



Cowboy Secrets

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Cover Art by Risky Ink

ISBN: 978-1-936279-75-3

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Chapter One

Tyler brushed the damp hair off his forehead and stuffed his hat back on. The day was hot as hell, and his throat was already dry from the dust his boots kicked up as he headed down to the stables. The fact that his mood was shot didn't help matters either. Here he was going after his little brother once more because he'd stayed out all night and never showed up for morning duties.

This damn ranch didn't run itself, and the men while they were good at what they did, they weren't going the extra mile without supervision—watching that should have been done by Chris. But no, he thought it was more fun to party the night away with his girl and not wake up until late the next morning.

Tyler didn't actually want to interfere with Chris and his woman. Hell, he and everybody else that cared about the younger man was happy to know he'd found Becky. All the guys, and Tyler too, had wondered for a while. Christ had never had a girlfriend even though he had the looks that women went for—blond hair and sky blue eyes. He was short but built strong and wiry. Women were constantly throwing themselves at him, but he never seemed to notice.

Not that Tyler didn't have his fair share. Where his brother was light, he was dark, and he liked his big size, dark hair and eyes. He'd taken after their father, while Chris took after their mother. Neither had reason to be jealous of the other. Then there were these times, of course, when Chris pissed him off for shirking the responsibilities that their parents had left them with.

Sighing, he saddled his horse, Thunderbolt, and turned him toward the west. With the sun at his back, he clicked and tapped the horse's sides. Thunderbolt took off toward the far end of the property. The two moving as one ate up the ground before them, and soon left Leather Stile Ranch behind. He came up on the neighboring property before long and gave the horse's reins a gentle tug. They glided over the low fencing and continued across an open field.

At a convenient spot near the main house, he tethered Thunderbolt and jumped to the ground. As he walked toward the house he caught sight of this ranch's hands at the back of the property working with the cattle. Becky's older brother owned the place, and he preferred livestock to crops. Tyler dipped into a little of everything just like his father had.

He stepped up on the porch and rapped on the screen door. A dog barked somewhere out of sight. When there was no answer, he knocked again, harder. "Hey, Becky? Looking for my pain in the ass brother."

No answer. He figured Jace was out in the field somewhere by this time, so he didn't bother calling out to him. He needed Chris now. Taking a chance, he opened the screen and checked the front door. Since it was unlocked, he went in looking around. The place was nice, comparable in size to his, but it was obvious a woman still lived here with the frilly curtains at the windows. He almost laughed knowing how Jace hated them. His and Chris's house was all male, all the time, just as he liked it with rugged furniture made from real wood, deep, rich earthy tones. At least the curtains here weren't yellow, one of his least favorite colors. Jace had put his foot down on not going that far. The two of them had been on their own a lot longer than him and Chris, and they hadn't inherited the ranch. Jace had earned the money for it and bought it from his own sweat and blood. Tyler had always admired him for that a lot more when it came to his character and personality.

He searched the front rooms of the house and hesitated at the hall he knew led to the back where the bedrooms were. He'd been here often, but beside that people in these parts were friendly. A locked door was rare. Still even though he'd known Jace all his life, he didn't want to come in and search the place with him not being around. But he'd bet any amount that Chris was back there somewhere sleeping off a major hangover. He deserved a bucket of ice water over the head. He should have had no trouble playing hard and getting up the next day to work harder.

Tyler decided rousing his brother was the lesser of two evils and headed on to the rear of the house. He listened at doors, and when he

heard snoring, he tried the door, hoping as he went in that Becky wasn't exposed.

Becky was the least of his worries when he got a load of what waited for him.

Two men in the bed, stark naked. He knew this since the sheet that might have covered them was draped over the side of the bed, and the rest of it pooled on the floor. The smaller man, Chris, was on his back, while the bigger man, Jace, was laying sideways over him. Their groins met in the middle.

Tyler's mouth went dry. He struggled to react, but all he did was squeeze the doorknob until his fingers hurt. For whatever reason, his gaze slid over to the wastebasket by the door. Two—no *three*—condoms hung on it at the side as if they'd been tossed without a care. Tyler's stomach roiled. This had to be a mistake. They'd fallen into bed together when they were both smashed and didn't know which way was up. An accident, he decided. Nothing more. And it wasn't happening again.

Jace took that moment to lift his head to discover Chris under him. He grinned and straightened his body to align with Chris's. "Hey, sleeping beauty, you better wake up and get home before your brother comes after you."

Tyler opened his mouth, but he couldn't say a word.

"Hey, you hear me, Chris?" Jace raised his hips, and to Tyler's shock, began stroking Chris's cock. Chris groaned and pushed up into the caress. "You like that, baby? Want me to fuck you once more before you go?"

"Yeah," Chris murmured, eyes still closed. "No, wait. I can't. Tyler will be mad. I gotta—"

He sat up pushing Jace off him at the same time, and that's when the two bastards spotted Tyler.

"Oh, hell," Jace said.

Tyler finally came alive, and he charged across the room and jerked Jace up by his hair, which was no easy feat since Jace was slightly bigger than he was. He reared back and drove his fist into Jace's face, sending

him over the side of the bed onto the floor. Tyler dove after him to finish the job.

“Tyler, quit,” Chris yelled. He jumped on Tyler’s back just as he smashed a fist into Jace’s jaw again. Jace flipped him over and punched him in the gut. Tyler winced, but his anger fueled him on.

They somehow scrambled to their feet and began tussling around the bedroom, knocking into furniture. Tyler thrust Jace back against a dresser and swung on him, but Jace dodged it. Tyler’s fist sent a lamp crashing to the floor, and Jace charged him. All the while Chris tried breaking between them, but Tyler shoved him away.

Jace’s attack sent them back to the bed. The footboard thumped Tyler’s calves, and he lost balance. Missing the soft bed, he fell over the edge and hit the floor shoulders first. Jace landed on top of him, and with the wind knocked out of him, he lost the advantage. Jace pinned him down with his hands at his sides and straddled him.

“Get the hell off of me,” Tyler shouted, embarrassed that Jace’s dick and balls were resting just above his. He tried raising his hips to force the bigger man off, but that wasn’t working. Instead it freaked him out more because it was exactly what Chris had done when Jace stroked his dick. “I’m warning you, Jace.”

Jace shook his head. “Not until you promise not to swing at me again.”

Tyler glared. “You forced yourself on my little brother. I have every right to kill you.”

“Did that just now look like force? You know as well as I do Chris wanted it.” He glanced at Chris, and his brother nodded. That didn’t make it any more acceptable.

“He would have never done something like that if you hadn’t seduced him. If you want to be that way, that’s your business, but you leave my little brother out of it.”

Jace grinned. “Why, you want me for yourself?”

“Fuck you!” Tyler spat.

“Why should I do that when I have Chris?” He looked down toward Tyler’s crotch, and Tyler gritted his teeth. “In fact, maybe I can have you. You’re hard as a rock right now. I wonder why.”

Tyler made another attempt at getting loose, but couldn’t budge Jace off of him. He panted from the struggle. “An ass is pushed into my dick. What else is it supposed to do? It has no brain. Doesn’t take much to get hard.”

Jace laughed. “Oh, is that how you fool yourself?”

“Get.The.Fuck.Off!” he growled.

Instead of rising, Jace leaned over him until their lips were inches apart. Tyler didn’t look away only because he wanted to prove to the bastard he wasn’t intimidated, or scared he’d reveal a deep, dark secret desire for another man. He glared, hoping Jace would get the message that as soon as he was free, he was dead.

“I like Chris,” Jace told him. “We have a lot of fun together, and we’ve been lovers for three months.”

“No!” Tyler exploded.

“You can deny it all you want, but it’s true.” Jace seemed to get off on tormenting Tyler. He looked over to where Chris was getting dressed. “Right, baby?”

Chris’s face reddened. “Yeah.”

“Stop calling him that,” Tyler demanded. He squirmed some more, hating how every time he didn’t it, his cock shifted and jerked like it wanted more action. “Everyone knows he’s been seeing Becky. Chris is just a kid. You want a man, find one your own age.”

“I’m twenty-three, Tyler,” Chris said and came over to sit on the bed near them. “I’m not a kid, and I know what I want. You say everybody knows I’m seeing Becky. Well, what they really know is that I have never been interested in women. You just don’t want to face it.”

“There, you see?” Jace said, flashing even, white teeth. “Everything settled.”

Tyler still wanted to rip his head off. He should have pretended he didn’t care. That would get him off his back and out from under Jace, but

he couldn't stop his anger. "When I get up, you're done. I'm going to beat you into the ground for breathing in Chris's direction. I thought you were my friend. I was wrong."

Tyler caught the flash in Jace's eyes and the flaring of his nostrils. He guessed he'd hit a nerve. He would be the first to admit he knew nothing about men who liked other men, but maybe he had a few stereotypes in his head. Jace seemed to be cut from his own mold, a hardened cowboy through and through. He was built like a truck, and all their lives, Tyler had enjoyed challenging him to races on their horses and to contests of who could rope a calf faster. They'd fished together, camped together. But he'd never have guessed this about him.

Jace's hands on his wrists tightened until Tyler winced. He moved his hips, and Tyler swore, closing his eyes. "S-Stop," he hissed through his teeth.

Jace's warm breath fanned his cheek. "If I thought you didn't like it, I would be off you right now, but your body is humming."

"That's a lie." Tyler's voice had gone down to whisper. He knew Chris was watching, and he wished he'd just go and let him settle this. "If Chris is your lover, then you shouldn't be coming on to me."

"Chris knows how much I've wanted you for a long time, don't you, baby?"

Tyler growled.

"I admitted to him the first time we had sex how I'd always fantasized about taking you. My best friend."

Jace moved again on top of him. Tyler didn't know how to explain what was going on with his body, not to himself or anyone else. He maintained that it was only that a warm body straddled his dick that it had gone hard, and when he closed his eyes except for Jace's weight and hard muscle, he wouldn't have been able to tell. Of course that made him hotter, so he forced his eyes open and stared at Chris.

"Please, Chris," he pleaded.

His brother leaned out and touched Jace's arm. "Let him up, Jace. I told you, you'll never get my brother, so just let him be."

Jace glanced over at Chris and then sat up straight. He turned to look at Chris, and for a moment, Tyler thought they would kiss. His anger boiled hot. He took advantage of Jace's distraction and was able to jerk his arms free, and he shoved the other man on his ass. He jumped to his feet ready to attack, but this time Chris got between them and held him back. "Please, Tyler. Respect me enough to make my own choices."

"Respect?" Tyler frowned. "I'll respect you when you stop running out and leaving me to do all the work. You want to fuck a man, fine! But you do it on your own time, and leave me out of it."

Heading to the door, he adjusted the front of his jeans. He snatched his hat up from the floor where it landed during the fight and jammed it down on his head. Tyler didn't look back as he left the house in a hurry. Half hour later, he was focused on work, having put the morning's experience firmly out of his head.

Chapter Two

Tyler sat on the porch swing at the front of his house. He'd found a few bits of rope, and for a de-stresser braided the pieces together. All day he'd worked hard, not just supervising his men but getting out in the fields with them and training the horses he'd bought a couple months ago. Next year, he hoped to have even more and increase his profits by selling them. Some said he was spreading himself too thin with his hand in so many pots, but he didn't care. He loved his life and his work. He enjoyed even the backbreaking work because it meant he was alive. He knew this was all his father's dream too, and he'd taken this ranch much farther than his father ever had.

In the distance, a coyote howled, and Tyler glanced up when he heard someone's step nearby. All his men had gone home for the day, and he and Chris weren't on the best of terms. Chris had gone into town after he finished work. Annoyance stirred in Tyler thinking he'd gone to see Jace.

But his friend walked around the side of the house obviously coming from his own property behind theirs. "Hey," he called.

Tyler clenched his jaw. He set his rope aside and made to rise. Jace raised his hands in surrender.

"Whoa, buddy, I'm not here to fight. Just wanted to talk."

Tyler frowned. "What's there to talk about? You made your position clear. You're gay, and you and my brother are lovers. Nothing I can do about it since he's grown. I don't enter into the equation at all."

"I'm sorry."

Tyler blinked and stared at him. He'd expected him to make excuses about himself and, frankly, his lifestyle, especially not coming clean about it. Tyler felt his face reddening remembering all the times they'd skinny dipped in the lake together as kids. Who knew if Jace had been eye-balling him then. He and Jace were both ten years older than Chris.

"What are you apologizing for?" he demanded. "For lying to me all these years?"

"I never lied to you," Jace snapped. And then he drew in a breath as if to calm himself. "I kept what I am a secret. For that I'm sorry. You had a right to know given...ah...how we liked to play."

Tyler knew then that he was remembering their days and nights at the lake.

"For what it's worth, I knew I liked you a lot more than anybody else, but it wasn't a sexual thing back then. I wasn't ogling you naked." He seemed amused by that admission, but Tyler felt more embarrassed. He picked his rope up and sat back. He didn't respond, so Jace came up on the porch and sat down at the opposite end of the swing. "I can tell you how it happened with Chris and me."

"Not interested."

"Tyler..."

He slammed the rope down again. "All I've heard from you is your interest in me, and I get the impression you're only fucking my brother because you can't have me. I will feed you your balls if you hurt him. You're using Chris, and he's still too young and stupid to see it."

"I'm not using him."

Jace rubbed a hand over his mouth and chin. Tyler caught the light scratchy sound, like he needed a shave. The women were always after Jace, commenting on how sexy they thought he was with a five o'clock shadow. Now, Tyler knew why the compliment never fazed him. He could have chosen any other man. The countryside was littered with them. Hell, he employed at least a good handful that were relationship material if the gossipy woman who came to clean his house once a week had anything to say about it. Tyler grunted and scratched at his head in frustration. This situation couldn't be simple.

"Okay, I'll admit," Jace said, interrupting his thoughts, "that it's you I want, but I was clear—*really* clear that first night with Chris about my feelings. When we discovered we were both gay, it was like a relief to finally be able to share it with someone local, even if it was Chris. No offense."

Tyler chuckled despite himself. “None taken.” He knew how Chris was. Stuffed full of his looks and the reactions he got from others. He wasn’t beyond using his appearance to get what he wanted. Tyler let the rope slip through his fingers until the thicker end dangled over the side of the swing. He whipped it back and forth in a lazy arc while he stared up at the stars. “You’re telling me Chris seduced you. How exactly did you two, uh, come out to each other?”

“The horse you were having trouble with,” Jace reminded him. “You sent Chris over to ask me to run him through a few cues because he wasn’t picking up as fast as he should.”

Tyler gritted his teeth. He remembered that. Turned out the horse had vision problems. The loss was more than he’d wanted to absorb, but he had no choice, and he wasn’t going to try screwing over the next person by selling him. He’d found a good home for the animal and taken the loss.

“So, something happened when he came by?” Tyler asked when Jace didn’t seem forthcoming.

“I got him helping me with a couple bales before we were going to head back. We got to laughing and joking until I took the opportunity to ask him what everybody else was thinking. Why he’d never given any of the girls buzzing around him a chance.”

Tyler shoved up from his seat and loped over to the top of the steps. He leaned on the narrow column that ran from the porch floor to the ceiling. He wanted to tell Jace to shut up or at least tell him this was some big joke. One taken too far since every time he closed his eyes he saw Jace and Chris naked in bed together.

But despite how desperately he wanted it all to be a lie, Jace kept talking. “He looked nervous and embarrassed. I thought he should have said, I don’t kiss and tell or something, but nope. Red that went all the way up to his blond hair. So I said well, I’m not too much for dating around here either.

“He thought I meant I pick up women on my cattle runs or when I travel out of the area on business. I’ve done that, but not with women.”

“Don’t feel free to share,” Tyler quipped.

Jace sighed. “Anyway, I still wasn’t sure, so I decided as your friend, to give him that big brother speech, like you’ll find the one and that other bullshit people spew when you just aren’t gettin’ any.”

Tyler laughed and then bit it off. He didn’t want to joke around with Jace. He still felt the man had betrayed him. They were best friends, and he should have been looking out for Chris, not screwing him.

“I walked over to him while I was giving that little spiel and put a hand on his shoulder. I don’t know how it happened after that. I guess I remember seeing his lips and thinking...” He stopped and then spoke again. “I kissed him, and he didn’t push me away. In fact, we were all over each other.”

Tyler whirled around to face his friend. “Spare me the details!”

Jace met his glare with one of his own. “Fine. You’re the one who asked. One thing led to another. I told him just before the deed that I’ve been attracted to you for years, and I said I wanted him too, but it is—and always will be—you.”

“Stop saying that!”

“It’s fucking true!” Jace yelled, surging to his feet. “You keep your head down and work like a dog, day in and out. You think you’re fooling everyone, but you’re not fooling me.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Tyler clenched his hands into fists, ready to swing on him if he dared accuse him of something. From Jace’s stance he was ready for another fight himself.

“Hey, half the county hears you,” Chris called out from the drive. Tyler’d been so focused on Jace that he didn’t hear his brother drive up. “I thought we were meeting at your place, Jace. You coming or what?”

Jace stood there staring at Tyler a moment longer, and then he strolled over toward the steps. He stopped beside Tyler and pitched his voice low enough so that only Tyler could hear. “Maybe you forgot about Pickerd’s Creek, but I never did, and I never will.” With those words, he stomped down the steps and jogged up to Chris’s pickup. After he was inside, Chris did a three sixty and peeled out, sending up gravel and dirt in his wake.

Chapter Three

Jace stood at his bedroom window looking out. Chris was asleep in the bed. Tonight they'd stayed in because Jace wasn't in the partying mood. Besides, unlike Chris who could depend on his big brother to bail him out of everything, Jace had to think about Becky and the ranch. He sighed. The real reason he was in a funk was because of Tyler. Any time over the last nineteen years, when he was in a bad mood, Tyler was the root of it.

He rested his forehead on the glass and let the coolness of the coming dawn chill his body. All too soon, the Texas sun would be beaming down on him while he worked outside.

Jace could never forget the summer he and Tyler turned thirteen. They were inseparable, and every chance they got when chores were done, they headed down to Pickerd's Creek to fish and swim. Like every other time, they raced each other and kicked their shoes off at the edge to dangle their feet in the water.

Jace held up his new rod. "Check this out. Got it with the money I made working for Mr. Lockman afternoons."

Tyler frowned. Jace could see he was jealous since he was still working with his old one handed down to him from his dad. But it was still good from what Jace could see.

"It's okay," Tyler admitted. "You get it in town? Why didn't you tell me? I could've tagged along."

Jace shrugged. He turned away to prep his hook with a worm and pretended it didn't matter why he hadn't invited Tyler. Still, he couldn't avoid saying it. "I came by to get you, but you were with your dad. Y'all looked like you were fixing the tractor or something."

Tyler nodded stuffing gum in his mouth. "Oh yeah, he said it's important that I know how to run things after he's gone." Tyler rolled his eyes. "Gets on my nerves with that stuff. That's why I like coming down here with you, to get away."

"Yeah." Jace didn't need to say more. Tyler was his best friend. They were more like brothers even though Tyler had a three year old brother at

home, and Jace's sister was two. They were closer than any others. Jace didn't know what he'd do if Tyler went away—like his dad had. Tyler was clueless to how good he had it having his dad around, interested in teaching him and spending time together.

All of a sudden, Jace was annoyed with his friend. He carefully set his new rod down reached for Tyler's. "Oh man, what's that. Let me look at it for a sec."

Confusion clouded Tyler's gray eyes, but he handed over his rod. Jace pretended to examine it, but then he put it down and gave Tyler a push. His friend pitched forward and splashed down face first in the water. Jace jumped to his feet laughing and pointing.

"You're easy," he jeered.

Tyler came up right away sputtering and wiping his face. "You're going to pay for that. He hoisted himself out of the water, and Jace took off running. They zigzagged through the trees, sometimes near the water and sometimes farther inland. Tyler caught him and sent him to the ground, wetting the back of his clothes in the process.

Now they were both laughing and tumbling over the ground, each trying to get the upper hand. Jace had always been bigger and stronger. Maybe it was because he had to work harder for his family, and because he was already the man of the house. He flipped Tyler off him and pinned him to the ground. They laid flat against each other, panting trying to catch their breath.

Tyler swore before Jace picked up on why his friend's eyes had gone wide. Jace jerked off of him and scrambled away with his hands over his crotch. He felt his cheeks warm with embarrassment. After he'd gathered his courage, he turned back to Tyler to explain what he didn't know how to explain. But Tyler was standing there just as red-faced and hiding the fact that he too had gotten excited from them lying together like that.

They stood there a long time not saying anything, but Jace couldn't *not* say something. He chewed on his bottom lip before blurting out, "You're still going to be my friend, aren't you? I didn't mean to do that just now. I

know what. I'll buy you a new rod. I just need to work some more with Mr. Lo—"

"Why would you do that!" Tyler shouted.

Jace frowned. "I said I'm sorry."

"No, you ass," Tyler interrupted. He stomped over to Jace and shoved him. "Why would you think buying me a new rod would make me keep being your friend?"

Jace stared at him. He didn't know what to say. He couldn't admit to Tyler that he'd do anything to keep him as his friend. When it got hard, and he wanted to run away or feel sorry for himself, Tyler made him laugh. Tyler was the only one that made it all better. But what just happened, he couldn't explain to himself, let alone to his buddy. He couldn't tell Tyler he'd liked being close to him just now. *Really* close.

Jace swallowed and stared at the ground. Tyler came strolling by and shoved him then kept walking. "Stupid, I'm always going to be here."

Jace looked up and grinned at his friend's back. "Promise," he shouted after him.

Tyler looked back. "What?"

Jace felt his face heating up again. "Promise," he repeated.

He thought Tyler would make a joke or come after him until he chased him down to the water to shove him in, but Tyler got a really serious look in his eyes, and his gaze didn't waver from Jace's. "No matter what happens, I'm not going anywhere. Ever. I promise."

Thinking back on it, Jace smiled. That was when he knew that Tyler got him. He knew how scared Jace was and how lonely. He said he'd be there no matter what. Those words had brought Jace's feelings for Tyler home to him, but he didn't realize what that meant until much later. Now he knew he was gay, and the one man he'd always wanted and probably would go on wanting for the rest of his life was Tyler.

"Hey," Chris called from the bed. His tone was filled with sleepiness, and Jace turned to look at him. "Why are you over there? I've got a hard-on."

Jace laughed. "You've always got a hard-on. That's nothing new." Jace strolled over and slipped into bed next to Chris. He played with his hair like he always did, and Chris settled into his arms. Under the sheet, Jace pulled Chris's thigh up over his and brought his hips in closer. Now he was just as solid. He was attracted to Chris. How could he not be with the younger man's sexy body appealing to him? Chris was not as big as Tyler, but he did have a good build, all tight muscle with no spare flesh. Jace had told Tyler the truth when he said he liked Chris.

Jace rolled Chris half on his back and lay on top of him. He leaned down and kissed his lips, seeking entry into his warm mouth. Chris moaned and let him in. They remained that way for a few minutes, but Chris wasn't one for cuddling. He pushed Jace back to speak. "You were thinking about Tyler, weren't you? That's what you're always doing when you can't sleep."

"Are you jealous?" Jace rolled away and stared up at the ceiling. With the mood he was in, he didn't think he could reassure Chris if that was the case. He'd actually been on top of Tyler, felt his cock under his. Recovering from that would take some time. And if he'd ever wondered if the real thing would be as good as his many fantasies over the years, well he didn't wonder anymore. Being that close to him had felt so good.

"Naw, I'm not jealous," Chris told him. "I just can see what you feel about him. I wish I could change him, but my brother has always been a stubborn cuss. Even if he does wonder what it's like, he'll never admit it. You know him. He doesn't take chances. Everything he did with our ranch, he researched and asked questions of others who had done it before. He digs in and gets his hands dirty so he can learn everything he needs to know about the business." Chris screwed up his handsome face as he thought. "You know the only thing he's ever done which was not like him was to send me to talk to you about that trouble with the horse, that time when we first got together."

Something about Chris's admission made Jace pause. He did know Tyler better than anybody else, probably even better than Chris. And Chris was right. Tyler wouldn't normally have sent Chris to get information

about what to do with the horse. He'd have come himself. So why didn't he?

"Hey, baby," Jace said drawing Chris from his thoughts. "I have some things to do this morning, so how about one more before the road?"

Chris mewled and turned over, pushing his ass out. "I'm always ready."

Jace located an unused condom wrapper and ripped into it. He spent the next hour working out many frustrations in bed with his lover.

Chapter Four

Tyler counted stock in one of his buildings set for that purpose. He checked off items on his list and made notes on his clipboard. Staff had been told to leave him be while he worked since he was in no mood to talk to anyone. The isolation had been good so far. He could be alone with his thoughts even if he did try to suppress those that strayed in the direction of his best friend.

Not more than a minute had passed before he recalled what Jace had been talking about when he mentioned Pickerd's Creek. He remembered what he'd said and specifically what he'd been feeling at the time. Jace was afraid even though he wouldn't have admitted it out loud. And for that moment, Tyler considered what he'd feel like if his best friend left town like his father had, abandoning Tyler like Jace's father had abandoned Jace and Becky. His chest had constricted, and he felt like he couldn't breathe. All he knew was that Jace couldn't go. He had to convince him that he'd be there for him always. And that's when he made the promise.

A couple years later, when he thought about it again, he recalled how Jace had always looked at him and got all intense like he'd done that particular day when they made the promise. The knowledge made Tyler nervous and embarrassed him at the time. He could put his finger on why back then. Now he knew. Jace had been all but declaring how he felt with a look, and if Tyler weren't convinced of his own sexual orientation, he would have thought he'd answered that look with one of his own, along with his silly words.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. If Jace remembered the past like he did, he'd probably draw conclusions Tyler wouldn't accept. No matter how much Jace desired him, he wasn't interested.

While he pushed further thoughts on the subject out of his head, the door behind him creaked open. Tyler paused in his work and glanced over his shoulder. He froze when he saw Jace standing there. *Shit.*

Jace strolled over to him and turned to lean a hip against the multi-leveled shelves that were built into the wall. He crossed his arms over his chest, and Tyler forced himself not to look up from the clipboard.

“Hey,” Jace said. Tyler echoed his greeting but continued to work. “So I was wondering if you remembered what I mentioned the other night.”

Tyler sighed, but it did nothing to stop him from gripping the clipboard so hard that it hurt. He forced himself to put it down on the table, but rather than look at Jace, he studied the rows of canned goods. When he was done here, he’d need to go down to the stables and inspect the equipment there. None of the saddles or reins could be allowed to wear down, or it could mean someone’s life. He had a full staff for the ranch, and almost every man had a family at home to take care of. Too many people depended on him to fall short of his responsibilities.

When Jace continued to stand there in silence waiting for him to respond, Tyler had to admit his little silent speech was just to make himself feel safer. He didn’t hire a foreman just for show. His man kept things in tip top shape, and Tyler was just making excuses, if only to himself.

He sighed again and turned to face Jace. “I remembered.”

“And?”

“And what?” He frowned. “We’re all grown up now, Jace, and both of us have made our businesses a success. What I said back then...well, it was a promise to be your friend. I’m still here, aren’t I? It doesn’t matter to me what you choose to do with your sex life.” He flashed Jace a warning. “Not completely.”

“So you’re just going to make it about friendship?” Jace’s lips tightened into a straight line, and his almost black eyes narrowed.

“It *was* about friendship,” Tyler snapped. “We were thirteen. Don’t read anymore into it than it was.”

Jace started to storm past him. “Fuck—”

Tyler caught his arm to hold him back. “Don’t.”

They stared at each other for a long with Tyler’s hand still on Jace’s arm. A stampede of emotions paraded through his head, and he couldn’t

settle on any one. All he knew was that he didn't want Jace to leave angry at him again. They argued a lot like guys did, but it had never been about this serious a situation.

After some time, Jace laid his hand over Tyler's, and they both focused on the connection. "You're telling me you've never considered it?" Jace asked, his voice pitched almost too low for Tyler to hear what he said. A few replays in his head made it clear.

"No."

Jace tried going again, but for the second time Tyler stopped him. He was crazy. He didn't know what he was doing. His and Jace's friendship had always been solid ground, never wavering because they were alike in many ways.

"Why did you send Chris over instead of coming yourself that day?" Jace asked.

For some reason, Tyler knew right away the time he was talking about. He didn't want to admit why, so he gave him a half truth. "The night before I barely got any sleep. I had nightmares all night, so I think I didn't have a whole lot of patience. I only sent Chris because I didn't think you'd take too kindly my barking and biting your head off."

Jace's expression told him he hadn't swallowed that load of horse crap for a second. "That's never topped you before." They both laughed, and Tyler removed his hand from Jace's arm. He didn't trust himself not to do something he'd regret, but he had a feeling he was headed there anyway.

The real truth was that he'd had dreams half the night of Jace. The day before they'd spent a lot of time together at a local rodeo. They'd joked around about entering the competitions, but neither of them had the time. Chris had been with them the entire day, so it wasn't that the outing had been intimate. But the dreams had shocked Tyler, and he'd been too chicken to face Jace just yet. He never imagined Jace might have had those dreams about him all along.

"I've thought about it," he blurted out.

Jace's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

“Yeah.” Tyler moved away and ran his fingers through his hair. The room was beginning to feel stuffy although he’d opened several windows when he came in this morning. He focused on the back wall while he confessed what he never thought would come to light. “I wondered what it would be like to kiss you.”

Jace’s exhale was audible. When he spoke, Tyler could hear the smile he fought to control. “I hoped, but I never thought...I could come to your house later, or you could come to mine. If that doesn’t work for you—”

“Hold it.” Tyler pivoted on the balls of his feet. “I said I wondered about a kiss. That’s all. There’s not going to be any more than that, so we don’t need to make a date. And I never said I would go through with it.”

But now that it was out there, he couldn’t help noticing Jace’s lips, sculpted perfectly and firm. His jaw was rugged, a slight bump in his nose where a classmate had broken it when they were still in school. He and Jace had both kicked his ass later. They shouldn’t have since Jace had caused as much damage to the boy as he did to Jace, but it was the principle of the matter. Tyler almost smiled while he thought about it. Jace had been the one to explain the justice of getting revenge when he knew his nose was permanently changed, and Tyler had thought then that he just wanted Tyler to defend him.

Tyler didn’t know why the memories made him want to try kissing Jace even more, but they did. He didn’t wait too long to think about it. If he did, he’d change his mind and be tormented with *What Ifs* forever. Jace was a good enough friend not to blab a word to anyone else, so he went for it.

Tyler charged toward Jace and leaned in to kiss him, but his nerves and his mind being empty of all the practice he’d had kissing in the past with women made him completely miss. His lips landed to the right of Jace’s. Face flaming, he went to draw back, but Jace’s arms came around his waist. His friend chuckled and then turned his head slightly so that their lips met.

Tyler felt like his heart would explode. The sensation of having another man’s lips on his—no not any man’s, Jace’s lips—was

indescribable. Jace pulled him close so their bodies just touched, and he parted Tyler's lips with his. At first Tyler stared with his eyes open, but then his lids drooped of their own volition and closed. Jace sucked lightly and moaned. A shudder passed through Tyler. He didn't know whether to push his friend off him or let it go on. He wasn't sure if he liked it.

Jace drew back. "Well?" he asked with a smile.

"I don't know." He looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. How the hell did he deal with this? "Maybe I'm not meant for what you want."

He started to turn away, but Jace came at him again. This time he pushed him back against the shelving and followed with his big, hard form. He shoved a leg between Tyler's and ground up against him. Tyler tried pushing him off with his hands locked into the bend of Jace's arms, but Jace was planted firm.

"Jace," he uttered, but his words were cut off by his buddy's mouth slanting across his. Tyler gasped in shock when Jace pushed his tongue into his mouth and began sweeping it around the warm, wet depths. He didn't think twice about pushing his tongue back into Jace's mouth with the same actions. He had to admit if only to himself that Jace tasted good. His cock hardened with the two of them rubbing together. His nipples tingled as he imagined feeling Jace's through the material of their shirts.

He forgot everything even where he was and who he was beyond Jace. He moaned and pressed closer for more. Jace broke the kiss, and Tyler could have sobbed, but his friend dropped small nips down over his cheek to his neck. Tyler bent his head back panting. Jace's whispered words weren't clear, but hearing the rumble of his deep voice sent shock waves of need through Tyler's body.

"Mm, baby, I've wanted this for so long," Jace murmured.

Common sense slammed Tyler back into reality. He shoved hard at Jace and broke free. They stood there facing each other, both trying to catch their breath. Tyler dragged an arm over his mouth. "This was a mistake. I should never have done that."

"You liked it," Jace said.

Tyler shook his head. “No!” At Jace’s stricken expression, he calmed and amended his words. “I wanted it. I tried it. It’s done. I’m not going to repeat it. I respect your decisions, Jace, but they’re not mine.”

Jace took a step in his direction, but Tyler held up his hand. Jace scowled. “Oh, come on, Tyler. You can’t tell me you didn’t like what we just did. You liked it. Your cock makes that crystal clear.”

Tyler resisted looking down or putting a hand over his crotch. He knew he was hard. Hell, they’d rubbed into each other like two horny teenagers, but like he’d told Jace the other day, his cock didn’t know a man from a woman. That might mean he was bi-sexual, but he refused to believe it. He was what he always had been, and Jace could accept it or not.

“I have work to do,” he said not allowing his gaze to waver from his friend’s face.

Jace reddened. He clenched his fists at his sides, and then his shoulders slumped. “Fine. I’ll talk to you later. I guess this means you’re not going to the rodeo with me and Chris this weekend?”

“Why? Are you uninviting me?” Tyler snapped.

Jace grinned. Tyler felt something stir in him, but tamped it down. He didn’t want to feel anything he hadn’t been feeling before the kiss. But he already knew things were different between them. He watched Jace walk over to the door, his gaze trained on the other man’s ass. He was aware that he liked how Jace fit his jeans and the easy way he loped in his boots. When Jace put his hat on and tapped the brim, Tyler gritted his teeth.

This was it, he decided. He should get this look out of his system and be done with it. He followed behind Jace to the door and stood in entry while his friend un-tethered his horse and put a boot into the stirrup. As he swung up into the saddle, Tyler observed every moment. He kept watching when Jace clicked with his mouth and turned the horse to head back over to his own property. When he was out of sight, Tyler went back to his task barely in control of his libido and his emotions.

Chapter Five

Tyler pounded on his truck horn hoping Chris would finally come out, but when the front door of his house opened, it was just Cookie. He sighed and leaned out the window. “Hey, Cookie, tell Chris to get his ass out here, would you?”

“Sure thing, Tyler.” Cookie disappeared inside and returned a moment later with Chris behind him shoving his shirt into his jeans.

Chris jumped into the front seat. “Sorry, bro. Lost track of time.”

“That’s nothing new,” Tyler complained. “Get in back.”

Chris paused in the act of putting on his seatbelt. “What?”

Tyler squeezed the steering wheel, already tense and not needing his brother to add to it. “I said get in back. I have someone else to pick up.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. Just do it,” he ground out.

Chris frowned at him but did as he asked, and they sped down the road leading toward the opposite side of town where the rodeos were held. Soon he reached the small homestead where he intended to pick up his date. He knew Chris recognized the place. Tyler had dated Laura the year before, but she’d broken it off with the excuse that Tyler was more interested in work than in her. He couldn’t fault her for that because it was true, but at least they’d remained friends. Most of all, he was grateful she’d agreed to come out with him today.

Jace would probably interpret him bringing her as an excuse to keep him away. Not that he thought Jace would try anything in public, but he did feel safer, and if his buddy asked him about it, he intended to deny everything. Maybe next week, the impact of that kiss would fade to nothing. He could only hope so. For now, Laura would do.

Laura on board, he headed toward the rodeo. Jace had told them he’d meet them near the entrance, and since he and Chris weren’t public about their relationship, Chris had come with him rather than with Jace. When he’d parked, they walked toward the rodeo entrance. Tyler spotted Jace right away in a T-shirt and jeans. He chewed on a bit of hay, and nodded a

greeting to one of their neighbors. With his attention drawn away from them Tyler had a moment to study his friend.

The memory of them standing close came to mind, along with the feel of Jace's lips on his. Tyler could deny all day and night that he liked it, but he had. He'd grown excited and wanted much more. He tried to recall how it had been kissing Laura or any of the other women he'd dated or had one night stands with in the past, but all of those experiences faded into the background. Since he'd always had an orgasm during his sexual exploits, he had to assume he liked those times too. For the life of him, he couldn't bring up one occurrence with any clarity.

"Hey, Jace," Chris yelled out and waved his arm like they weren't visible right in front of him.

Jace turned from the man he was speaking to, and Tyler watched as his eyes sought out not his little brother but him. He flushed and dug his hands into his pockets. From the corner of his eyes, he caught Laura giving him a curious look. But Chris jogged up to Jace and began discussing the favorite for this year's bull riders. Capturing Jace's attention and blocking some of his big form from Tyler's view helped him to regain control.

He took Laura's hand and led her past the others. "We're going to find seats," he called to Jace and Chris. Jace didn't respond, and Chris was still heavy into his predictions for each category.

Tyler was settled in a good spot in the stands with Laura on his right. He gritted his teeth when Jace sat down on the other side of him with Chris on his left. Chris stood up and yelled his "yeehaws" with the other excited fans, while Laura studied the pamphlet they'd been given listing the standings of each entrant.

"So you're just going to ignore me, is that it?" Jace said beside him.

"I'm not." Tyler ran his moist palms over his pants legs and pretended interest in the crowd. They had more than last year. With a local from their small area going all the way to the world championship, every cowboy fancied himself the next big thing. "You were busy talking to Chris. Didn't want to interrupt you."

“Look if it bothers you that I’m seeing him...” Jace whispered.

“What Chris does is his business,” he interrupted. “I’ve decided he’s a big boy. He can take care of himself. I don’t have to be involved.”

“You know what I mean, Tyler.”

With Laura so close, he didn’t know if she heard them. All he wanted to do was drop the subject. He looked away toward the gate where the bulls were let into the arena, but Jace leaned in closer to him. A shockwave zinged through Tyler’s system when Jace’s hardened thigh touched his. Jace’s breath warmed his ear as he spoke.

No one around them would think twice about how close he was because the crowd had begun to get rowdy again, and it was hard to hear. Yet, he knew his face burned, and it took everything in him not to shove Jace.

“If you want me to stop seeing him, I will,” he said.

Did it bother him? He loved Chris and would do anything for his little brother. He’d kill anyone who messed him over. Ever since Chris grew old enough to follow him and Jace around, he did, and they’d never discouraged him. Tyler had never felt jealous of Chris’s friendship with Jace because it had always been clear that he shared a strong bond with his buddy. Chris was like both of their little brother. But when he found out that they were lovers, the entire dynamics changed. Shouldn’t he just feel put off by their relationship?

He thought about it for a long time as he watched the various events, only half paying attention. The truth was it did bother him, but he didn’t like it. He didn’t want to feel anything or care. He couldn’t change how Jace felt, but he wouldn’t give in to whatever his friend had evoked in him after that kiss. If their friendship had to change, so be it.

Tyler glanced over at Jace, but Jace had long since fallen into light arguing with Chris. Tyler looked down at his and Jace’s legs. He’d put space between them, but he found himself wanting to move back. He swallowed trying to dispel the desire to put his hand on Jace’s thigh and slide it up to... *No!* He shook his head.

“Earth to Tyler,” Laura said beside him. “You invite me to come today, and then you ignore me to daydream all afternoon.”

“I’m sorry. Just thinking about work.” He saw the annoyance in her eyes. Jace would never care if he worked too hard because he did the same. When one or the other called for a break of drinking at a local bar, they never complained to each other about feeling the friendship was neglected. He sighed, almost laughing at himself for again bringing his thoughts back to Jace. “Sorry, you have my undivided attention for the rest of the day.”

And he did all he could to entertain Laura while they were at the rodeo and later when he took her to a late lunch since she hated the vending food. The problem was, inside, he was still unsettled and longing for something he didn’t want to give into.

* * * *

Tyler woke in the middle of the night covered in sweat. He swung his feet over the side of the bed and ran a hand over his face before resting his forearms on his thighs. He knew he’d been dreaming, but he couldn’t remember anything that happened. The fact that he had a raging hard-on was one indication, and the feeling that he’d shouted Jace’s name was another.

Two weeks had passed since that damn kiss, and still he couldn’t get Jace out of his mind. He’d thrown himself even more into work and hadn’t laid eyes on his friend since the day of the rodeo. He supposed what complicated his confused emotions was the fact that Chris had come storming in the next afternoon declaring he hoped Tyler was happy, Jace had broken it off. Tyler had been torn between relief and irritation at himself for feeling relieved!

Since sleep wasn’t coming back anytime soon, he decided to go out to the old barn to work. The new one he’d had built was ready and housed a few of his animals, but the old one hadn’t been cleared of the hay stored

there. He could do some bundling and fatigue his muscles. That might help him to get some sleep.

He'd worked a good hour when he heard the barn door open and someone step inside. Although it was just after two in the morning, some instinct told him it was Jace without him having to turn around.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, straightening from his task and stretching his stiff back muscles.

"I saw your light from home. Couldn't sleep. I guess you couldn't either."

Tyler turned around then and clenched his hands at his sides when he saw Jace. A twinge of something stirred in him. He wasn't willing to believe he'd missed this man enough for a physical reaction. "You're a good ways. Not likely you saw the light."

Jace shrugged. "Or something."

Tyler chuckled. In the silence that followed, he shifted in his stance, not sure what to say or how to act. Jace strolled over to him but not too close. Tyler was grateful for that. He couldn't stop noticing how broad Jace's shoulders were, how big his chest was. Tyler pushed his hands into his hair and closed his eyes. He willed his body to calm down. Already he started to get hard. If this kept up, Jace would see.

"I'm selling the ranch."

Tyler's eyes popped open. "What?" When he focused on Jace it was to find such a raw expression on his face that it hurt Tyler to look at him. "What do you mean you're selling?"

Jace turned and walked over to a bale of hay and sat down on it. He laced his fingers in front of him and stared blindly at the floor. "Well I've been seriously thinking about it. In the fall, Becky's transferring colleges and going out of state. Up north, if you can believe it."

"And that's the reason you're selling?" Tyler demanded. "'Cause she can't cover for you anymore if she's not here?"

Jace frowned. "No, idiot. Maybe you forgot, but I broke it off with Chris." He paused for a while and then stared at Tyler with that same intensity in his eyes. "For you."

Tyler squirmed. "I never asked you to."

"You didn't have to. I saw how it got to you. I teased like it didn't matter when you first found out, but the truth is it was devastating. I don't know why I even did it. Maybe it was because he was the next best thing to you."

"Don't," Tyler grumbled.

"Damn it, I can't change how I feel!" Jace exploded.

"I'm not asking you to!"

They glared at each other, and then Jace stood up. He stalked over to Tyler, but Tyler stood his ground, clenching his jaw and narrowing his eyes. When he was inches away from him, Jace stopped and all the anger seemed to drain out of him. He laid a hand on Tyler's shoulder and swayed a little on his feet like he'd been drinking.

"I want you. More than I can stand." He grinned, but there was no humor in his eyes. "I could tolerate it all this time. Just being with you as a friend. Knowing there was no one closer to you than I am was good. You worked so hard, even forgetting your girlfriends half the time. I didn't have to be jealous except for the times when I let myself imagine you in bed with them, rutting together like horny ponies."

Tyler swallowed. To think that Jace imagined him having sex was more than he wanted to know about his friend, but now that he did, he kept repeating the words in his head. He didn't let himself do the same with Jace so close.

"I made a mistake with Chris," Jace muttered. "I'm sorry."

Tyler sucked his teeth. "He's not heartbroken. He's already planning to do like you do, find someone out of town in places no one knows him. I guess he's not ready to let anyone know either."

"That's not what I mean." Jace moved closer. Now Tyler felt the warmth coming off his body. He had room to step back out of reach, but he stayed where he was. Jace played with a lock of Tyler's hair, rolling it between his thumb and forefinger. "Taking Chris as a lover only reminded me more of you. Your mannerisms are the same. Some phrases he uses are the same as you use. Instead of easing my hunger, I ignited it. And at

times, I couldn't stop myself from imagining I drove my dick into you and not him."

Tyler panted. Now his cock did grow hard and pushed against his zipper. *Move back. Get away from him.* His legs didn't budge. He only stared at Jace in shock, wanting more than anything to touch him. Every detail of that time in the storeroom was still in his head. He even remembered Jace's scent, the same as it was now—intoxicating.

Jace must have taken his silence for disgust. He backed up. The light in his eyes a moment ago had dimmed. Tyler couldn't have read a clearer indication of self-loathing. "After the kiss, I can't do it anymore," he muttered. "Our friendship is basically in the toilet, all because of me."

"Jace," he began.

"So I'm selling. I'm going to leave with Becky. I'll live up north." He shuddered. "That's far enough, and since we don't have any family down here, there's nothing to come back for."

He turned to leave, but Tyler grabbed his arm. "No!" Jace eyed him in surprise, but he forged on. "You're not leaving. We made a promise. I said I would be here for you. That day I became your family. How the hell are you gonna say you have no family here, so there's no need to come back? Chris and I don't mean anything?"

"You know you do."

"Then you're not going. You're not selling." He hesitated for only a second and then pulled Jace into his arms. Tyler didn't know he was going to do it before he crushed Jace's lips in a hungry kiss.

They held onto each other, Tyler's arms around Jace's neck as if it was the most natural move for him to do. All he knew was that if Jace left he'd lose it. Jace reached around with both hands to Tyler's ass and squeezed. When he slipped his hands into Tyler's back pockets, Tyler gasped. That gave Jace the opportunity to push his tongue into Tyler's mouth. Tongues merged, tasting, while lips sucked at each other.

Tyler moaned in his friend's mouth. They were doing it again, and he didn't want to stop. Jace tasted so good, and his hard unyielding body was

beyond a turn-on. How could it be? He wasn't sure and didn't care at the moment. All he could think about was making Jace stay.

He stepped out of his friend's arms and pinched the button on his pants open. He didn't know really what to do, but his cock was so swollen, it had to get out. His fingers shook as he lowered his zipper. Jace stared as if he was starving for a look. He couldn't seem to wait any longer, so he reached down to help. Tyler's desire kicked up a few thousand notches with Jace's rough dragging on his jeans to get them over his hips. He jerked Tyler around by his hips and pushed him backward over to the bale of hay.

Tyler fell into a seated position, and Jace followed, kneeling between his legs. He kissed Tyler once more, and Tyler let him. Jace cupped his face and forced his chin up. Tyler surrendered to the pleasure as his friend traced soft caresses with his lips all across his jaw before reclaiming his mouth.

When Jace broke the kiss he looked into Tyler's eyes. Tyler noted how dark they'd gone, black now to reflect his lust. Jace glanced down at Tyler's dick, stiff and hard between them. Tyler expected him to ask if he was sure about this, but he didn't say a word. He crouched lower and swallowed Tyler in one swift movement. Tyler swore at the sight of his cock disappearing into a man's mouth. He watched shuddering in pleasure as Jace's full lips extended as he drew on the shaft. The pull brought Tyler close to coming too soon. He fought not to. Partly because then he'd have to say he'd been given head by a man, and partly because he didn't want it to end.

Jace drew back and began licking Tyler's shaft from bottom to top. He swirled his tongue around the head and dipped into the slit. All the time, he groaned and stroked Tyler's thighs. "Oh, baby, I've wanted you so long."

"Don't," Tyler rasped. "Don't call me...ah, fuck! Jace, put it in your mouth again. Suck me."

Jace's gaze flicked to his a second, and then he moved to do what Tyler begged for. Tyler grabbed for Jace's head and knotted his fingers in

his locks. He raised his hips to pump against Jace's mouth. His orgasm was building fast, and if he didn't pull back, he was going to release. Jace couldn't want that.

He looked down and watched Jace's head bobbing up and down between his legs while his pants were around his ankles. The cords in Jace's neck strained with his urgency to swallow Tyler's dick. Just looking at him was making Tyler lose control.

"I'm going to come, Jace," he groaned. "You should stop. I can't hold it."

If anything Jace sucked harder and wrapped his hand around the base of Tyler's shaft. Tyler lost the ability to think straight when his friend raised a palm to his balls. This was it. He'd warned him. His sac tightened and rose. He gasped.

His hot seed shot out, but to his amazement, Jace didn't back off. He drew on Tyler's cock, sucking out every drop and swallowed it as he did. Tyler's eyes fluttered closed. He sagged backward unable to catch himself as Jace licked up every drop of come he'd spilled. When he was done, he rose up and pushed Tyler's shirt up to plant kisses on his abdomen.

Jace lifted his head with a smile brighter than Tyler ever remembered seeing it. He lay over Tyler until his cock, still trapped behind his jeans, pressed against Tyler's. "I knew you would be delicious, and I was right."

Tyler frowned. "This isn't the best position, me holding us both up on this short bale."

Jace laughed and stood before pulling Tyler up after him. He caught Tyler in his arms and moved in to kiss him on the lips, but Tyler turned his head. "You drank my come."

Jace laughed. "You should try it. Nothing like it."

Tyler looked away. "I'm not sure about that. Uh, I feel kind of exposed with my pants down."

Jace backed up and watched as he pulled them up and fastened them. "Don't you want to continue this?"

Tyler paused. He drew in a shaky breath and ran a hand through his hair. A bit of straw clung to it, and he picked it out. "I don't know. I can't do this in a barn."

"We could go to your house."

"Someone might catch us. I have more people coming and going." He could only imagine one of his men catching them in bed and shuddered at the thought.

"My place then."

All the time, Jace's suggestions were made in a reasonable tone. Tyler was the only one feeling like he wanted to run screaming in the night like a frightened woman. The fact that he'd done what he did just to keep Jace from leaving was crazy. But was it only about keeping Jace where he belonged?

He looked into his friend's eyes and saw the hope there. He had to be sure of what he wanted because he couldn't pretend he was something just so he wouldn't lose Jace. The fact that he'd gone so far said a lot. No man would do such a thing, but it threw him off balance, and it was too much to take in.

"I don't know," he said at last.

Tyler figured Jace would get angry at him leaving him hard and not returning the favor of a blowjob. At the least, he expected his friend to go back to thinking it would never happen between them, but Jace pulled him in for a hug and smacked him on the ass before he let him go.

"I get it." He adjusted the raging hard-on. Tyler couldn't help watching. He'd seen it before, and now he could admit to himself that he wanted to again. Jace looked up and winked. He'd been aware of Tyler staring. "We'll talk about this tomorrow."

He loped to the barn door as if he had not a care in the world. Tyler called out to stop him. "Hey, about you moving..."

Jace glanced over his shoulder and offered one of his heart-stopping smiles as described by the local women who'd never pinned him down. "I'm not going anywhere now that I know you belong to me. Night!"

Chapter Six

Jace tugged on his boots with a grin so wide, his cheeks ached. He'd never been happier in his life. He'd awakened that morning with a plan in mind, and all he needed was a little help from a friend. The last couple of days hadn't gone so well talking to Tyler. He was still scared out of his britches about the blowjob Jace had given him, and more so about going all the way. Jace saw no choice but to push his friend into making a decision about them. He'd either embrace his desire for Jace or...well, there wasn't much of an option. Jace was confident in the way Tyler felt about him. All he needed to do was prove it to Tyler.

He's seen the raw pain in Tyler's face when he said he was leaving. He'd felt the same way coming to that conclusion even though he had no idea if he could carry it out. But it was at that moment that he knew he wasn't the only one clinging to the idea of them being side-by-side the rest of their lives. Tyler expected it too. He just hadn't identified it as being more than two friends. Jace had no doubt since he was a teenager that he loved Tyler with all his heart.

That's why if he had to be the one to get them over this hurdle, he'd do it. He reached for his cell phone by the bed and pulled up the contact list. A man he called friend, who he'd had a brief affair with in the past was just the person to help him pull off his plan. Within a few moments, Jace had it all arranged. Now, all he needed was Tyler.

He called Tyler. "Hey, there's a private sale going on in Cat Spring I wanted to check out. You up for a ride?"

Tyler didn't hesitate. "Sure, what's he got?"

Jace's hold on the phone tightened. Unfortunately, his friend dealt only in cattle. Tyler would be more interested if the sale was for horses, but he couldn't lie about it. Tyler was no fool, and he'd catch on to what Jace was trying to do if he did. "Red Brahman bulls. He's open with the price, and I can either buy right out or get half interest." Why the hell was he rambling about the animals? "I thought you wouldn't mind checking out more of that end of things in case you wanted to expand into cattle."

Jace held his breath and waited, but he needn't have worried. "I'll go. When're we leaving?"

"I'll pick you up at ten."

Since Cat Spring was near enough for them to drive over with not much time lost and far enough that Jace could keep his lifestyle to himself, he'd never had a problem with anyone finding out about his ex-lover. They pulled onto his property, and Jace parked the truck. He and Tyler got out, just as Wade came out on the porch.

The affair had lasted all of a month and had ended not because Wade wasn't good-looking. He was, which was what Jace had been counting on. Wade was tall and muscular with a square jaw and eyes so pale they were both mesmerizing and scary at the same time. His easy smile paired with those eyes were what had lured Jace in, and the day Wade asked him to dinner, Jace hadn't resisted.

Wade strolled over in jeans that hugged his narrow hips and a T-shirt that strained over his chest. From the corner of Jace's eyes, he saw Tyler notice the other man's physique. He hid a grin.

"Jace, long time, bud," Wade commented. Rather than hold his hand out to shake, he did what Jace had asked him to over the phone. He drew Jace close and kissed his cheek. The edge of his mouth just touched the side of Jace's.

"Likewise," Jace said when he drew back. He pretended not to have heard Tyler's sharp intake of breath. "This is my buddy, Tyler. Like I said on the phone, we want to look at your bulls."

Wade chuckled. The innuendo was plain, but he let it go. That didn't stop him from giving subtle hints the entire time they inspected his stock and from standing nearer to Jace than was necessary. Tyler didn't say a word but stood rigid and quiet with his lips compressed and his eyebrows low over narrowed eyes.

At the end of the visit, after Jace had arranged to purchase a few heads, he thought he must have failed in his mission, but Wade drew him a little away from Tyler. He stood leaning on a fence with one leg up to brace his

foot on the lower rail. His hat was pushed back a little from his forehead but not so much that it didn't shade him from the hot Texas sun.

If he wanted, he could have pitched his voice low enough that Tyler didn't hear, but he spoke just loud enough that Jace was sure Tyler must be picking up every word. "I don't know why we stopped seeing each other. It was good. You're not like other men I've been with. Something about you."

The words were no more than a line, but Jace smiled. He still appreciated the compliment, and from the tent in Wade's jeans, he got the impression that he was attracted to him. Wade might still want him, but Jace had made it clear on the phone that he loved Tyler. This wasn't just about getting someone in his bed. In a last ditch effort, he continued to play his part.

"Maybe we could arrange something," he offered.

Wade glanced around as if to check to see if any of his men were in sight. He stepped closer to Jace and leaned in. His lips parted in invitation, but before Jace could make a move, a crack rent the air, and Wade landed on his ass in the dirt. Tyler stood over him with fists at the ready in case Wade wanted to defend himself. Wade held up his hands in surrender.

Jace grabbed Tyler's arm. "What are you doing?"

Tyler rounded on him. His was anger apparent in his darkened expression. "What did you think *you* were doing? You're not fucking him!" Jace opened his mouth to speak, but Tyler cut him off. "We're going, and you can forget about the bulls. Jace can get his cattle elsewhere."

Jace had no choice but to follow Tyler back to the truck. He'd call later and straighten things out with Wade, but he never expected Tyler to blow the way he did. Angry, yes, ready to kick the man's teeth in—that was a whole other animal.

Even though Jace had driven, Tyler took over the wheel and Jace hopped into the passenger side. He weighed whether to come clean about it being a set up, but the way Tyler gripped steering wheel, he thought he

should wait a bit. If he blurted out the truth now, there was a chance he'd lose whatever ground he'd gained today.

"You've been with Chris. You've been with that guy..." Tyler gritted his teeth. He drew in a few sharp breaths and blew them out with his nostrils flared. Jace guessed they hadn't done the trick. Tyler forced himself to talk anyway. "Look, I get it. We're not going back to the way we were. Judging from how that guy acted, you two have had a while to get used to...you know. Sex with men. I haven't. It's been two fucking days since you blew me in the barn. Trust me, I can't get it out of my head, but I'm not exactly ready for more. You pushing me isn't going to help."

Jace sat miserable in his chair. So Tyler had picked up on the truth anyway. He felt like a heel. He knew he loved Tyler, and he was sure Tyler loved him, but he never considered Tyler's feelings when he paraded Wade in front of him. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Tyler continued.

"What you have to decide is if you can keep your dick in your pants until I am ready." His cheeks reddened. "I love you. There, I said that at least. But wanting you and touching you are two different things, and giving in is scary as hell. I've ridden bulls and felt less churning in my gut."

Jace grinned. "Yeah, I know how it is."

Tyler glanced at him and then focused on the road again. He hesitated and then reached his hand out to take Jace's. A lump rose in his throat when Tyler laced their fingers together.

"It'll happen. We both know that," Tyler said. His tone had dropped so he almost whispered. "I want you to be faithful to me. It's a lot to ask, and it's not fair of me. I just don't want anyone else touching you. Can you live with that?"

Jace nodded and raised Tyler's hand to his lips. His heart pounded in his chest. Yeah, he could definitely handle it. He might be able to acknowledge that Wade was handsome and a good bed partner, but he

hadn't desired to sleep with him again. Tyler was all he wanted now. "I can wait. No matter how long."

"I'm not going to be with anyone either." His gaze flicked to Jace again. "Man or woman. At this point, I know I want you, and if I can't settle with what I feel, I'm in trouble. I don't know how I didn't see it all these years, how important you are." He cursed. "I feel stupid just admitting that."

They rode in silence for a long time still holding hands. When they neared their home town, Tyler eased his hand from Jace's and put it on the wheel. Although Jace felt the loss, he was still positive. They'd basically committed to each other. He'd never had that before with anyone. The men he'd been with were less than a handful in total, but Jace had always known none of them would get his heart because that already belonged to Tyler.

His friend pulled up in front of his door and threw the truck into park. Before he could get out, Jace reached for his arm to stop him. "Hey, I just wanted to say if you'd like me to, I'll give you head anytime you want. No strings attached, no obligations to return the favor."

Tyler's eyes widened. "Why would you do that? I mean, it seems selfish to even consider it. I left you hard the last time. I feel bad about that."

Jace shrugged and smiled. "Trust me. You were on my mind in the shower later."

Tyler reddened. Jace wanted so badly to pull him close for a kiss, but anyone could be around and see them, and Tyler wouldn't appreciate it. He had to be patient though he had none. If he could give his friend blowjobs, maybe that would help him to get over his fear a little faster, but he wouldn't push it.

"I'll think about it. Okay?"

When Jace agreed, he stepped out of the truck and headed toward the house. Each step he took, Jace watched, feeding his lust with the backside of his soon-to-be lover. He couldn't wait for things to heat up between them. He just hoped it wouldn't be long.

Chapter Seven

Tyler led Thunderbolt into the stable and unbelted his saddle before hoisting it off the horse. While buckets of rain poured down outside, he brushed his animal down and then led him into his stall. Tyler made sure he had something to eat and drink and then walked back to the door.

He should have checked the weather or at least paid attention to the sky while he was out, but he'd been lost in his own mind thinking about Jace and his offer. Tyler had told himself he wouldn't accept Jace doing that to him when he couldn't do the same. Yet, all his thoughts went back to it no matter what.

He darted out to the house and then changed out of his wet things. A shower, dinner, and a few hours spent staring at his accounting books, but Jace's words reverberated in his ears as if he was right there beside Tyler.

Realizing he was never going to get anywhere with work, he put down his paperwork and turned the lights off in the office. In his room, he stripped and showered then dropped into bed. The night was humid and hot. He'd had to crank up the A/C, and it whirled down the hall, drowning out the sounds of the rain. Nature was better, more relaxing, and many summer nights, he'd gone to sleep on the front porch just listening.

At some point, he must have drifted off, because he opened his eyes with the distinct feeling that someone else was in the room. At the same time he recognized Jace's silhouette, he remembered he hadn't worn anything to bed. Not even a sheet kept his friend from taking in all that Tyler had to offer.

"What are you doing here?" Tyler asked. His question wasn't an accusation.

Jace came closer to the bed. When he leaned over it and then dropped to his knees at the side, a bead of water fell on Tyler's leg. He realized Jace was soaked. Tyler was going to offer a towel for him to dry off, but Jace bent farther and kissed his thigh. Tyler shook from the pleasure of it.

"Let me suck you," Jace whispered.

He stared into Tyler's eyes, and Tyler swallowed nervously. After some time, he nodded. "Yeah, I want it."

Jace began kissing him more, and the chill that had started on his skin from the A/C receded from the heat in his veins. Tyler couldn't help his hips rising from the bed when Jace took him deep and released his cock in slow degrees. He wrapped his fingers around the base and fed himself with Tyler's shaft. His concentration on the head, alternating between twirling his tongue around it to sucking had Tyler biting on his knuckles. He grunted and groaned, trying to keep it down, but it felt so damn good.

He shouldn't like this so much. Watching his cock disappear inside Jace's mouth shouldn't get him off. His eyes were locked on his friend's head as it bobbed up and down. The moonlight shining in the window illuminated the wetness on his shaft. Jace groaned and all but slurped like Tyler's dick was a treat.

Tyler chewed on the inside of his jaw. He pinched his lips tight trying not to give in to an orgasm yet. But it was coming soon. Jace was good at what he did, better at sucking Tyler than roping a calf. He had no problem giving his friend that victory. "You like how it tastes," he said in awe.

Jace glanced up. "Baby, there's no one that tastes better than you."

"No," he growled. "Don't...don't remind me you've done this to others." Tyler didn't want to be jealous, but he couldn't help it.

"Never again." Jace's expression turned serious. "Baby, you're everything. Nobody's getting this but you."

His endearment embarrassed Tyler, but he didn't demand he not call him that this time. He was more used to it, and he believed Jace when he promised to be faithful. He had to get over his issues so he could do this for Jace. His buddy seemed to get off on pleasing Tyler. The act itself was one way he satisfied his lust.

Jace held his legs apart with both hands in a firm grip. He let his mouth sink down on Tyler's cock without guiding, and then he sped up his hungry pump. Tyler could hold back no longer. He shouted Jace's name, and jerked as his come shot out. He rocked his hips and thrust into Jace's

mouth. When his orgasm eased, he settled down on the bed panting with a hand thrown up to his chest. Under his palm, his heartbeat pounded.

“I’m sorry,” he said into the sudden silence of the room. Jace lay with his head on Tyler’s leg resting. “I lost control. I hope I didn’t hurt your mouth.”

Jace gave his thigh a quick squeeze. “Don’t worry about it. I know how to handle you.”

Tyler chuckled. Tension knotted his stomach because he waited for Jace to demand more. He watched as Jace traced a fingertip over his skin. A shiver passed through him. He raised the leg until he planted his heel against the bed, whether to get away or to call attention to the fact that his dick wasn’t quite soft, he didn’t know.

Jace leaned over and kissed low on his leg, almost on his ass. He looked up at Tyler and then pushed his leg higher. When his tongue met Tyler’s tight hole, Tyler jerked away and rolled off the bed. He stood firm, legs apart, hands in fists at his sides. His cock grew stiff and jutted from his body. He swore in annoyance.

Jace stood up slowly, turning his back to Tyler. “Hey, don’t worry. I’m not going any further. Do you mind if I use your shower, borrow some clothes? I got a little sloppy and got come on my neck.”

Tyler’s throat was dry. He swallowed several times but couldn’t pull himself together. His mind replayed the feeling of Jace’s tongue on his asshole over and over. He’d be lying if he said it wasn’t the strangest yet the most amazing feeling he’d ever encountered. That more than the blowjob shook him.

He stood there unmoving while Jace disappeared into the bathroom. The shower came on, and he began thinking about Jace naked. Ever since that first day, he’d wanted to see him again. He took his time walking over to the door. Jace hadn’t shut it all the way. Tyler pushed it farther. Jace hadn’t closed the curtain either. His back was to Tyler. He let his gaze travel down the hardened, muscular form, taking in the curve of his ass, the thickness of his thighs. He swept back up to the wide shoulders and the contracted biceps as Jace ran his hands through his wet hair.

Tyler clicked off the light. He didn't know why he did it. Maybe he was ashamed or embarrassed. He hoped he would get past it because Jace deserved better. When he stepped into the shower behind Jace, only the small amount of moonlight which reached this far into the room separated them from the darkness.

He reached out to touch Jace's back. The warm wet skin got him even harder. "Is it okay?" he whispered.

"Of course."

Tyler was relieved Jace didn't turn around. He let him explore all he wanted, running his hands over his body, feeling the contours and valleys. Tyler stepped closer and stuck his tongue out to capture the water rolling down the back of Jace's shoulder. He shivered. "Can you turn around?" he asked with hesitance.

Jace complied, but he kept his hands to his sides. Tyler dipped his head to keep from meeting Jace's gaze. He stared at his flat abs and stroked them with his hands. They were rigid without an ounce of excess. Tyler roamed lower to his crotch. Jace's dick was massive. The girth and length would make any man jealous, but all Tyler could think about was how beautiful he was.

He dropped to his knees and kissed the tip. Jace continued to hold still, but from his sharp intake of breath, Tyler knew he liked the touch. Tyler took the head between his lips and pulled on it with his mouth. *So this is what it tastes like?* He caught a hint of salt from a bead of precome. He wasn't sure he wanted to continue, especially with the thought of Jace's come filling his mouth if he got him off. But he kept sucking and licking.

He ran his tongue down the curved length to the base and then back up again. He pushed it into his mouth the second time and let it pop out. The sensation of the curved cap pulling free was a real turn on. He kept doing it, letting Jace's cock slip from his mouth over and over then pushing it back in.

Jace groaned. He couldn't seem to hold back but put a hand on Tyler's head, tangling his fingers in his hair. "Oh, baby, who taught you to make me feel so good?"

Tyler didn't pause to answer. He kept right on sucking his best friend's dick. After a while it felt so good doing it, knowing he was pleasuring Jace, it didn't bother him. He liked it. Between his own legs, his cock pulsed, feeling almost like he was getting sucked himself. He concentrated on pleasing Jace. He knew what he liked, and he did that, massaging Jace's balls and biting down a little on the tip between the roof of his mouth and his tongue.

Jace cried out his name, and when he did, a second after, come shot into Tyler's mouth. He jerked back, and the thick cream coated his lips, his chin, and his cheek. He licked a bit of it off his lips, surprised he liked the flavor. Tyler licked the dick clean, and then raised his face to the water to wash away the rest.

When he stood up, Jace pulled him close in a hug. "You want to do more?"

Tyler tensed. "Yeah, I do."

Jace turned off the shower and handed Tyler a towel to dry off while he did the same. Tyler couldn't stop staring at his friend. He couldn't believe he was doing this. The thoughts ran through his mind for the millionth time, but it was different. Now he couldn't believe a man like Jace was *his*. Jace was—he shivered with the idea—sexy as hell. He'd never been aware that he wanted this cowboy this much, but now that he knew, he was glad. He was somehow freer.

Jace led him into the bedroom, and he guided Tyler to lie on his back. Tyler did what he wanted, not being experienced in having sex with a man. He didn't know if he'd freeze up before they got anywhere, but so far his cock practically jerked with the excitement of having Jace in bed.

"I'm going to ride you, okay?" Jace said. "I think you can handle it better for the first time than if I did you."

Tyler's eyebrow went up. "Yeah. Anybody ever tell you, you've got a big dick?"

Jace looked proud. He leaned down and kissed Tyler on the lips. "All the better to please you with. But that's for later."

Tyler turned his lips up to the side at Jace's words. This cowboy was proud of himself and his ability to handle what he had. As Tyler watched him lean down to his pants by the bed, he couldn't help wondering how many times Jace had done this and if he was as scared shitless as Tyler was during his first time.

Jace came up with a tube of lubricant in his hands, and Tyler frowned. "You expected this to happen tonight, or were you planning on pushing until you got what you wanted."

"No, I didn't expect it. I hoped. Ever since that night you let me suck you, I kept this with me." He held up the little treasure. "I wanted to be ready as soon as you said the word."

Tyler shifted nervously on the bed as Jace climbed up his legs and straddled his hips. He licked his lips and gripped the sheets under him. This was up close and personal, but he couldn't say it didn't turn him on to have Jace naked on him like this. He feasted his eyes on the other man's body, imagining the taste of his skin and remembering how he grunted in pleasure when he came. Tyler's cock stiffened even more, and Jace made it worse by playing with it while he greased it.

"You want me that much?" Tyler asked.

Jace glanced up. "More than you know, but if you let me, I'll show you how much for the rest of our lives."

The rest of our lives? So this was permanent in Jace's eyes. This wasn't an affair or a quick roll in the hay. He considered it with narrowed gaze trained on Jace. Now his friend had turned away from him, still over his hips. He leaned forward a little and stroked his own ass with a finger. One greased digit slipped into his hole and out again. Then he put in two, all angled as if to put on a show for Tyler. Could he get used to watching Jace do this for him? Hell, yeah, if it felt as good as he expected. Right now, he held onto his control with strained intensity and fear mingled. If he had no fear, he'd consume Jace and take everything he had to offer.

Now he knew that Jace had been in his line of vision all of their lives. He'd never wanted to lose him to success, so he'd pushed himself and his parents' farm to the extreme, learned everything he could. In the end, he

realized that Jace must have felt the same way, striving for excellence in his chosen course so he too wouldn't lose Tyler. How could they not pursue this? The truth was staring them in the face. They belonged together.

"I'm going to give you what you're used to," Jace told him as he took hold of Tyler's cock. "When we've done it enough, and you're not shocked anymore, then you can do me. Deal?"

Tyler's voice came out in a low rasp. "Yeah." Jace had begun to feed his dick into his hole, inch by inch. The fit was a tight squeeze that set his teeth on edge and arrowed powerful sensations all through his groin. His head dropped back, and he moaned his pleasure. "Ah, Jace, your ass is tight. It feels good."

Jace began pumping up and down his shaft. "Mm, you should feel my end, buddy. Nothing like it. Oh, yeah, you're thick. I'm going to ride you all night long, cowboy."

Tyler shut his eyes but then popped them open. He wanted to watch Jace move on him. He reached down and took hold his friend's hip, guiding him as he rose and fell. A hiss slipped between Tyler's gritted teeth. He was going to come soon because there was no way he could hold back.

"Should I come in you?" he almost pleaded.

"Y-Yeah, do it. I'm not going to last too much longer."

Tyler sat up and wrapped his arm fully around Jace. He braced himself on the bed, opened his legs a little, and then began to push up into Jace. He kissed his shoulder and across his back. Emotion welled up inside of him as his come seemed to heat in his cock. The two of them began pounding together faster and faster.

All of Tyler's fear and shock drained away as his orgasm rose closer to the surface. "I love you, Jace. I want us to be together. Forever."

Jace cried out, and Tyler felt hot liquid run down over his hand as he clutched his friend to him.

"I love you too," Jace rasped. "Now we're never going to be apart. Promise."

Tyler let out a roar as he came inside Jace. He drove up into his friend a few times more as he rode out the bliss, and then he fell back on the bed, pulling Jace down with him. They kissed for several minutes, and Tyler nuzzled Jace's cheek, warming it with his breath. "I promise."

The End

About the Author

Eden Cole is the author of several erotic works including male/male and ménage, and she has many more on the way. Please visit Risky Ink at riskyink.blogspot.com to find out more about her First Time Series of male/male novellas.