulled his hands away slowly. "I'm sorry. I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry. I've been getting this treatment, ever since my trip to Chicago, and today was my last one and on Monday I might find out I'm fine now and then what would have been the purpose of worrying you?" He raked his hands through his hair and wished Riley would look at him. The other man's face was pale and he was staring at his lap. "I'm sorry. It was a stupid lie I told myself, and you, because I didn't want to deal with the truth. I was scared." Still was, truth be told.

"You lied to me," Riley whispered, visibly shaken. When his eyes lifted finally, Trace was frozen by the anger and hurt in them. "You lied to me! Just like he did. Here I was planning on apologizing to you for thinking that you were anything like Sam but I was wrong again. Because you are. You're just fucking like him."

Pushing away and to his feet, Riley's hands clenched into fists at his side. Trace half expected to get a right hook any second.

"Damn you! You've been lying to me all along, just working on me, getting me to trust you, to believe in you, to lo..." Riley's voice trailed off and he shook his head.

Trace flinched at Riley's harsh accusations, all of which were completely true. He took a step toward him but Riley turned away, staring out the window. "Don't touch me. Don't even come near me."

Trace's chest tightened and he took a shaky breath. "Riley, please, let me explain..." This was worse than he'd imagined. And damn if he didn't deserve every harsh word and angry glare.

Riley spun around and the look in his eyes broke Trace's heart right in two. He'd done that. Because he was a coward, Riley was hurting. Fuck, fuck.

"Explain what? How stupid you thought I was, all this time playing me like a goddamn flute? Jesus!"

Trace shook his head, swallowing hard. "No. No, darlin', I don't think you're stupid. Pretty sure I am but you're not. I was a coward and knew you'd never get involved with me if you knew. I admit that I was selfish and didn't—" He broke off and looked down, then back up, gathering himself. "I didn't want to waste what time I had

left, however long it was. It made me see, even if I got better, how short life is and how fast it can change and be snatched away. Then there you were, this beautiful angel and I swear to God, Riley, I didn't set out to hurt you. I just wanted to love you. I swear."

"Didn't set out to hurt me?" Riley asked, his eyebrows going up. "How do you figure that? Even if you hadn't lied, what if this treatment doesn't work? You let me fall in love with you knowing there was a chance that it might not, knowing you could die and I'd be alone again."

Riley took another step back, shaking his head furiously. "You've been lying to me ever since that first night. Lying about being sick, lying about where you were going and what you were doing...all so you could keep on being selfish." Riley turned his back on Trace, his whole body tense and tight. "Don't come near me. I can't even look at you and not be angry right now."

Trace stared at Riley's stiff back, his heart thudding heavily in his chest. Funny, it was still beating. He would have sworn it was broken.

"What can I do, Riley? To make this right, you have to let me make this —"

"I don't have to do anything! Leave me alone, Trace. If you want to do anything for me, just leave me the fuck alone!" Riley didn't turn around and Trace swallowed past the lump in his throat, nodding.

"All right, all right, darlin'..." He took a step back, then another, every one painful when all he wanted to do was make Riley see he hadn't intended for this to happen. He paused at the doorway, drawing a shaky breath. "Don't leave, Riley. Please just stay, give me a chance. I'll leave you alone, long as you need, just...don't leave."

Riley didn't move — a beautiful, cold statue radiating fury and hurt.

"I'm not going anywhere. Just...go away. I need to be alone right now."

Trace didn't say anything, afraid if he did Riley would explode at him and things would get worse. He ached to go to him, hold him until Riley understood he hadn't meant to hurt him, just love him. But he didn't. He slipped out of the living room to give Riley the privacy he wanted, probably needed. He'd promised not to leave. That would have to be enough for now.

Chapter Fourteen

Sighing, Riley stared at the door to the guest bedroom. Part of him didn't want to knock, didn't want to disturb Trace, but he couldn't let this go on any longer. Despite his pretended indifference, the hurt looks Trace gave him every time they happened to be in the same room were cutting Riley to the quick. Trace was leaving for Chicago first thing in the morning and Riley couldn't bear to let him go with this barrier still between them.

He hadn't handled things well – there was no way around it. Riley hadn't been able to bring himself to ask what was wrong with Trace, what the doctors had said. Part of him just didn't want to know, almost wished that Trace had continued to keep him in the dark. But Riley had come to the conclusion that he was holding on too tightly to the anger over Trace lying to him, when the reasons why were far more important.

Lifting a hand, Riley took a deep breath and knocked on the closed door, pushing it open and peering through the shadowy darkness at Trace, then slipping inside. "I need to talk to you."

The sheets rustled as Trace flipped on the bedside lamp and Riley's heart ached at the worry on his lover's face. He looked haggard and Riley hadn't ever felt so guilty. Trace must be terrified. He stepped farther into the room, standing a foot or two away from the bed.

"I, um...I've been doing a lot of thinking these last couple days and I..." Riley broke off as his voice shook, his composure rattled when he met Trace's eyes. The lingering hurt and worry there was all it took and Riley closed the distance between them in a step, sinking down on the edge of the bed and reaching out to cup Trace's cheek.

"I'm so sorry. I've been such an ass, only thinking about myself and how upset I was and how hurt – I've been awful." Riley shifted and stretched out beside Trace, grateful when the other man didn't push him away but instead gathered him closer. "I hate hurting you. I seem to do it a lot but this was horrible of me and I wouldn't blame you a bit if you just wanted me to leave and forget about us." Riley hoped like hell that wouldn't be the case. He didn't think it would be but he had to leave the option out there. He couldn't even imagine how Trace must be feeling right now.

Trace shook his head, looking down at Riley as if horrified by the idea. "No, no, I don't want you to go anywhere. I never will. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Riley. I should have, I know I should have, but I needed you so bad that I told myself it'd be okay, I'd get better and there wouldn't be anything to tell you after all."

Trace's voice faltered and he squeezed Riley close. "I'm a selfish bastard. I just couldn't do this alone. I needed you. I still do. I always will. There's a reason I went to the club that night and a reason you were dressed like an angel and there's a reason you

fell in love with me. It's all meant to be, it has to be, and I just...I really don't believe God would give us to each other only to take us away so fast. And if... Darlin', I don't want you to look back and wish you'd never gotten involved with me. Promise me you won't."

Riley shook his head vehemently, relief sweeping through him. "I could never regret loving you. Never. I swear." He laid his head on Trace's shoulder, taking a few deep, steady breaths before looking up again to meet Trace's eyes.

"That's not all I wanted to say. I don't know what's wrong and I'm not exactly sure I want you to tell me but whatever it is, whatever happens...I'm not going to let you face it alone. I love you and that's not going to change, no matter what. And if...if you're not going to be okay, I'd never forgive myself if I walked away when you needed me the most." Riley managed a small smile. "And if I left and you did get better, I'd kick myself for the rest of my life for letting you slip away."

Trace smiled and Riley sighed softly, laying his head on Trace's shoulder, closing his eyes for a second. "I'm sorry for everything I said Thursday. I was angry and hurt and I crossed the line. You're nothing like Sam."

Trace shook his head. "I understand why you did. You were rightfully angry and, on top of that, had just run into that asshole again so he was fresh in your mind. The connection was inevitable."

Trace cupped Riley's face between his hands and met his eyes, his own serious. "I swear to you, I might not have outright lied, I drew the line there, but omission is just as bad and I won't, and haven't lied, about anything else."

Riley gave him a gentle smile. "I know that. I do."

Trace exhaled heavily and smiled, wrapping Riley up again and hugging him close. "Thank you, darlin'." He brushed a kiss across Riley's hair. "You need to know what's been happening though, and I think I need to tell you."

It all spilled out, somewhat convoluted and he had to ask Trace to go back a couple of times, but finally Riley knew all that Trace knew. What it came down to was that tomorrow they would know if the treatment had worked. If it hadn't, there would be a lot to deal with because there was no other treatment to fix it, just delay some and not even by much.

When Trace finished, Riley squeezed him tightly, swallowing hard and doing his best to mask his own fears and worries. It wasn't a position he was used to, but he felt as if it were up to him to be strong so Trace could lean on him if he needed or wanted to. "It's going to be okay. You're too stubborn to let it be any other way. I mean, come on, you wore me down. That's not exactly easily accomplished."

Sensing that both of them needed the distraction, Riley shifted, leaning up and pressing his lips to Trace's, kissing him softly, slowly. It'd been three days since they had made love and if this was going to be the last night they had together without fear and questions hanging over their heads then Riley was going to make damn sure it was worth it. After a long moment, he broke the kiss, meeting Trace's eyes.

"I love you. I'll always love you. Always." He couldn't help the tremble in his voice, shutting out the little voice in his mind that kept asking what if? Riley didn't want to think about "what-ifs", not tonight.

"I love you too, no matter what, darlin'." Trace was silent for a long moment, his eyes closed, then he opened them and shook his head. "Not here. I need you in our bed."

Half a minute later they lay on their bed and Trace stretched out over Riley, cupping his cheek and kissing him. Riley let out a soft sigh. He'd felt kind of like a half-done jigsaw puzzle the last few days, as though the outside edges were done but all the center pieces were just a big jumble, unconnected and out of place. Now it was like all those little pieces shifted where they were supposed to be, locking together, just from Trace kissing him, just from knowing that things were back to the way they ought to be.

Lifting his arms, he pulled Trace closer, one leg hooking around his hip, his hands trailing lightly up and down Trace's back, needing to be touching him as much as was humanly possible. Trace deepened the kiss, his tongue sweeping into Riley's mouth, taking possession. Riley shivered, his stomach tightening pleasantly. Nothing could ever compare to the way Trace made him feel, nothing at all.

Trace slowly broke the kiss before pulling back enough to meet Riley's eyes. He didn't say anything, no words were needed to convey how important this was, how much they'd missed each other the past few days. He just smiled and slid down to press his lips to Riley's collarbone, then lower to press another kiss to his chest, just above his heart. Trace smiled, turning his head to rest his cheek there, his eyes closing, he sighed.

"I love you," Trace murmured and Riley gave him the words back immediately.

Riley smiled, letting his hands tangle in Trace's hair, idly combing his fingers through the thick, silky mass. Trace teased him sometimes, said Riley had a fetish for his hair, which Riley didn't even try to deny. Trace shifted down again, feathering soft kisses over his ribs and Riley shook his head, urging Trace back up.

"Don't. Even that's too far away." Riley desperately needed to be able to look into Trace's eyes, to kiss him and touch his face and reassure himself he hadn't lost everything because he'd been stupid. Trace just smiled and moved back up, his face close to Riley's, their eyes meeting and Riley smiled, touching his cheek. He couldn't find any words to say but he figured the look he was giving Trace said it all.

Their lips met again and his eyes fluttered closed, warmth spreading through his body. He'd felt so cold the last few days, inside and out, and had been tempted more than once to creep into the spare room and curl up in Trace's arms, though nothing had been resolved. It was scary for Riley still, needing anyone that much, but he was getting used to it.

Trace wrapped his arms tightly around Riley, breaking the kiss and pressing his forehead to Riley's. "I missed you so much, darlin'. It broke my heart, not being near you, you not talkin' to me."

"I'm sor —"

Trace shook his head, pressing his fingers to Riley's lips. "Don't apologize. We both made mistakes, some bigger than others. Don't apologize. Just...smile for me, darlin'. I missed your smiles."

Riley nodded and Trace moved his fingers away but not before Riley had pressed a soft kiss to them and did exactly what Trace had asked – smiled for him. The expression on Trace's face just about took Riley's breath away. Trace looked so perfectly happy, as if he had everything he could possibly want. Riley reached up, meeting his eyes.

"You're everything to me. I might still be baffled at how you managed that so quickly but you are. Absolutely everything." That scared Riley, especially knowing what he did now. What was he going to do if Trace wasn't okay? He had no idea and just the thought caused his throat to close up. Pushing the thoughts from his mind, Riley wrapped his arms around Trace, clinging to him, his face buried in Trace's hair.

"Make love to me, Trace, please. I need you so much." As long as Trace was kissing him and touching him and giving him that beautiful smile, Riley could keep the worries at bay, could push it all out of his mind.

Trace paused, his face thoughtful, and Riley tilted his head. "Riley? How do you feel about losing the condoms? I mean...I've been tested for everything under the sun the past few months and I'm sure you've been?"

Riley nodded, slinging his legs around Trace's hips. "Yeah, I have and since you're the only man I plan on letting anywhere near me for the foreseeable future and then some...yeah, yeah, I think that's a fabulous idea."

Trace grinned and bent his head to kiss Riley, reaching for the nightstand and the lube, this time leaving the condoms in the drawer where they lay. Riley moaned into the kiss, reaching down and tugging at Trace's pajama pants, managing to get them down around his hips before he just couldn't reach. He let out a soft moan when Trace let him go briefly to pull them down and off before turning his attention to Riley's sweats, tugging them off easily. Oh, that was much better, their bodies entwined now with nothing between them. Riley broke the kiss, smiling up at Trace.

"I love you. I can't ever tell you often enough." Besides, Riley figured he had three days of not saying it to make up for, not that he thought Trace would ever get tired of hearing him say so. Trace whispered the words back to him and Riley beamed. He wouldn't ever get tired of hearing it either.

Trace pushed up to his knees, uncapped the bottle of lube and Riley's eyes lit up with anticipation. Trace shifted, stretching out beside him and urging his legs apart, one up and out, the other draped across Trace's lower body.

He leaned in close and pressed soft kisses just behind Riley's ear, nibbling and tongue sweeping the sensitive spot as he reached his hand down and rubbed two of his slick fingers against Riley's entrance. Riley gasped and his eyes fell closed as he tilted his head to allow Trace better access and lifted his hips in encouragement. Trace gently eased one fingertip inside, going slow, and Riley reveled in it, wanting to savor every second of tonight, let them both soak in every sensation to the fullest.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Riley moaned, trying his best not to let his hips buck into Trace's touch. It wasn't easy, the man did things to Riley's insides that no one ever had, made him react in ways he'd never even dreamed of before. But he knew Trace and it was plain to see that tonight was a night for taking their time. Riley smiled at the thought. Slow wasn't something either of them was very good at sticking to, though they usually had good intentions. But tonight was different.

He turned his head toward Trace and kissed him again. He could never, ever get enough of Trace's kisses, he was an absolute sucker for them. He'd thought sometimes Trace could talk him into anything, all he'd have to do was kiss him and any thought of resistance would be swept right from Riley's mind. Not that Trace really needed the weapon. Riley wasn't very good at saying no to his lover anymore.

Trace sighed into the kiss, shifted closer, pressing his body against Riley's side more fully and sank his finger deeper. The combination had Riley arching, his breath coming faster and hips twitching with the urge to buck and thrust up and demand more. Trace broke the kiss briefly, sucking Riley's lower lip against his tongue.

"I love how much you want me, darlin'. It's so fucking sexy, you have no idea." Trace released Riley's lip and met his eyes. "Would you tell me? I think I'd like to hear it."

Riley smiled, his fingers trailing aimlessly up and down Trace's body, just needing to touch him, even in innocent ways. "You mean I don't tell you enough how much I want you? How good it feels when you touch me? That there are days when if I could get away with tying you to the bed so you couldn't go anywhere, I would? That one of these days I might just do that anyway?"

Riley grinned wickedly at the mental image that provoked. He imagined Trace would have an interesting reaction to being tied in bed. He really was going to have to do it, just to see it.

Trace smiled and adjusted his position again, this time over Riley, between his widespread thighs and, with a wicked laugh, sank his two fingers deep. Riley gasped and arched, his eyes narrowing on Trace.

"What happened to going slow, savoring, cowboy? Are we done with that already?"

Trace shook his head, bending to nip Riley's nipple, then looking up at him. "Nope. I still intend to go slow. Just upping the ante a little, darlin'. Don't ya wanna play with me? Or don't ya think you got anything else to bring to the table?"

Riley didn't justify that with a response, just rolled his eyes. Reaching out, he curved one hand around the back of Trace's neck, tugging him closer again.

Riley was on the brink of reaching down to stroke Trace's cock but he had a better idea. He let his fingers glide slowly, almost lazily over Trace's chest, toying with his nipples and grinning when Trace let out a soft groan. Riley didn't stop though, his hand moving down and around, cupping Trace's ass and giving it a squeeze and then a light smack.

Taking advantage of Trace's distraction, Riley wrapped both legs around his hips, pulling his lover down against him and rolling their bodies so he straddled Trace's hips. "You want to play, cowboy? I'll play with you," Riley murmured, rocking his hips against Trace's, their cocks rubbing together and the friction making them moan.

Trace shuddered, his head tipping back with a groan. "Oh fuck...think I just miscalculated," he muttered, his declaration met with a dangerously wicked laugh from Riley. Trace opened his eyes again and looked up at him. Gone was his flawless, beautiful angel. In his place was a demon, the most seductive one, hovering over him with heated blue eyes and tumbling golden hair and a body built for every sin God ever wrote down and a few he might have missed.

"I think maybe you did, cowboy," Riley whispered with a seductive circle of his hips.

Trace could only groan, reaching his hands up to grip the headboard, meeting Riley's darkened eyes. "Two can play," he murmured, using the leverage to lift and circle his own hips, gratified when Riley shuddered and his head fell back with a moan.

"That's the idea, isn't it?" Riley murmured, bracing his hands on the bed, one on either side of Trace. He leaned down to nip playfully at one nipple, his tongue sweeping over it. "You're mine," Riley whispered, glancing up and meeting Trace's eyes, lips pressed just over his heart. "Always all mine, just like I'm completely and totally yours."

Trace could only nod. "I am, darlin'. Been yours from the moment I laid eyes on you." And whether Riley had recognized it or not, Riley had been his from that moment on as well. It'd just taken him a little longer to realize it.

The friction was maddening and Trace gasped when Riley shifted just slightly and Trace's cock slid between the firm cheeks of his ass. His shaft rubbed across his entrance with every rock of their hips, the cock head nudging his hole before slipping away. Trace released his grip on the headboard, reaching down to curl his hands on Riley's hips and urge him to rock a little harder, a little faster. They were driving each other crazy and it was a beautiful feeling.

Riley smiled when Trace gripped his hips, quickening the pace and Trace groaned. Leaning down, Riley nibbled at the exposed skin of Trace's throat before soothing the spot with his tongue. Trace figured he could die a happy man with Riley in his arms, loving on him like this.

"I don't suppose marking you up would be a very good idea," Riley murmured, raising his eyes to Trace's.

Trace shrugged and lifting his head to nibble on Riley's lower lip before laying his head back down. "You wanna mark me all up, darlin'?" Riley's eyes lit up as he nodded and Trace had to laugh again. "I believe we just established that I'm yours. Do whatever you want."

He grinned at Riley's beaming smile. The man looked like a kid at Christmas who'd been given permission to open a present early. His smile faded with a shuddering moan

as Riley dipped his head, his fingers tangling in Trace's hair, tugging his head back to expose his throat. Riley's lips were warm and damp, open against his skin and Trace bucked his hips as Riley sucked, teeth scraping. There was something very primal about it, like being branded. It was sexy in a way Trace hadn't imagined it could be.

Riley lifted his head, his lips curved in satisfaction as he trailed his fingers over the damp spot on Trace's throat, meeting Trace's gaze. "Mine." Riley leaned down again to take Trace's lips in a heated kiss and when he broke it, gave him a seductive smile. Rolling their bodies again, Trace shuddered at the feel and sight of Riley spread out so deliciously beneath him. Like his own private buffet.

"I do believe it's your turn now, my love," Riley murmured. Trace gave him a wicked smile, lowering his head to Riley's neck, sucking and biting, his tongue sweeping over the sensitive skin and Riley moaned low in his throat, shuddering.

Trace lifted his head, tilting it slightly as he examined the small bruise he'd left. It looked sexy against Riley's smooth golden skin, startling and out of place and he imagined they'd get some looks for the matching hickeys tomorrow at the hospital and airport but he couldn't bring himself to care.

"Mine." He chuckled and dropped a kiss to Riley's softly panting lips, arms sliding around him and deepening the kiss. His body was clamoring for more and he saw no reason to deny either of them.

He reached down between them, guiding his cock against Riley's lube-slick entrance as his lover's long legs shifted higher around Trace's waist. He'd be a fool to refuse an invitation like that and Trace was done being a fool where Riley was concerned. He eased forward, slowly sinking inside, penetrating inch by delicious inch.

Riley's breath caught as Trace slid inside him, his eyes fluttering closed and a low moan escaping his lips. Oh yes, he was done with playing now and Riley clearly agreed. His heart pounding wildly, Trace did his best to memorize every sensation. The damp heat of Riley's body pressed against his, the low, rough groans that mingled with the other man's ragged moans, the way their bodies fit together so perfectly. He couldn't get enough. Riley opened his eyes, his hands lifting and his lips brushing over Trace's. "I love you."

Trace smiled and whispered the words back to him as their bodies began to move together, their rhythm already so beautifully familiar and perfect. If he could stop time, freeze this moment until he got enough...well, he never would. There was no such thing as enough Riley. Trace only prayed he had a lifetime left to prove it.

Chapter Fifteen

Trace tried his best to not show his anxiety as the cab approached Rush University Medical Center but he was sure Riley was aware of it. Their hands were linked between them on the seat but neither said anything. Everything that needed to be said, had been. Now it was just a matter of waiting for the doctors to give them the news they needed to hear.

They'd already been to the hospital once today, first thing when they'd arrived that morning to have blood drawn. For the last six hours they'd tried their best to put it out of their minds as they waited for the call that finally came—the results were in and could they come back to the hospital right away?

Trace glanced over at Riley as the cab pulled to a stop, squeezing his hand. He got a shaky smile in return and they each leaned in and shared a quick kiss. This was it.

Riley caught Trace's hand in his as they rounded the end of the cab, crossing the front drive of the hospital parking lot. Trace knew he ought to say something, something hopeful and encouraging, but he couldn't come up with a single thing that both of them hadn't said a hundred times already. Finally, just before they reached the doors, Riley tugged him to a stop, meeting his eyes.

"I love you more than anything. And I'm going to be right here, right next to you where I belong, no matter what happens. I promise. Whatever else you're worrying about, I want to make sure that you don't doubt that for a minute."

Trace couldn't help but smile. He hadn't really been worrying about it but having Riley confirm it was enough to make him feel a lot better. He figured he could face anything, even death, if he had Riley beside him, loving him. He nodded and bent to wrap his arms around Riley, his lover's arms flinging around his neck and they just stood there a moment, holding each other tight enough that even God might have trouble getting them to let go.

Finally, Trace made himself ease his grip. He met Riley's eyes and his smile this time wasn't shaky or uncertain, it was determined and confident. "Come on, darlin'. They've got good news to give us and we have the rest of our lives to start."

Riley seemed to catch the confidence and when he returned Trace's smile, he nodded firmly. "You're right. So quit gathering moss, cowboy, I hate Chicago and don't want to stay any longer than we have to."

Trace laughed, feeling the bands around his chest ease. It was all going to be all right. It had to be, because they said so and he challenged anyone, doctors or nurses or God himself, to defy that.

It was hard to keep that confidence as the nurses called Trace back to take his vitals, but every time he'd start to falter, Riley would flash him a smile or squeeze his hand at just the right moment. He'd never realized before how much he had craved that during his treatment. Someone to sit beside him and tell him it would be all right, to just laugh at his jokes and take his mind off it all. He'd denied them both a lot by keeping Riley out of the situation. Lesson number three hundred seventy-one in why it's better to trust your partner than try to do it all by yourself.

Sprawled in the uncomfortable waiting room chairs, Trace called out the next answer on *Jeopardy!*, which was playing on the TV that was attached to the wall.

"What is Parliament?"

Riley groaned and shoved his shoulder. "I had that, asshole!"

Trace grinned at him. "Snooze you lose."

"Mr. Collins? Dr. Galbraith will see you now."

Both he and Riley stilled, the laughter dying and Trace glanced over at the nurse and nodded, smiling tightly. He turned to Riley and gave him a smile too, this one warm and real. "You don't have to come in, darlin'."

Riley glared at him and stood. "I'm not going to dignify that with a response, cowboy. Let's go, that man's got good news to give us."

Trace didn't want to get his hopes up, he really didn't, but he couldn't quite stop the little surge of confidence. Riley was so sure, it was hard not to feel that way too. Whether it was real or feigned, Trace drew Riley to him and gave him a hard squeeze.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Riley hugged him back, the only sign that he was scared a small tremor that rippled through him before he steeled himself and pulled back, giving Trace a bright smile. "You're welcome. Now come on, we have better things to do than waste the day in this hospital."

Trace didn't try to argue, following his lover's lead with a shake of his head. If Riley could make it true just by sheer force of will, Trace was beginning to think maybe things really would be just perfect.

* * * * *

Riley hummed softly as he finished loading the dishwasher, closed it and started the wash cycle then leaned on the counter to look out the kitchen window. It was long since dark outside and the stars were out, winking prettily in the pitch-black sky. In another month or so, the sun would still be out at this time of evening, the grass would be just beginning to go green with spring. It was Riley's favorite time of year, these last few weeks of winter just before spring began, full of potential and promise.

Glancing around the kitchen, Riley double-checked that everything was cleaned up and put away before switching off the lights and wandering down the hall. His fingers trailed over the lovingly polished furniture, careful not to leave any fingerprints, over

the newly hung wallpaper in cheerful yellow stripes. Riley had redecorated the house a few months back, wanting to make it seem more his. And it was, more of a home than anywhere else he'd ever lived. Now, Riley understood the lack had never been so much in any one place but in his life. He'd always wanted to belong somewhere. And he did, right here in this house that had become home so quickly, with constant reminders all around him of the love that had brought him there.

As he walked, his gaze was drawn to the pictures that lined the walls—Trace's baby pictures and school photos. Riley smiled, idly straightening one frame, wiping a bit of dust off another, his fingertips just brushing over the impish smile behind the glass. The house was quiet but for the faint hum of the dishwasher, an occasional creak of the hardwood floor beneath his feet. Turning into the living room, Riley straightened the cushions on the couch, the crocheted throw over the back that Trace's mother had made for him.

With a heavy sigh, Riley dropped onto the couch and leaned back, eyes closing. It's been a long day, an even longer winter. He smiled slightly at the thought. Had it really been six months already? Didn't seem that way. Some days it felt as if it'd been just yesterday that his life had turned onto this path. Other days, it felt like he'd been on it forever. His eyes opened and he sat up, smiling when Ginger leapt up on to the cushion beside him.

"Hello there, sweet baby. Come here," he crooned, scooping her up into his lap. She wriggled and licked him before settling down and sprawling contentedly across his legs as he rubbed her head and scratched her ears. A picture of him and Trace together sat on the end table and Ginger climbed from his lap to the arm of the couch and sniffed at the picture frame before giving him a forlorn look that made him smile.

"Missing Daddy again, huh, girl? Yeah, me too," Riley agreed, dipping his head to nuzzle into Ginger's soft fur. She answered with a soft whine and Riley nodded. "My thoughts exactly."

They sat like that for a while, listening to the crickets chirping on the porch outside the window. It was too quiet, Riley hated nights like this when it seemed there was nothing but empty space in this big house.

Ginger's ears perked up and Riley's lips curved as he sat up slightly. "What do you hear, sweetheart?" He glanced over his shoulder out the window to the front drive and caught a flash of headlights bouncing up the access road toward the house. The dog in his lap saw them too and went ballistic, yapping and scrambling up onto the back of the couch to paw at the window.

"Who's that, little love? Huh?"

Riley grinned, turning to watch as the truck came into view, a cloud of dust visible even in the dark. The truck pulled to a stop and Riley's heart thudded heavily as the man driving climbed out, for a moment illuminated in the wash of light from the front porch before their eyes met through the window and Riley lifted a hand in a small wave before bouncing up off the couch and patting his leg for Ginger to follow.

“Come on, silly girl! Trace is home.” Then he raced her for the pleasure of being the first one to get a kiss when Trace came through the door.

About the Author

Fae Sutherland has always dreamed of being a published author, starting her writing career off at age 11 with a horrific “Monkees” fan fiction that will, luckily for all, never see the light of day. At age 33, she has since progressed to more serious writing, though always keeping that dash of irreverence and fun.

Fae tells the stories that the muses give her, and is multi-published both solo and joint. When she’s not working hard on writing new stories to make her readers sweat or slaving over edits for completed work, she spends her time on website and graphic design, being with her closest friends and playing The Sims 2 until the wee hours of the morning.

Chelsea James always wanted to be a writer, but never got serious about it until a bossy, demanding muse walked into her life and ordered her to tell his story. She stalled and made excuses, but in the end threw sanity to the wind and dove headlong into her life’s dream of sharing her words with the world.

When not catering to her muse’s whims, Chelsea has a full-time job catering to the whims of spoiled lawyers. And then there are the pampered cats who rule the roost, and her best friend/hetero lifemate, on whom she blames everything (but still adores).

Fae and Chelsea welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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