

ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



Hard
RIDE HOME
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Hard Ride Home

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HARD RIDE HOME

KyAnn Waters

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Chapter One

God damn! This was bullshit. Seven years and seven times more ruts in the dirt road taking him to the last place on earth Trace Tilton wanted to be.

Dust billowed around the sporty Eclipse Spyder convertible. Heat from the sun blurred the horizon. However, the mammoth structures of his family homestead still loomed in the distance.

His stomach rolled. Coming home always made him feel like shit. Maybe it was because Mom was gone and Bud was an ass. Too many years to count had passed since he thought of his father as *Dad*. The only light in the whole fucking family saga came from his big sister. Five kids and another Jennings baby on the way, she wouldn't likely have much time to listen to his complaints. Trace smiled. Not that she cared. His major complaint was coming home...at her request.

Trace sighed and turned up the stereo. He needed to get his head in the right place. Family obligations had always been a source of contention. Constant pulling between who he was and what his father wanted from him nagged at his conscience. Seven years ago he'd made a decision to pursue his own happiness and now, like the Corleone family, they were dragging him back. Only a cataclysmic event could bring him back to the belly of the beast...and it had. A lump formed in his throat.

Bud had a heart attack.

Gravel sprayed from the tires as Trace came to a stop in front of the sprawling single-level, five-bedroom rambler. A barn, larger than the house, sat off to the left. He leaned back in the driver's seat and stared out the windshield. He didn't want to go into the house, but there wasn't a way to avoid the inevitable.

Before he'd hit the dirt road, he'd had the ragtop down. He checked his reflection in the rearview mirror and combed his fingers through his dark brown hair. He should've

gotten it cut before leaving Salt Lake City. It was too long. He preferred a haircut short on the sides and a bit longer on top.

A squeal from the front veranda drew his attention. His sister ran down the steps as fast as her lumbering form would allow. Her auburn hair streaked with natural highlights was pulled into a ponytail. Without a stitch of makeup, overalls rolled up to the shins and a tank top underneath, she looked too young to have an enormous pregnant belly sticking straight out. At five feet tall, she was too small to be his big sister.

Trace opened the door and slid out of the car.

"Trace!" she laughed, launching into his arms.

"I can barely get my arms around you." He set her down and patted her swollen belly.

"Look at you." She put her arms akimbo, narrowed her hazel eyes and scrutinized him from head to toe. "Such a shame," she winked.

"Shhh."

Donna rolled her eyes. "No one's around." She latched on to his arm. "Dad's at the hospital, Bob has the kids out at our place and I'm sure Nash is somewhere in the fields or out with the horses."

"Who's Nash?"

"Ah, that's right. My handsome baby brother doesn't know about the beefcake Dad brought in to run the ranch." Donna smiled. "If I wasn't already married to Bob..." She hummed in her throat. "Mmm, mmm, mmm, I'd have to get a piece of his ass. Wait until you see him. Instant arousal, guaranteed."

Trace coughed. "That good?"

"Yep."

"Doesn't matter. I'm not staying long enough to make pals. You're the only one around here who knows I'm gay and I'd like to keep it that way. Bunch of bigoted

fucks, which is why I left in the first place. Once Mom was gone there wasn't any point in staying."

Donna gripped his hand. "People come around, Trace."

"Not in this lifetime. Not in butt-fuck, back-road, middle-of-nowhere Montana."

"I thought you liked butt-fuck. Isn't that why you left town?"

He swatted her in the ass and she giggled. "We aren't discussing my sex life. And we certainly don't need to inquire whether Bobby Boy is treating you right. Christ, Donna, are you single-handedly repopulating Farley Gulch?"

"It's not like *you're* going to contribute."

"You've got me there. You go ahead and have the kids to make the old man happy. Nothing I ever do will."

"Wait until Dad sees the hot car in the driveway. He'll know what a success you've become in the big city."

"Yeah, I think I left part of the muffler on that trail y'all call a road."

"You can use Dad's truck while you're here. Doc Holman isn't going to let him out of bed for a while."

"Exactly how long do you expect me to stay?"

She shrugged. "We can talk about that later."

He followed her into the house. "We should talk about it now. I don't want to get blindsided. How long does Bud think I'm staying?"

The familiar scents of childhood overwhelmed him. Absent were the loving arms of his mother, who had intuitively understood that he wasn't like the other boys from around town. He liked horses, hay and ranching well enough, but teenage life in Farley Gulch encompassed more than the Triple T Ranch. And unfortunately, he didn't have any interest in getting drunk at the water tower and making it in the back of a pickup with Colette Peterson.

At seventeen, the getting drunk part had been fun but not now. Back then he'd pretended he was into girls, was even able to follow through a couple times with Colette. She thought the sex was great because she hadn't realized his stamina actually stemmed from not being able to come while buried in her body.

Imagining his cock slamming into Jack Smith's ass had helped him over the edge those few times with Colette. He wondered how the shortstop on the high school baseball team would feel knowing the group showers after the game were the only reason Trace had played. He smiled remembering the smell of athletic socks and musky male sweat, knowing even then he'd wanted to pitch for the other team.

Back then, Trace would've rather sucked guys off in gym class— young, virile men with tight asses and constantly hard dicks. Hell, he'd been one himself. Of course, he never told anyone. Fags got their asses kicked— not kissed— in Farley Gulch. Since then his tastes had changed. He preferred men, not boys. He rarely dated anyone under thirty-five.

Maybe he was looking for the right *one*— and that would never be a younger man who hadn't gained some life experiences. Part of him wanted to settle down, to be in a long-term, monogamous relationship. Trace was tired of the scene. He didn't want to fuck around anymore.

With the rush of memories, once again came the harsh acceptance. He was gay and, in his experience, rural Montana didn't offer the open life he wanted. "How long, Donna?" he repeated.

"Dad thinks you're home to stay." She quickly put up her hands. "I had to tell him something to lower his blood pressure! He had a heart attack. He's worried about the ranch."

"He has a foreman for that. What's his name again— beefcake?"

"His name is Nash Stokes." Donna wrapped her hands under her belly and took a deep breath. "Dad wants his son home." Her face scrunched.

“Shit.” He wasn’t about to put Donna under more pressure by riding her about the length of his stay. He’d figure it out. Hopefully Nash was capable of handling the responsibility of the ranch. Trace had a life back in Salt Lake City...at least he *had*.

Footfalls sounded on the steps. Trace turned toward the door – and life on the ranch suddenly took an interesting turn.

“Hi there, Mama.” The man stepped through the screen door, immediately went to Donna and placed his hand on her tummy. “I’d say at least another week,” he predicted, his whiskey-rough voice vibrating dirty and low. Shoulder-length brown hair, whiskered jaw and a weathered face bronzed by the sun. His nose had a slight bump on the bridge. Wrinkles crinkled at the corners of his eyes when he smiled. The only thing that looked soft about the man was his lips.

“I’m not one of your heifers.” She swatted his hands away. “But you aren’t wrong with the cows.” She rubbed circles into her belly. “Nash, this is my brother, Trace.”

Nash slid his hands into the front pockets of his dusty jeans as he turned. The smile his full lips held for Donna thinned.

A moment of fear flashed through Trace’s mind before he squashed the idea that Donna might have said something to this man about his being gay. He couldn’t help being sensitive to the temperature of town. Back in Salt Lake, the homosexual closet didn’t exist for him. Being in Farley Gulch took him right back to when he had hid his sexual preference.

All the more reason to get out and get out quick. The town stifled him. His dad had already had a heart attack. Discovering Trace preferred men would kill him.

“We’re heading over to the hospital to see Dad.”

Nash nodded. “Don’t let him worry about the ranch. We both know the son of a bitch won’t rest. He’s probably pinching the nurses’ backsides.”

Trace guessed a lot hadn’t changed in the seven years he’d been gone. Sounded like Bud was still hard-assed and stubborn. One of the many reasons Trace had relocated to SLC. That and, once his mom passed, he’d lost the one person who stood between him

and his father's domineering nature. He'd endured Bud's bullshit because he couldn't hurt his mother. Had Trace not left after her death, father and son would've permanently severed their relationship. Distance allowed them both to pretend there was nothing wrong.

Trace's attention returned to Nash while Donna spoke about the recent updates on their father's condition. He should've been paying attention to the serious discussion but instead his eyes fixed on Nash's dusty, worn cowboy boots. The denim of the jeans he wore loose over his calves but snug against thick thighs and low on his hips. The impressively bulged fly was faded —

Trace's eyes snapped to the man's face. What the fuck! The prick had a boner for his pregnant sister!

Nash stared. His brown eyes blazed straight at Trace. "Enjoy your visit." He held out his hand.

Trace thought briefly about not shaking. What did Nash think? That he'd step to the side and let his sister screw up her life? Trace didn't think the guy really wanted to welcome him home. But instead of telling him off, Trace stepped closer. Nash's grip was firm, his palm rough and calloused. Although brief, the contact punched Trace in the gut.

Trace couldn't be sure but the man's vibe felt hostile. He had to admit though, Nash was beautiful. Easy-to-distinguish pectorals flexed beneath the thin cotton shirt. It seemed every muscle twitched and Trace was aware of each subtle move. Broad shoulders and arms strained the fabric of his shirt. Sweat dampened the underarms. The tang of hard work sweetened the scent of the man's skin. Damn, but Trace loved that smell.

Great, now tonight he'd beat off thinking about burying his nose in Nash's crotch, getting high off his earthy scent before sucking him dry. He'd fantasize about the man with a strong, square jaw and stubble shadowing his hollow cheeks. The hair at his temples was streaked with a few grays. Sideburns grew level with the earlobes. Trace

loved a face with character. Now, standing so close, Trace could see Nash's eyes weren't just brown, but flecked with gold and subtle green striations. His nose had obviously been broken before. Not surprising. The man was as big as an ox and carried confidence in his posture. He probably brawled in the bars in town.

Nash carried himself with his back straight and his head held high. Trace had no doubt he managed the ranch well. He didn't look like the kind of guy who followed orders...he gave them. Trace wasn't one to take orders either.

However, Nash could take anything he wanted.

Nash turned back to Donna, bent down and kissed her cheek. "Let me know if you need anything, Mama."

"No need for you to worry. I'm fine."

Once Nash left, Trace grabbed the keys to Bud's truck and he and Donna took off for the hospital. When he had her cornered in the vehicle, he asked her about the secret looks.

Donna laughed. "Nash has never once made a pass at me. He gets along better with Bobby than he does with me." She patted his arm. "You couldn't be further from the truth. He doesn't date." She cocked an eyebrow. "Hardly goes to town." Donna leaned back in the cab of the truck and spread her thighs to get comfortable. "Remind me when I'm this close to delivery not to let you drive. You hit another rut and you're liable to break my water."

"Men don't want to hear shit like that." He glanced in her direction and smiled.

"I don't have a mama or a sister and you're here. I'm entitled to some complaining."

On the twenty-mile drive to the hospital, Donna filled him in on the kids and the town gossip. "Do you remember Colette?" She shook her head. "Of course you remember. You hung around with her in high school." She paused, not for a breath in her endless chatter, but to ask, "Did you ever tell her you're gay?"

“No. I haven’t told anyone around here.” He narrowed his eyes at the sun coming through the windshield. “I’ve always felt bad about Colette. She deserved better than what I gave her.”

Donna let out a snort. “Don’t let that worry you. The girl has been a natural disaster for years. She’s divorced now but she’s dated just about everyone in town. Wait, let me clarify. She’s *fucked* everyone in town.” Her mouth quirked into a smile.

“Yes, even me.”

“I know. She works at The Double Down. I told her you were coming home. She wanted me to make sure to tell you to stop in.”

Trace growled low in his throat. All he’d wanted to do was come home, pacify his sister, make sure his dad recovered his health and take a couple weeks to gain some perspective on his life back home.

He hadn’t been completely honest with Donna when he’d led her to believe life was great in Salt Lake City and that he was in a hurry to return. Reality was much different. Certain aspects hadn’t been going well.

Mental note, don’t get involved with coworkers, especially your boss.

Steve had a lot going for him, but Trace wasn’t in love with him. Getting blown in the bathroom goes a long way toward making a shit job bearable. It also made life complicated when you wanted to scale back on the relationship. Trace never had any misconceptions on what the relationship was about.

Steve lost focus when he thought he’d fallen in love. Now Trace was on an official *indefinite* leave of absence from a job that had paid well. If Donna knew the truth, his temporary stay in Farley Gulch would be *indefinitely* extended.

Trace pulled into the hospital parking lot and found a stall close to the main doors. They walked side by side into the building.

Hospitals all smelled the same, medicinal overtones with a hint of cleaner. After the month his mother had spent in the ICU, the scent was burned into his memory. Being

here again hit him with the same intensity it had the last time. *The day they took Mom off life support.* Cancer won. Now a heart attack threatened to take his father.

Trace followed his sister to the elevators. They rose in silence to the second floor.

"How does he look?" Trace asked on the way to the room. "I don't want any surprises." He'd had enough. Knowing Bud remained under the misguided notion that Trace intended to stay home was surprise enough.

"He's gotten older. The years are catching up. Trace, you need to prepare yourself. Dad's not capable of running the ranch alone. Nash handles almost everything now. I've been doing the books again." She narrowed her eyes. "You're the accountant in the family. It's really your job."

"Guilt works great for you." He pasted a smile on his face and entered the hospital room with Donna.

Trace couldn't have prepared for his father's frailty. Tufts of this gray hair sprouted out in all directions. A tube under his nose supplied oxygen. He had an IV drip for fluids and medications. Monitors beeped. Wires crisscrossed his chest.

Trace walked into the room and approached the bed. "Bud?"

His dad's eyes slowly opened. The bright alertness had dimmed. He blinked a few times to focus and then he smiled. Crinkles formed at the corners of his eyes. He was pale and his skin appeared thin. Trace grabbed a folding chair and brought it to the side of the bed.

"I'm going to check in with the nurses. I hope you've behaved yourself," Donna said to their dad. "Nash asked if you've been pinching the nurses' butts."

Donna left and heavy silence hung in the room. Trace sat on the chair with his forearms braced on his knees. His fingertips touched and pushed off each other.

"Took my ticker giving up to get you home."

"Donna said we weren't to argue."

"Hmph. Figures she'd take a man's only pleasure."

Trace laughed. "Arguing with me or flirting with the nurses?"

Bud reached over the guardrail of the bed. Whether from the heart attack or the years, Bud had aged. Brown spots marred the top of his leathered hand.

Trace gently squeezed Bud's trembling fingers. That was more emotion than the old man had shown the last time they saw each other. It was enough. Trace leaned back in the chair. "So tell me what's happening on the ranch. I met your foreman."

"Nash is worth ten men. Hired him on right after you left. With your mama gone and your sister giving me a grandchild every year, I needed the help. He's a good man. You'll want to keep him happy."

There it was hanging in the air between them. Did he correct Bud and tell him he'd be leaving again?

With the oxygen tubes, IV line, pale skin and quivering lips, his father didn't need to hear the truth today.

"Not sure he likes me. I didn't get the 'glad to meet you' Montana handshake. However, he seems to like Donna just fine. Maybe a little too much." He mumbled the last part.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Bud's voice grated against Trace the same way it had since childhood.

Trace remembered when that tone used to strike fear into his heart. Most of his childhood had been spent with a measured amount of anxiety. He remembered the derogatory remarks his gruff father often made. Bud was an indiscriminating offender. Race, gender, social status—no topic was taboo. Queers were also the butt of his jokes often.

Being gay didn't mean he wanted to wear his mother's dresses or makeup. He just liked six-pack abs, a chiseled chest and a big cock straining against a faded fly.

Like those on Nash.

Trace groaned and rolled his shoulders. Bud needed to rest, recover and get back to the ranch if Trace intended to get out of town. Lusting after a shitkicker guaranteed an ass kicking.

“Nothing. Nash looks capable of running the ranch for you.”

“Running the ranch for *you* now. I’m retiring.”

Sweat trickled down Trace’s spine. Evidently lying in a hospital bed had given Bud time to plan. “We can talk about it when you’re feeling better.”

Bud shook his head. “No need. It’s all settled.”

Not really, but Donna entered the room smiling and the conversation changed to Bud’s condition. “Dr. Holman said you’re doing great. You should be out of here in no time.”

“Bullshit.”

She shrugged. “Yeah, but my job is to make you feel better.” She went to the bed and carefully sat. “Dad, you have to do what the doctor says or I’m going to be laboring in the bed next to you.” She held his hand and kissed his knuckles. Tears filled her eyes. “I don’t want to lose you.”

Trace stood. “I’ll leave you two alone for a minute.”

“No,” Donna said. “Don’t go.”

Trace patted her shoulder. “I’ll go get a coffee.” He walked out of the room and released a deep breath. Donna meant well when she conspired to have her way. She didn’t want to lose Bud but she didn’t understand what living in the Gulch would do to him.

Farley Gulch could only be a temporary home. Seven years ago Trace had come out of the closet and he didn’t think he could retreat to a lifestyle where he’d be forced to hide his sexuality again. He wasn’t ashamed of who he was...he just didn’t want to put another wedge between him and Bud. What Bud didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him. In

this case, ignorance was best. Trace didn't want the responsibility of causing Bud any stress that might aggravate his heart.

Chapter Two

Fuck! Nash jerked his hand from the wire fence and sucked his finger.

He couldn't keep his mind on the job because Trace Tilton continued to roll through it.

He pulled the finger from his mouth. Blood oozed from the puncture. He sucked it hard and pressed his tongue to the wound. The sting ebbed and Nash continued to repair the fence, his hands clenched as he twisted the wire.

His normal, quiet, reclusive life didn't need the complication of the only son returning home to take over the ranch...even temporarily. Emotions on two different levels, both equally dangerous, clashed in his head. Years of sweat and dedication to the ranch had earned his place next to Bud. He loved the old man. Working for some young fuck who had hands as soft as silk—albeit with a hard, virile body—wasn't going to happen.

He walked to the truck and tossed the wire snips into the toolbox. He checked his finger again. Blood clotted on the surface. He slammed the tailgate closed. "Fuck!"

Sweat dripped from his brow. Using the bandana from his back pocket, he wiped his forehead, his eyes and around to the back of his neck. Breeze from the south billowed his partially unbuttoned shirt. Nash turned his face into the wind. His cock raged, and had ever since he'd walked into the house to see who was driving the convertible parked out front. Donna had mentioned her brother was coming home to see their father. There were a few pictures in the house, but they'd been taken nearly a decade before and hadn't done the man justice.

Trace had short, dark brown hair. Thick eyelashes fringed copper eyes. He was clean-shaven and he smelled fucking incredible. Nash groaned. Because Donna was a petite woman, Nash never expected her brother would be more than six feet tall. He

had to be roughly his same height, six three, maybe six four. Although Trace had been dressed casually, Nash suspected he normally wore a suit every day.

Just the kind of man he found appealing, the kind he imagined on his knees...waiting for cock.

Nash unzipped his pants.

Using his hand, he imagined Trace opening those full lips to take his cock into his sweet mouth, sucking him until Nash came and then drinking him down.

Nash wrapped his fist around the base of his shaft with one hand and put the palm of his other over the smooth, heated crown. Gentle circular motions drew a bead of moisture from the slit. He needed lube, but he was desperate. His balls blazed with the need to jack off...hard. He spit in his hand and coated the shaft.

"That's it." He spoke to Trace as if he were there. "Take it all." He made a tight circle with thumb and index finger. Starting at the head, keeping the ring made by his fingers small, he inched down the length of his thick penis.

He clenched his ass, thrust his cock and conjured more images of the man. Without anyone around on the remote stretch of fence, he allowed himself to take his time reaching orgasm. His palm was rough. Friction built and without lube, he'd probably rub himself raw. Fuck it. He had to ease the ache in his balls. The hard, fast beat of his heart pounded in his chest, echoed in his ears and set the tempo for his strokes.

Rural Montana was supposed to get him away from the savage lust he felt for sophisticated, urbane city guys. Discovering the Triple T and Bud Tilton had been the one piece of luck Nash had found in his life. All that could end if *City* stuck around.

Nash squeezed his shaft harder. Punishment for wanting Trace and the passion he imagined at the hands of the man numbed his mind. His breathing grew shallow as he watched the bulbous head turn purple before he released the pressure. Blood rushed in and flashes of pleasurable pain exploded like lightning from tip to base and into his balls. A burst of heat filled his sensitive cock, nearly bringing him to his knees with insistent longing for the stranger at the house.

He lifted his face to the sun, continued stroking and then glanced at his cock. It was huge from wanting to slam deep into that tight ass. Thinking about Trace and those copper eyes pulled his lip back in a snarl. Muscles bunched in his arms as his balls tightened against his body. Moisture seeped from the tip. He dragged a finger along the slit, catching the hot juice and bringing the salty taste to his tongue. Nash imagined tasting Trace instead.

Building pressure, faster strokes, his rough, calloused hands working the skin over the engorged tissues—he conjured fragmented images of the man he had really only glimpsed for a few moments. He hadn't wanted to stare and give himself away. He closed his eyes. "Ah, fuck." Muscles in his ass clenched. He hollered into the summer sky. Ribbons of cum shot from his cock and landed on the dry ground.

After the final spasm, he was still hard. Fucking his fist wasn't going to be enough. And yet, it had to be.

After tucking his cock back into his jeans, he zipped up. Nash had finished with the fence so he headed back to the ranch house. Not only could he get an update on Bud's prognosis, but he could get another desperate fix of Trace and his clean city smell. The truck door squeaked when he open it. Sliding in, he turned the key left dangling in the ignition and stepped on the gas. As he sped away, dust and dirt sprayed from the tires.

The house was empty when Nash arrived. Figuring he'd get a little paperwork done for Bud, he let himself in. When he first came to work on the Triple T, he'd been staying in a small trailer on the property. Then a year or so later, Bud asked him to move into the house. Donna had made him feel at home when she gave him the biggest spare room, farthest away from Bud's. With just the two of them in the big house, he still felt a sense of privacy.

Now that City had come home, he wondered if he'd be pushed back out. Three men in the house might change the dynamics. Nash wouldn't mind seeing City naked, but touching and tasting his tanned skin certainly offered a compromising roommate

situation. Never once had Nash sprang an erection with Bud around. Whereas he'd be lucky to get any rest at night knowing City slept a room or two away.

The air-conditioning felt great against his heated flesh. He went to the kitchen, took off his hat and left it on the table. Normally the house didn't look as tidy as it did today. No one could say that he and Bud cared much for cleanliness, which was why Donna hired a local woman to come in once a week. Claimed it was the only way to guarantee two bachelors had clean floors. Nash grabbed a beer out of the fridge. Standing at the sink, staring out the window, he guzzled.

He hadn't noticed Bud's truck parked on the far side of the stable. City's car was where he'd left it. Nash scanned the horizon. Off in the distance a car sped toward the house, leaving a dust cloud in its wake. Since Bud had been in the hospital, not many people had been by.

Good. That's the way Nash liked it. He didn't hang out in town, but once upon a time he'd spent his evenings in bars.

Gay bars. They didn't have those in Farley Gulch.

Nash used to live in San Diego. He'd been stationed there for a few years while he served in the Navy. He knew about sports cars and image. He knew enough to know he liked his life just the way it was, without all the bullshit.

The car stopped in front of the house. Everyone knew Colette's beat-to-shit love-mobile. Nash was about to go out to the porch when he saw movement near the barn. Trace stepped from the shadows and waved the woman over.

Colette's teased blonde hair whipped across her face and stuck to her pink lipstick. She smiled and jogged the short distance to Trace, her large breasts bouncing beneath her tank top.

"What have we here?" he asked aloud, noting the grin on Trace's blowjob lips. Maybe today they were pussy-eating lips. Trace sure hadn't wasted much time rekindling friendships. He'd only been in town a few hours. Of course, in Farley Gulch, news traveled fast. The son had returned.

Nash set his beer on the counter. Leaving his hat, he walked out the back door and stalked across the barren ground to the barn. He slipped in the tack room door and listened. Colette and Trace were now in the main open area of the barn.

“The doctor said he’s doing better.”

Nash kept his back to the wall, remaining just out of sight.

“Oh that’s good, real good. Gosh, I just can’t believe you’re back. You’ve been gone so long.”

Leave it to Colette to sniff out fresh meat.

She sighed dreamily. “You look great.”

“You look good too, Colette.”

Nash raised an eyebrow. Trace didn’t sound interested. In fact, his tone was cool. Not what he’d expected. Of course, he didn’t really know what to expect. He recalled Donna mentioning that her brother had known Colette in high school. The conversation came about after Colette had attempted to pick up Nash during his first days in town.

“A bunch of us plan on meeting over at The Double Down. Why don’t you come out tonight?”

“I don’t think so. While I’m home I want to be out here...at the ranch.”

Nash stepped from the shadows. Trace stood near the stalls. One of the mares nickered and swished her tail. “You ought to go,” he said, meeting Trace’s penetrating eyes. Heat raced through his system. Instantly hard, he shifted on his feet to ease the pressure behind the fly of his jeans. Didn’t help. The only thing that would get rid of his erection was City’s lips around his shaft while he pumped into his wet, willing mouth. There wasn’t a chance in hell of that happening.

“It’ll be fun.” Colette turned to Nash. “You should come too.”

That was his thought exactly. Not going to town – but jacking off until he’d milked his cock dry.

“I’ll go if you will,” Trace said.

Nash's attention snapped back to Trace. Mischief glinted in his eyes. For a moment Nash wondered if there was a hidden agenda in his response, but he quickly quelled those thoughts. Wishful thinking had him hearing and seeing interest that didn't exist. "If you'll buy the first round, then I'll go."

Trace smiled. "Count us in," he said to Colette.

"Great! I better skedaddle but I'll see you both later." Colette bounced out of the barn.

Trace picked up a couple of leather straps. "I'll be done out here in a minute."

"I'll see you at the house."

Nash's pulse raced. He hadn't been to the town bars in six months. They didn't exactly cater to queers. Sweat dripped from his brow. When was the last time he felt the need to clean up for a date?

Shit, this *wasn't* a date, just a way to satiate his lust. Not only did he want to look at City, he wanted to be near him. Excitement fired his blood. He jogged up the front porch steps. As he went to his room, he stripped off his shirt. By the time he entered the bathroom he'd lowered the fly of his jeans, giving his cock much-needed growing space.

The hot water took a minute. While he waited, he stared at his reflection in the mirror. The years had crept up on him. Sun and wind had weathered his skin, but ranch work kept his body hard. He'd be forty this year. Donna was in her early thirties. That had to put City in his late twenties. He growled at his reflection. Not that it made a fucking bit of difference.

He raked his fingers through his hair and swore. Somehow he had to get Trace Tilton out of his head.

What had possessed Trace to ask Nash to the bar?

If he tried, he could convince himself he'd made the invitation to provide a barrier between him, Colette and the rest of the town. He didn't want to rekindle past friendships. Maybe if he planned to stay, but realistically it wouldn't work. He enjoyed men, liked to work out at the gym with his friends, enjoyed a good meal at a nice restaurant. And if he went on a date and the night ended in bed, all the better.

Heading down the hall to his old room, he passed by the cracked-open bathroom door and froze. Steam clouded the mirror. Pipes rattled under the water pressure. There was no mistaking Nash on the other side of the glass shower door. His head tipped back, water and shampoo suds sluicing over his body.

Trace couldn't turn or walk away. Breathing became difficult. His heart hammered in his chest. The man was fucking gorgeous. Solid muscle, long legs with heavy thighs and dark whorls of hair on his pectorals. A thin ribbon of hair trailed down his stomach and surrounded a beautiful cock. Christ. Nash's balls hung heavy in a dark sac. He swallowed hard. Nash reached down and shut off the water.

Trace turned away and leaned against the hallway wall. He tried to quiet his labored breathing. But his heart raced and chills broke along his skin. Adrenaline pumped through his veins. The shower door opened and the creak of the towel rack gave Trace a perfect idea of what was happening on the other side of the wall.

The last thing he needed was for the rough cowboy to discover him with a hard-on in his pants. He quickly walked down the hall to his room.

Opening the door, he realized his hand shook.

Well, hell. Apparently, he didn't have a room anymore.

Trace glanced down the hall toward the bathroom. Nash stood a few feet away with a towel wrapped around his waist. Water dripped from his hair. Several strands clung to the bronzed skin of his neck.

"You moved into my old room?"

Nash approached. Trace liked the way the towel parted, teasing him with a glimpse of thigh. Black hair on his calves and shins also covered his upper legs. Trace liked

manly men. Nothing feminine. He wanted aggression, testosterone and a big tool. Nash had it all in spades.

“Didn’t know this was your room.” Nash brushed past him and Trace caught a whiff of soap and male. He stopped just inside the room and turned to Trace. Their eyes locked.

A lump the size of a boulder lodged in Trace’s throat. Normally he wasn’t at a loss for words. Yet he stood at the threshold of his old room filled with Nash’s belongings and tried to think of something to say—anything—because Nash waited there naked with the exception of the terrycloth towel. Clean-shaven, wet hair slicked back and his skin carrying a healthy flush from the hot water.

Awkward silence stretched between the two men. Trace couldn’t help noticing the growing bulge behind the towel. Picking up guys in a gay bar or introductions made through friends didn’t require a declaration of sexual preference. But shit if he could tell what rumbled around in Nash’s head. Normal intuition failed. He wasn’t getting the vibe. The one that expressed interest.

Yet, straight men didn’t tend to make eye contact with other men when wearing a towel and sporting a boner.

“I’m getting dressed.” Nash loosened the towel.

Trace forgot to breathe. His heart pounded and his cock jumped. Muscles in his ass clenched with need. Saliva filled his mouth with want of sucking Nash off. A muscle in his jaw jumped as he clenched his teeth—hard.

Nash’s eyebrow rose in question. “Did you need something?”

Yeah, to fuck you. “I’ll grab my bags out of the car and move into Donna’s old room.” Trace turned away, but not before he caught a glimpse of Nash dropping the towel while walking to the closet.

Flames of burning need had his cock instantly hard. His pulse raced. Two dimples, one on each of Nash’s butt cheeks, looked perfectly lickable. He had a nicely rounded ass and it was just the slightest bit paler than the rest of the man’s body. Trace wet his

lips with his tongue. Interesting. Nash evidently liked to feel the heat of the sun on all his body parts. Before Trace was caught staring, he headed down the hall and out the front door.

Stepping outside felt like slamming into a wall of hot, stifling air. Heat waves rose from the hood of his vehicle. Since there didn't seem to be a way to get out of an extended stay in Farley Gulch, he probably ought to park the Spyder in the barn. It wasn't as if he could take it for Sunday drives on dirt roads.

Back in the house, Trace tossed his bag onto Donna's old bed. He sat on the edge and laughed. Bedsprings groaned and squeaked under his weight. Bouncing a few times, he remembered when they were kids. Donna could never bring a boy to her bedroom. The minute they sat on the bed, the springs squeaked like an alarm to their mother.

Trace grabbed his shave kit and headed to the bathroom. Unlike Nash, he made sure to close and lock the door before turning on the shower and stepping under the hot spray.

A clean shave, a bit of gel in his hair and a splash of Calvin Klein Man cologne rejuvenated him. He knew he was overdressed for The Double Down but he needed to feel comfortable, so he wore a black button-down linen shirt tucked into tan Dockers, a belt and tie.

He found Nash sitting at the kitchen table with a longneck bottle of beer. After taking a sip, he rolled the bottle between his palms. Nash had large hands with long, thick fingers and, Trace knew from their handshake earlier, rough palms. What would it feel like to have those hands on his chest, his thighs and all the places in between?

Nash plucked at the paper label on the beer with his blunt fingernail. He lifted his head. Their eyes met and held.

Tonight Trace had to stay sober. Getting drunk would be sure liquid motivation for making an ass out of himself. "Ready?"

Nash drained the bottle and slammed it back down. "Yep. Let's take your car."

Shit. Risk dragging his muffler to town to have the tall cowboy in the front seat of his vehicle? Close quarters, the scent of his skin blending with leather...

Hell yes!

* * * * *

Nash nervously snuck a glance at Trace. City rubbed his hand over the steering wheel with a lover's caress while he drove. His fingers tapped out the cadence of the song on the stereo. His other hand periodically gripped the gearshift. Nash groaned silently, imagining City's firm grip on *his* stick. He needed to get his thoughts moving into another direction. "How's Bud?"

Trace turned down the stereo and shifted his body in the driver's seat. "It was a bit of a shock to see him like that. Hard to see him as anything less than the strong, bullheaded—"

"Cantankerous son of a bitch?"

Trace laughed. "Yeah. He doesn't look so tough right now."

Nash nodded. Bud exuded a ruggedness that made him larger than life. Nash respected the man. Not quite like a father, nonetheless, Bud meant a lot to Nash. "I'm sure it did him good to see you."

Trace shrugged. "You never can tell with Bud."

The usual crowd gathered at The Double Down. A round of hellos greeted Nash and Trace. Not only were people excited to see Trace after such a long absence, they were also surprised to see Nash at the bar. A few guys from the ranch offered to buy rounds. Trace took a chair with his back to the wall and Nash sat next to him.

Country music pumped through the speakers, but not loud enough to interfere with conversation. Worn-out chairs and scarred tables were scattered about the room. A long bar stretched the length of the narrow building. People didn't come here to dance, but to drown their sorrows in watered-down whiskey. Usually about the time the alcohol worked its magic, the mechanical bull in the rear of the bar roared to life.

“First round of whiskey, boys,” Colette said, chomping on a piece of gum as she set a tray down on the table. Skintight jeans molded to her body from hips to where they tapered into her red-and-black cowboy boots. A black lace bra strap slipped onto her shoulder from beneath the red tank top. She reminded Nash of a ladybug, only Colette wasn’t much of a lady. When she leaned forward he glimpsed an abundant amount of artificially tanned cleavage spilling from her bra.

Nash turned to Trace. “Can you shoot whiskey, City?”

Trace met Nash’s stare. “City, huh?” His lips twitched into a smile.

Colette sat on the other side of Trace and tugged on his tie. “You know they say ties are a phallic symbol.” She ran her finger over the striped pattern. “I think they’re sexy.”

Trace picked up a shot glass with a frown. “It’s good to be home.” He tipped his head back and upended the glass. He swallowed once...twice...

Watching the movement in Trace’s throat made Nash want to wrap his hands around his neck and lick the sweat glistening on his skin.

Trace handed him a shot. “Your turn.”

Nash’s fingers brushed Trace’s. The slight contact sent adrenaline through his bloodstream.

“Tell us about what you’ve been up to.” Colette leaned into Trace, pressing her breast against his arm. Nash might not have noticed her hand on Trace’s thigh if Trace hadn’t jerked a bit.

“Not much changes, does it?” Trace put his hand over hers and guided her palm to his knee. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Trace headed toward the back of the bar where the restrooms were located. Nash excused himself a moment later and followed.

Shit. Nash felt every nerve ending sizzle. His pulse quickened and tension tightened his gut. He wasn’t sure what he expected by following Trace. Maybe he just

hoped to catch a glance of him at the urinal. A visual of Trace's cock would go a long way toward heightening his fantasies while jacking off.

Nash walked into the bathroom.

Trace stood at the sink with his back to the mirror. "What the fuck?" He had his hand at the knot at his throat, loosening his tie. "Is she in heat? Because I *know* I didn't give off any signals that I was remotely interested."

"Maybe she's trying to rekindle those old sparks."

Trace rolled his eyes. "Those fires were banked years ago. Good hell, she's practically a stranger yet she still tried to grab my dick." Trace raked his fingers through his hair. "I don't really want to be here...and you look like you're having about as much fun as I am." He pulled the tie from around his neck. "If you want to stay awhile, I'll hang around. But if you don't mind bailing, I'd rather pick up a bottle of Crown, go somewhere less Farley Gulch and put some perspective on how the fuck I ended up back here."

Nash leaned against the door. "You think I'm better company than the motley crew out there?"

Trace nodded his head in the direction of the bar. "Them?" He laughed. "I hardly consider that group diverse."

Nash shrugged. "Let's go."

Colette pouted when they told the group they were leaving. "Well, when can I see you?"

"I'll be around. As long as Bud's in the hospital and I'm needed at the ranch. We'll have time to catch up later."

Nash bristled. Trace wasn't needed at the ranch. Bud hadn't worked long days in the field for a couple years. City didn't look like the type to work up a sweat in the hot summer sun doing manual labor. Maybe in a gym or between the sheets with women like Colette. Either way, not Nash's concern.

At least he now knew where Trace stood in regards to the ranch. It didn't sound like he really wanted the responsibility. Not surprising; Donna had said as much. But he knew she hoped she could talk her brother into staying in Farley Gulch permanently.

Nash hoped to convince him to leave.

They left the bar and walked back to the car. A few vehicles were parked along Main Street even though the local businesses were closed. The two bars in town always had a few patrons.

The night was humid, and Nash watched the play of muscles beneath Trace's dampened shirt, clinging to his body as he walked. When they reached the car, Nash ran his hand over the ragtop. "Can you put it down?" He wanted to feel the warm air against his heated flesh.

One side of Trace's mouth quirked in a disarming way. "Yeah, until we hit the dirt road. I don't want to climb into bed covered in dust."

The space between them filled with heavy silence. Nash's cock twitched with the image Trace had conjured with his innocent words. Their eyes met over the car. For a moment, Nash swore recognition and understanding of what he wanted dawned in the copper depths of Trace's eyes. Then the spell broke when a car honked from the street. Nash looked away first. Lust had him engaging in wishful thinking.

In the bathroom, City had insinuated that although he wasn't interested in Colette now, that hadn't always been the case. Trace had a history with women. *Good*. Nash wanted his life in Farley Gulch to remain simple. Thankfully Trace was straight, because he was a temptation Nash didn't need.

Trace slid into the vehicle, turned the key in the ignition then lowered the top. Nash smiled as he sat in the passenger seat. The rich sent of leather and spice wafted about him. The seat hugged his body and after riding in a truck day after day, in the sports car he felt as if he were practically sitting on the street.

"There are CDs in the visor if you want to listen to music." Trace flipped on the blinker then pulled away from the curb.

Nash glanced at the music collection as Trace eased into the accelerator and sped them toward the outskirts of town. “So how long does it take you to drive up from Salt Lake City?” He made his selection and slipped the disc into the stereo.

“Is that your way of hinting I’m driving too fast?” He relaxed into the seat, smoothly shifting gears and making the car purr like a kitten as the speedometer clicked higher.

Nash rested his arm on the edge of the open window. Wind whipped through his hair. “Nope. But the thought crossed my mind that in the nearly seven years I’ve worked for your dad, you’ve never come home.”

Trace checked the rearview mirror. “I guess saying I was busy would sound like a lame excuse.”

“You’ve missed a lot.”

Trace gave a snort. “Yeah, I’ve missed seven years of fighting with Bud.”

“I suppose there are always good and bad times in any family,” Nash ventured.

“When it comes to Bud and me, it’s mostly bad.”

“But this time it’s different. Bud nearly died. Staring death in the face makes a man think about all he has to lose.” Before Bud’s heart attack, Nash felt confident in his position on the Triple T. Now he couldn’t be sure what would happen if Trace stayed. “That has to mean something.” It meant something to Nash. He didn’t just have the ranch to lose – Bud, Donna, Bob and the kids were all the family he had.

But they weren’t *his* family – they were Trace’s.

“Where’s your family? Around here?”

“My parents are both gone,” Nash said tersely, nervously tapping the rhythm from the speakers on his knee with his left hand. “Bud and I have made some improvements to the ranch. I can show you around.” He turned to Trace. “That is, if you’re going to be around for a while.” He paused. “Do you think you’ll be staying?”

“Shit.” Trace popped his head back against the headrest. “Donna told Bud I’m home to stay.”

“And are you?”

“God, I hope not.” Trace nodded to the vast blackness in the distance. “There’s nothing here for me.”

Nash cocked an eyebrow. “Your family isn’t enough?”

“Yeah, I know. They should be.” Trace smiled and Nash felt the heat of it blaze a trail straight to his groin. He shifted on the seat.

“I suppose you have time to make your decision. Doc Holman isn’t going to let Bud out of the hospital for several days.”

“Great, *days* to decide whether I want to move back to this homo—”

Trace’s head snapped around and his eyes locked on Nash’s. “To move back home.” He glanced back to the road. “I’m going to need that drink when we get back to the house.”

* * * * *

Sunlight streamed through the sheer-curtained windows. Outside the roosters welcomed the morning. Fresh-brewed coffee and the hint of bacon flavored the air.

Not figuring Nash for the domestic type, Trace hollered for his sister.

“Donna, you sweet girl! Come in here so I can thank you properly.” He groaned and stretched his arms over his head. “Bring the coffee with you. Cream and a bit of sugar, if you don’t mind. You know coffee’s the only thing I don’t like strong.”

He glanced up—and started when he saw Nash leaning against the doorjamb.

“Do you expect me to bring you breakfast in bed every morning? Because your sister doesn’t have time to brew my coffee or fry my bacon.” Nash sipped from the mug in his hand.

“No, my sister has her own family to take care of.” Trace narrowed his eyes on Nash—and realized he wasn’t looking at his face. Trace glanced down. Nash had noticed the tented sheet. Morning wood. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Coffee’s on the stove.” Nash straightened. “If you want, I can swing by around lunch. Eat here at the house and then we can ride a couple of horses out to the fields.”

Trace nodded. “Thanks.” He kept his hands in his lap to hold down his cock.

The draw of coffee had Trace dressed and in the kitchen in minutes. The house was quiet. Normally he listened to CNN before he left for work. Bud didn’t own a television. The old radio in the living room did a good job of picking up the emergency system, but it wasn’t stereo sound. No CD or DVD player. Basically work on the ranch began with sunrise and ended at sunset. More reasons he’d wanted to move on.

He took his coffee to the barn. Even as a kid it was his favorite place to be. Leather and fresh hay perfumed the air. Birds built their nests in the rafters and sunlight created a crisscross pattern on the hard, packed-dirt floor. A mouser prowled the corners of the cavernous space. “Hey, kitty, are you going to keep me company?” He set his coffee on a long workbench.

“If you’re looking for company, maybe I could help.”

Startled, Trace spun around.

“I guess you didn’t hear me drive up. I called your name,” Colette said.

He hadn’t heard anything. He’d been remembering his youth, time spent alone in the barn. Where else was a confused boy supposed to go to beat off to male muscle mags? “What’s up, Colette?” Trace grabbed leather reins off the workbench and laid them over a partition between horse stalls.

“After last night, I wondered if you wanted to do some of that catching up.”

Trace sighed and leaned against the wood beam supporting one of the roof girders. “You know, with Bud in the hospital, Donna ready to have another baby, the ranch and getting used to being home, I’m just not ready to start...anything.”

Colette ran her hand along one of the saddle blankets stacked on the worktable. "We used to have some good times."

This conversation should have happened years ago. "We had..." He searched for the right word, but couldn't think of one. "*Fun*...three times. And that was a long time ago."

Colette smiled and stepped closer. "You remember too."

"Yeah." How could he forget? Trying to bring some order to his thoughts, he mentally counted to ten. His heart raced and the beat pounded in his ears. He wasn't sure telling Colette his preference was the smartest course of action but he didn't see much of an alternative. If he didn't come clean she'd never give up. "We're not in high school anymore. There are things about me you won't understand." He picked up his coffee and sipped. Telling Colette meant taking a huge risk. Perhaps just hinting at their incompatibility would be enough to discourage further pursuit.

She approached him. "Come and sit by me." She grabbed his hand and led him to the sawhorse. "There isn't anything you can't tell me. We're friends." Reaching up, she combed her fingers through his hair. "We used to be *good* friends."

The touch made him jump up and move away. "I'm not interested in rekindling a romance, not even for recreational sex." He winced. That was a little harsh.

Colette's posture stiffened. "I wasn't begging." She worked a piece of wood loose from the sawhorse with her artificial fingernail. "Have I changed that much?"

"No, it's not you...not entirely, anyway." Maybe if she didn't look so damn dejected he could let the conversation die an easy death. But Colette's lips pursed and her shoulders slumped. "You're the only woman I've ever slept with."

Glancing up with furrowed brows, her expression implied a question. "Why? Was I that good...or that bad?" Her lips quirked into a smile and then shifted to a frown. "I always thought we were good together."

"I'm gay."

The statement hung like a dark cloud between them. Confusion, a glimmer of understanding—and then Colette’s eyes widened. “*What?*” she shrieked. “I made you *gay?*”

“Of course not!” he said incredulously. “No one is ‘made’ gay.”

Her hands shook as she fumbled with her keys. “I can’t believe it.” Her whole face scrunched into a sneer. “Gay?” She shook her head. “No, I didn’t screw a gay man. Trace! You aren’t *gay*. Gay guys don’t fuck women!”

He stepped closer. “Yes, they do.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “I never meant to hurt you.”

“Don’t touch me!” She stood and backed away and pointed her finger at him. “No! *Gay?*”

“Colette, listen. Bud just had a heart attack. I trust you to keep this between us. I just thought you had a right to know after all these years.” He paused. “That doesn’t make it anyone else’s business.”

“You think I want to tell anyone I fucked a fag?” She closed her eyes and wiped her palm over her forehead. “I gotta go.” She rushed out the barn doors, ran to her car and sped off.

“Fuck,” he whispered. That didn’t go exactly as he’d anticipated. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected but he knew if he stayed in Farley Gulch, the truth was bound to come out.

That wasn’t really the problem. Bud needed several weeks of rest before hearing the news that his son was gay. More to the point, Bud needed to hear it from *him* and not gossip and rumor from town.

Chapter Three

A noise behind Trace made him whirl around, pause and listen intently. Hay crunched under a heavy tread. "Who's there?"

Nash stepped from the shadow of the tack room. His posture appeared stiff and Trace sensed tension in him. Nash's fists clenched at his sides and his mouth formed a hard line. Fear coiled like a snake in the pit of Trace's stomach. Had Nash heard the conversation with Colette? If he'd been in the tack room, it would have been impossible *not* to hear. Voices traveled in the large barn.

Heart-pounding anxiety rushed through Trace's veins like liquid heat. Nerves tingled with awareness as the quiet cowboy crossed the room. Trace didn't retreat.

Expecting a condemnation, he started when Nash leaned in. Hot breath fanned against Trace's face. "Tell me you're interested," he whispered. "Because my cock is sore from beating off." Nash's chest rose and fell with heavy breaths.

Sucking air deep, Trace's nostrils flared and drew in the spicy scent of sweat and male. Similar in height, they stood face-to-face. Trace grabbed two fistfuls of Nash's shoulder-length hair and wrenched his face forward. Lips parted and tongues parried. Wild, hard thrusts deep into Nash's mouth tasted like coffee and man. As he'd imagined, Nash's lips were soft even when firmly sealed to his. Teeth clicked against teeth. Trace pulled harder on Nash's hair, yanking his head back and forcing their mouths apart. "God, you taste good."

Their eyes met. The intense impact slammed into Trace's gut. His stomach tightened and his cock swelled.

Nash reached his hands around to Trace's ass and pulled him flush to his groin. There was no mistaking the level of Nash's arousal. His cock pressed hard and huge

against Trace's erection. Shifting his hips, Trace ground against it, reveling in the powerful aphrodisiac of knowing Nash was as hot as he was.

Trace slid his hand between them, never taking his eyes from Nash's. He cupped Nash's cock through the denim of his jeans and then slid the zipper down. The sound of the metal teeth unlinking blended with their heavy breaths.

Trace flashed on the memory of Nash behind the steamed shower glass. Slipping his fingers into the front of Nash's jeans, he palmed his girth and then sought his sac.

"Fuck." Nash groaned and threw his head back. Breath hissed from between his clenched teeth. "Suck it."

Trace shifted Nash into one of the stalls then dropped to his knees on the fresh hay. A quick tug on Nash's jeans and they slipped past his hips to his thighs. Full and erect, Nash's huge, cut cock bobbed in front of Trace's face. Just as he'd seen in the shower, his dark sac hung heavy. With the first touch of Trace's fingers, it pulled up and tightened. Trace ran the blunt edge of his thumbnail along the thick vein running the underside of Nash's shaft.

Nash wrapped one fist around his cock and his other hand went to the back of Trace's head. Understanding the fierce intensity of denied urges, Trace opened his mouth and took as much of Nash's cock as he could swallow.

Sealing his lips, humming in the back of his throat, he sucked as he pulled back, running his tongue along the rigid length. He licked the cream seeping from the tip. Salty and sweet. Wanting more, he milked the cock greedily, savoring his pre-cum.

Nash growled, put both hands on the sides of Trace's head and pumped his hips, driving his cock deep. Trace relaxed his throat and tried not to gag on the size of the smooth, hot flesh. While Nash moaned in ecstasy, Trace massaged the man's balls with one hand and stroked his length with the other.

With fingers wet from his spit, he caressed the sweet cleft of Nash's taut ass. Nash growled, his fingers digging into Trace's scalp.

“You have the biggest sac I’ve ever seen.” Trace took one ball into his mouth and sucked. At the same time, he eased his finger into Nash’s tight, wrinkled sphincter.

Muscles clamped and Nash swore. “Fuck me.”

Trace intended to...just as soon as he’d had his fill of sucking on Nash’s magnificent, beautiful cock. He pressed his nose against the thatch of hair around the base and inhaled. Nash thrust back against his hand, trying to work his ass on Trace’s finger.

“Not enough, cowboy?” Trace eased out and inserted a second finger. Scissoring back and forth, sliding in and out, he stimulated the prostate gland.

“It’s been a long time.” Nash grabbed his cock. “Suck it.”

Trace tongued the ridge of the engorged head. Then he put his tongue on the slit and savored the taste. With one hand, he firmly gripped the base of Nash’s length and slid his mouth over the smooth crown. He sucked, used his teeth and pressing his lips in matching, wild, fast strokes with his fist. With his other hand, he alternated between pressing into Nash’s hole with his thumb and fucking him with a couple fingers.

Nash’s body tensed. His thighs quivered and his hips pumped.

“Ah fuck! That’s it, City,” Nash groaned. Rivers of hot, salty-sweet cum shot from his cock and filled Trace’s mouth. As he pulled away, a trickle of Nash’s nectar dripped from his chin. With the traces of cum left on Nash’s shaft and balls, Trace lubricated Nash’s hole.

Nash leaned back against the wall. Trace stood, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Kissing Nash’s lips, he then plundered his mouth, tasting both Nash’s cream and the intoxicating heat of his tongue.

While kissing, he reached into his back pocket and grabbed his wallet. He broke the kiss and took a condom out before tossing his wallet to the ground.

Trace unzipped his pants, pushed them over his hips and sheathed his cock. He'd purposefully not touched himself while blowing Nash because he wanted to be hard and ready when he took his ass.

"Turn around."

Nash eyed Trace's cock and swallowed. "It's been a while."

Trace inhaled and slowly exhaled. His cock throbbed and he desperately needed to fuck this man. Not only was Nash beautiful to look at, he carried himself with confidence. Trace lusted after Nash, but there was something more to the attraction—an indefinable quality. Maybe it had just been a long time since someone had been a mystery to him. Nash was quiet and reserved, and the fact that he was here, with Trace, with his penis hardening again, defied anything Trace could have expected. And Trace would take Nash any way he could have him. "Do you want to suck me off instead?"

"Later."

Nash squatted and then went to his hands and knees. His massive, muscled back tensed. His firm, rounded ass curved into heavy thighs. Trace recognized the coiled tension in the lines of his body. Nash wanted it, but a ribbon of fear still existed.

Trace lowered to bended knee. Tracing the divide between Nash's cheeks with his thumbs and spreading his palms over the full globes, he dug his fingers into his firm flesh and parted his cheeks.

He bent and licked Nash's wrinkled rosette. Then he inserted a finger.

Nash lifted his head and glanced over his shoulder. "You've already fucked me with your finger. I want your cock."

Trace aligned the head of his rod to the tight hole. "Ah!" It slipped in easily. Pressing slowly, he allowed the rim of Nash's ass to relax before inching in farther.

Finally buried to the base, he slowly pumped his hips. Damn, Nash felt fucking incredible. Muscles in Nash's ass clenched. At the same time, Nash rocked on his hands and knees, helping to set the tempo of Trace's thrusts. Sliding in and out, Trace felt

blazing heat surge from his cock to his head. Exquisite friction fired each nerve ending. He pumped faster. Skin smacked skin. Harder, each thrust ramming home.

Nash groaned and his muscles strained. Bracing himself with one arm, he reached between his legs. Two strokes of his shaft had him reaching orgasm again. The spasm gripped Trace's cock. Firmly clutching Nash's hips, Trace slammed into his hole. Again and again. Forceful thrusts deep into his rectum, the ring milking his cock and pushing Trace over the edge. His cock swelled, tightened and then blew. Stars erupted behind his closed eyes. Hot spurts of cum filled the tip of the condom. Clenching his buttocks, he stilled, buried full hilt and savored the sensations of fucking Nash.

Breathing hard, he collapsed onto Nash's muscular back. Deflated, his cock slipped out. "Are you okay?" Trace lifted his cheek from Nash's back and placed a kiss between his shoulder blades.

"I should've ridden the mechanical bull last night." Trace sat up so Nash could roll to his side and then to his back. Then Nash met Trace's gaze and cracked a grin. "You rode me hard. I'm going to have a limp."

"How long has it been...since you've been with anyone?" Trace carefully pulled the condom from his shaft and dropped it to the ground. He stood, pulled his pants over his hips and zipped up.

"About five years."

"Really?" Trace raked his fingers through his hair. "I haven't been celibate," he said. Not that Nash had asked. Trace just felt the need to qualify that it hadn't been five years for *him*. It hadn't been five weeks.

The quiet cowboy stood and pulled on his jeans. "I need to get back to work." With a hitch in his gait, he went back to the tack room.

Trace took the condom from the ground and tossed it into the metal barrel used to burn garbage.

* * * * *

Nash worked the ranch for hours, avoiding Trace.

So City was gay.

A few years ago the information would have had him coming in his jeans. But life in the Gulch wasn't the same as being gay in San Diego, or even in Salt Lake City where Trace lived. If the people in Farley Gulch found out about his sexual orientation, he'd have a hell of a time sticking around.

City was about to find out how small-town rumor sparked into wildfire. Although Nash had benefited from the information, Trace's decision to tell Colette had been a major miscalculation on his part. The woman had a vindictive streak. Everyone in town knew not to cross her.

Evening settled over the ranch. A hot breeze blew and whistled through the tree break along the north side of the property. Having avoided the house all day, he didn't know what to expect from Trace. His boots echoed off the porch as he climbed the steps. The front door was shut. Obviously Trace had left. At least he could make some dinner and collect his thoughts before City returned.

One particular detail weighed heavy in his thoughts. Now that they'd gotten dirty in the barn, did Trace expect the encounters to continue?

Did Nash want them to?

He pulled open the screen and tugged on the door—

What the fuck? Trace had locked the damn door! Who locks their doors in Farley Gulch? It wasn't as if someone was going to break into the property to steal priceless antiques. Nash didn't even carry house keys. Why should he? The door was never locked. And the hum of the air conditioner told him he wouldn't find a window open. He slapped his palm against his leg.

Hurrying down the steps, he jogged across the yard to the barn. Bud's truck was gone. Maybe City left his keys in the Spyder.

Nash pulled on the door handle as he peered into the vehicle. No keys and—no surprise—the doors were locked.

Growling low in his throat, he slowly meandered into the main portion of the barn. He couldn't stop himself from staring at the place where he'd gone to his knees for Trace. The crushed hay still bore the indentations of their bodies. His heart thundered and sweat moistened his palms.

Not a good sign. He didn't want to be attracted to Trace, didn't want him invading his thoughts. Nash's history with relationships didn't bode well for his future with Trace. Nash had had his fill of casual encounters. And knowing that, he didn't think he could develop a strictly sexual relationship with City. Too much about the man appealed to him. Trace had an amazing body, dressed to impress. Nash loved the way he walked and the deep, smooth tone of his voice. Talking with Trace was a pleasure. It had been a long time since anyone had stimulated Nash physically and intellectually.

The townsfolk didn't really know Nash. They thought they did, but he suspected quite a few people would be surprised to learn that the burly guy who knew his way around a ranch also scored a fifteen thirty-two on his SATs. Nash had a degree from the Naval Academy and had looked forward to a promising career as an officer in the Navy.

But that didn't happen.

Life as he knew it would be different had his partner not reported him to his commanding officer for being gay. Betrayed for love, but betrayed nonetheless. "Don't ask, don't tell" only worked so long as someone didn't *tell*.

Nash had left Brian, the Navy and San Diego. He'd also learned the value of keeping his mouth shut and not getting emotionally involved. After spending time on the rodeo circuit and fucking cowboys indiscriminately, he went back to his roots. Ranching and the Triple T.

Sweat trickled down his spine as he walked over to the stall where he'd opened himself to hurt...to Trace. He'd lied when he'd told him it had been five years since

he'd been with a man. Yes, five years since he'd had a blowjob. Five years since he'd penetrated a lover. But he hadn't been mounted in more than ten years...since Brian.

Even now Nash didn't want to explore what had been different about today. Knowing City stirred something deep inside was troubling enough.

Hay poked into his hands as he made a place to lie down. Hopefully City wouldn't be gone long, but in the meantime he'd take a nap.

* * * * *

Hospital personnel hurried up and down the hall. Beeps and buzzers droned with cell phones and the whispered voices of others waiting for news on their ill loved ones. Nurses chatted as they sat behind the desk station.

Trace braced his forearms on his knees while he waited, staring at the white walls. Donna rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet, her hands bracing her lower back.

"You should sit down." Trace patted the spot next to him. "They said they'll come for us as soon as they know anything."

She sighed then waddled over to the uncomfortable chairs in the intensive care unit. "I'm worried about Dad."

"I'm worried about *you*. Sit down before you put yourself into labor." He glanced around. "Although I suppose this is the best place to be if you do."

With deliberate slowness, she lowered into the chair. "I've had five babies, Trace. I'm not in labor."

Earlier today, Bud had had a second heart attack and was rushed into surgery. Trace and Donna had arrived at the hospital only to be told nothing except that when he was taken in, he'd been unconscious.

"I can't let him go back to running the ranch." Trace squinted to keep tears from his eyes. "Any years he has left ought to be spent enjoying the fruits of his labor. The ranch turns a nice profit each year. It's time he started spending some of the money."

A smile split Donna's face. The first one he'd seen all day. "Does that mean you've decided to move home?"

Trace thought about the encounter with Nash earlier. It was too soon to consider any long-term expectations, but the intensity of the connection gave him reason to hope there could be at least deep friendship between them...with the benefit of sex. When Nash had stepped from the shadows and they'd locked gazes, Trace felt the pull in every part of his body. Nash had needed the physical release. But while buried in Nash, he'd recognized the big cowboy's vulnerability.

"Yeah, I'll be around." So Bud could have a stress-free life. And because Trace wanted to know Nash much better. The complex man had layers. There was a spark in his eyes that made Trace think of warm summer nights and a strength that Trace wanted to curl up with through the long Montana winters.

Trace wanted someone who thought beyond the moment and yet could enjoy the simple things in life. A man like Nash, a rough-around-the-edges cowboy who worked a ranch, fucked with passion—yet for some reason had been denying himself love.

Trace hoped that Nash would recognize that he too wanted—needed—a partner.

"Here comes the doctor."

Trace stood and helped Donna from the chair.

"He's doing fine," Dr. Holman said immediately "We did an angioplasty." He pointed to the chairs. "Can we sit down?" They returned to their seats. "Your dad is a tough old man."

"Not that old," Trace argued. Sixty-four could hardly be considered old. Granted, Bud had lived hard. He liked his whiskey, smoked cigars in the evening on the porch and had raised his share of hell.

Donna put her hand on Trace's thigh. "We know he needs to slow down."

"His diet needs to change. He has high blood pressure, high cholesterol."

Donna sighed and rubbed her protruding belly. "Take notes, Trace, because you'll be the one living with him."

Trace nodded. "How long will this heart attack set back his recovery? You know he wants to get out of here."

"Now that we've cleared the artery, he's going to feel better almost immediately. But we'll keep him several days. Probably a week."

"You saved his life, Dr. Holman. Thank you."

Dr. Holman patted Trace's shoulder. "My job was easy. *You'll* have the task of convincing him to change his ways."

Trace laughed. "Have you met Bud Tilton?" He smiled at the doctor. "I'll make sure he follows your orders."

"We both will," Donna said. "And if he doesn't, I'll threaten to put him back in the hospital."

"Well, that's probably the best prescription." The doctor stood and shook Trace's hand before walking back down the hall.

"Do you want to go in and see him? He probably won't even know we've been here," Trace said.

Donna nodded her head. "Let's poke our heads in, check on him then I need to get home to the kids. It's getting late, so why don't we come back in the morning for a real visit?"

"Sounds good." But they didn't move.

"What's going on?" she asked. "I can tell something else is up."

Trace sat quietly with Donna, his head bowed. He stared at his shoes, unable to keep his mind from drifting back to Nash.

Trace rolled his shoulders. "Colette came out to the house." He didn't want to talk about what had happened afterward with Nash, but maybe he had to. Trace trusted Donna to keep a conversation private, which was more than he could say for Colette.

After so many years, he didn't know what she'd do with the information. If Colette decided to out him, Donna needed to know...and so did Bud.

"And?"

"And I told her."

"Trace!"

"She said she wouldn't say anything."

"She lied."

"Maybe not." He chuckled. "She doesn't want anyone to know she 'fucked a fag'."

"She might have felt that way when you told her, but I guarantee it'll be all over town by tomorrow! That barfly loves to trash talk. Are you sure you're ready for the whole town to know?"

He wasn't—but he also wasn't seventeen and afraid of getting caught checking out the cocks in gym class. "I'm not embarrassed to be gay. I'm staying in Farley Gulch. If the people around here don't like it, they can kiss my ass." He pointed a finger at her. "Don't say it."

Donna giggled. "The people who know and love you won't care."

"Come on. I'll take you home so you can mother your kids. I'm a big boy now." He shook his head. "Don't say anything."

"I wouldn't have touched that one with someone else's ten-foot pole."

"You're so bad."

"Yeah and you love it."

Because Trace had met Donna at the hospital, after they peeked in on Bud, he followed her home. Not only did he want to visit with Bob, he wanted to hang with the kids.

That wasn't exactly the truth. He wasn't ready to go home. What he needed was to get a grip before he faced Nash. Too much had been left unsaid between them.

* * * * *

Bob rocked on the porch swing with a boy on each side. They jumped from the swing when they saw their mother. Emotion choked Trace's throat. He could see his sister was happy. Trace wondered if that was in his future, if he'd even recognize a good life if he suddenly had one.

"I'll make coffee," Donna said to her husband. "Off to bed, boys." She scooted the kids into her two-story home nestled in the heart of the Jennings' land. The Lazy J wasn't as large as the Triple T but Bob ran an honest ranch with a good reputation. He provided a good life for Donna and the kids.

Trace sat on the porch railing.

"Are you itching to get back to the city yet?"

Trace glanced over to Bob. Donna's husband was a bear of a man with a full beard, mustache, a ruddy nose and deep blue hooded eyes that only sparkled for Donna. The boys had Bob's coloring, with reddish-brown hair. Bob looked like a lumberjack. Not tall, maybe five ten, solid and thick as a redwood tree trunk.

Trace wasn't sure, but he assumed sometime in the last ten years Donna had mentioned her brother was gay. If she did, Bob never said anything and had never shown the slightest hint that Trace's sexual preference made him ill at ease.

"Actually, I've decided to stay. Bud isn't going to be able to go back to running the ranch."

"What about Nash? Bud's had him doing just about everything for the last couple years. He's a good man and I'm sure he'd stay on to handle the day to day. Reckon he planned to anyway."

Trace narrowed his eyes and smiled. "Are you trying to get rid of me already?"

Bob shifted his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other without touching it. Smoke circled his head. Finally the brawny man cracked a smile. "Hell no. Your sister would skin me alive. We just want you to enjoy what you do with your life. I didn't think that was ranching."

Trace sighed and leaned back against the support beam of the veranda. "Yeah, I never thought I'd come home to stay. I guess you can't cheat fate."

And sometimes destiny had a way of revealing itself when you least expected. Nash represented some interesting motivation. He was probably at the house right now. Trace wondered if what happened between them would be a one-time occurrence or if Nash would welcome a night of loving. Not a fuck in the barn, but a night to try to gain insight into the instant connection they both obviously felt.

"Coffee's ready." She handed a cup to Trace. "Heavy on the cream just like I know you love it." She winked.

"You think you know me so well."

Donna snorted and Bob's barrel chest shook with a laugh.

"I think I know all I want to," she said and sat next to her husband.

Trace sipped his coffee. Night blanketed Farley Gulch. A symphony of crickets chirped from the darkness surrounding the house. Fireflies flickered in the shrubs around the porch and stars sparkled like a million pinpricks in a canopy of black above them. A sliver of a milky moon dipped low in the big sky.

"How are you getting along with Nash?"

His sister's words cut into his reverie and caused him to nearly choke on a sip of coffee. "Fine."

Donna narrowed her eyes. "You don't sound convincing. Trace, he's a good guy. You need him and Dad trusted him to take care of the ranch, so keep him happy."

"Bud told me about the same thing." And he'd like nothing more than to keep the quiet cowboy happy. Question was, what did Nash want?

Bob pulled the pipe from his mouth. "Nash has helped just about everyone around here at one time or another. What was it, two years back...?" He looked to Donna for confirmation. She nodded. "He helped keep flood waters out of this place." He nodded to the house.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Trace asked Donna. “I’d have come home to help.”

“By the time you’d have gotten here, it would’ve been over.”

Trace couldn’t stop the pang of...what? Jealousy? Regret? Guilt squeezed his chest. He’d missed a lot over the years. “I’m home now. And as much as it pains me to say,” he said with a laugh, “I’m here to stay.”

Bob leaned back in the swing, causing it to creak under his weight. “Have you told Nash?”

“Not yet. I hadn’t really decided until tonight at the hospital.”

“He shouldn’t have to tell Nash,” Donna said. “Nash works for the Triple T. He might’ve invested a lot, but he has no claim to the ranch. It’s Trace’s legacy.”

Trace chuckled at her defensiveness.

Bob puffed on his pipe again. “You’d be right, darlin’.” He kissed her forehead. “But that don’t mean Bud hasn’t made some big promises to the man.”

“Dad would want Trace to run the ranch.”

Trace sat forward. “Wait a minute. I don’t *want* to run the ranch. At least not the way you’re talking about.”

“Bud has made it known he plans on letting Nash in, a share of the ranch,” Bob explained, placing a hand on Donna’s belly.

“The only reason he entertained the notion of letting Nash buy in—” Donna began.

“Not *buy*—your Dad was going to give him a share. Felt like he’d already earned it.”

“Well, he wouldn’t have done that if he’d known Trace was coming home. I like Nash and he’s done so much for all of us. I’m just saying that the situation has changed. Nash can’t expect Trace to step back so he can have the ranch. That’s ridiculous.”

Trace remembered his first meeting with Nash. That Bud had promised him part of the ranch explained some of the initial hostility. Now he had to wonder how Nash would react to the news that Trace intended to stay.

A flash of anxiety surged through his body. He didn't want to be involved in a war of wills...especially with the man he wanted to get to know much better. Just because Trace was home didn't mean he wouldn't honor Bud's promise to Nash. He didn't want Nash out—in fact, the opposite was true.

"I need Nash to stay on. I don't want to work the ranch, just run the business side."

Donna used her husband as leverage to stand. "Can I talk to you?" she asked Trace then glanced at her husband, giving him a tender smile. "I need to walk. I think the baby is sitting on a nerve. We'll be right back."

Bob winked and Trace groaned. *Great, here comes the mothering lecture.* Trace had to wonder what part of what he'd said raised her radar. "Are you sure I'm not hitting a nerve?"

Donna rolled her eyes. "You're always on my last nerve." She preceded him down the porch steps.

They started off across the yard into the darkness. The driveway of the Lazy J formed a loop. The long road up to the house from the highway circled wide, running the length of the porch then curving around to rejoin the road back to the highway. Grass grew in the circle of the big loop. In the middle was a large oak with a tire swing hanging from one of the thick branches. Toys littered the grassy interior.

"Is there something more you aren't telling me?"

Trace slid his hands into his front pockets. "I don't know what you mean."

"Don't bullshit me. Did Nash find out? Every time his name is mentioned, your lip does that little thing. Mom could always tell when you were lying and I can tell you're holding out on something. What gives?" Donna had an uncanny knack of knowing exactly what was going on in his head.

He sucked in sharply, filling his lungs with sweet night air. He wanted to tell her, but when it came down to it, his relationship wasn't her business. If his involvement was with anyone besides Nash, maybe he'd share.

In all the years Nash had been on the ranch, he hadn't said anything to Donna about his sexual preference. Trace wasn't going to enlighten her now. "Nothing."

"You're full of shit. I know you're attracted to him. Admit it."

"What if I am? Are you going to ask him if he might like me too? Leave it alone."

Her left brow rose. "Fine. I won't pry, but I worry about you."

"I'm a big boy, Sister, even if I am your little brother." He didn't want to argue. "Time for me to go." He kissed her cheek, pulled his keys out of his pocket and then jingled them in his hand. "See you in the morning. We'll go back to the hospital."

Donna nodded. She waved as Trace pulled away.

* * * * *

It was a quick ten minutes on back roads to the Triple T from the Lazy J. The house was dark. No glimmering light from the windows. Not like when he was a child and a light was always left on. But then for Trace, a dark home was nothing unusual either. He'd been coming home to an empty apartment for years.

He parked and turned off the truck. The engine clinked and clattered to a stop and then silence surrounded him. The door creaked on its hinges when Trace opened it. He used his hip to slam the door shut.

A horse whinnied from the barn. Now that he was home, Trace realized how tired he was. After making his way up the front porch steps, he unlocked the door, went to the kitchen and flicked on the light. Apparently Nash had already gone to bed. Trace glanced at the clock. Eleven o'clock wasn't late, unless you lived on a ranch. It might take a few weeks for him to get accustomed to going to bed that early.

The comfortable creaks and groans of the house settling barely relaxed him. Heart attacks, the loss of his job, relocating to Farley Gulch and Nash all had his nerves on edge.

The front door slammed and Trace jumped. Heavy footfalls echoed in the hall then Nash filled the doorway. Hay poked from his hair and his clothes were covered in straw.

"Hey." Trace smiled, but the humor was lost on Nash.

His lips pursed. "You locked the door."

"I know. I always do."

Nash picked a piece of straw from his hair and flicked it at Trace. "Guess you forgot we don't lock doors around here. No one carries keys." He stalked to the refrigerator and threw open the door. "I've been asleep in the barn while I waited for you to come back." Nash took out eggs and ham. "I haven't had dinner." He glanced over his shoulder at Trace. "Are you hungry?"

"No, but thanks." In his haste to get to Donna and Bud, he hadn't thought about Nash. He'd locked the door without a second thought. The hospital had a cafeteria so he'd eaten there with Donna. "I'm sorry. City habits are going to be hard to break." He sat at the kitchen table.

Nash pulled a cast-iron skillet out of the oven and set it on the stove. A scoop of lard from the counter plopped into the pan. As soon as it sizzled, he cracked three eggs into the oil. "Sounds like you'll be here awhile."

Trace groaned and combed his fingers through his hair. Then he ground his fists into his tired eyes. "Yeah, Donna's worn me down. I've decided to stay."

Nash paused in tossing the ham into the pan. "Why?" He put the ham in the lard and turned to Trace.

"Bud had another heart attack today. Don't worry, this one was mild compared to the previous one. They put in a shunt and now they think they've got him patched up." Trace pointed to the pan. "Some things around here will have to change. Starting with that. Bud needs to stick to a special diet."

"But he's okay?"

“Yes, that’s why I wasn’t home earlier. I met Donna at the hospital.”

The aroma of ham and eggs filled the kitchen, as did a deafening silence from Nash. He tended the stove, one hip cocked to the side and most of his weight on one leg.

Trace wondered what thoughts ricocheted around in Nash’s head. Obviously not pleasant ones. His shoulders were stiff and the muscles in his forearms flexed as he gripped the spatula.

Finally Trace spoke. “Is it Bud’s health that has you worried...or my staying?”

“Do you think what happened in the barn earlier means I want you here?”

“I’m not sure what to think.” Trace shifted in the seat. “I know I’d like it to happen again.”

“We got off. That doesn’t mean I need a fuck-friend.” He flipped the eggs. “I also don’t need help running this ranch. If you’re thinking of forcing me out, forget it.”

“I don’t intend to force you to do anything.” Trace stood. “Just remember who made the first move today.” A sick feeling rolled through his stomach. When he’d left Donna’s, he’d had hopes of a long night.

Looked like he’d still be having a long night, just not with Nash—but wondering what in the hell happened to bring on the sudden change.

Chapter Four

The five on the alarm clock clicked to a six. Minutes ticked by and Nash couldn't sleep. Nearly seven years of sweat and tears, working the ranch like it was his own, and all of it could be gone because he'd fucked City.

What riled him more was that if he could change what happened in the barn—he wouldn't. City wanted more of the same. Hell, so did he, but at what cost? Once the hospital released Bud, he'd be home and any relationship they both might want would have to come to a halt. He'd been around the old man long enough to know he wasn't going to let two men fuck the hell out of each other under his roof. Nash had no intention of sneaking around. Hell, he didn't want a relationship so what would be the point? The military hadn't allowed him to live out of the closet and neither would Farley Gulch.

Accepting that it was time to get up and get some work done, Nash tossed off the thin sheet and slid out of bed. Worn work shirt and jeans piled up in the corner. At some point today he needed to do laundry, might as well do it now.

Wearing only boxers, he carried the clothes to the mudroom off the kitchen. An outdated washer and dryer sat against one wall. Once he had the clothes in the washer, he jumped up and sat on it.

He needed to think clearly, but his emotions were jumbled and confusing. Lust and desire for Trace mixed in with rational thoughts. The Triple T represented Trace's legacy. His family had run the ranch for generations. Yet Trace didn't want it and times changed. The Triple T was home for Nash. As long as he minded his own business, helped out the occasional neighbor in need and worked the ranch, he truly felt like he belonged.

All that was threatened now. Nash didn't see a solution that left everyone happy. No way could he keep his hands off Trace if he decided to stay.

And since he had, it was time for Nash to move on.

Regret churned in his stomach. He'd grown to love those little shits of Donna's, even looked forward to the new one coming any time. And where had City been? Not here, not with his sister who needed her family. Bud wasn't going to stay young forever, yet it took a heart attack to bring Trace home.

Nash sighed and jumped down from the washer. Yet, he understood why Trace had left. Understood even more why he hadn't returned. Farley Gulch wasn't any place for a gay man to explore his sexuality. Nash had found Farley Gulch the perfect place to be alone.

Nash went to the kitchen and made coffee before sitting at the table. Now he had a choice. Seemed leaving was inevitable, so did he take advantage of the proposition Trace offered? Use his body, slake this need for the man and then be on his way? At most, he had a week before Bud came home from the hospital.

Could he stay detached from the emotion that ripped through his chest every time the memory from the barn flashed in his mind? No. Already he liked City too much. Liked the way he laughed, the way he moved. Falling for Trace might be worth the pain he'd feel when he left.

Closing his eyes, he listened for a time to the rhythmic tempo of the washer. Crickets chirped and the animals slowly began to wake. A rooster cock-a-doodle-dooed.

Down the hall he heard the shower. Nash's mouth twitched. Once the rinse cycle started on the washer, City was going to feel a shock of cold water.

He sipped a second cup of coffee while he waited for Trace to turn off the shower. Knowing Trace stood naked under the spray of water had Nash's cock hard and demanding satisfaction.

If Nash was going to leave the ranch, he decided, he intended to take some memories with him.

He stood, set the coffee on the counter and went to the bathroom. The door was shut. Nash turned the handle. Did the man have to lock everything? Now he'd have to knock if he wanted in. And damn, but he wanted in.

He pounded his fist on the door. He wasn't in any mood to be sensitive.

"What?"

"You locked the door. I need in there."

"Just a minute. I'm almost done."

Nash reached into his boxers and stroked his cock. "This isn't going to wait."

"Okay, hold on."

Oh he was definitely holding on...with two hands. He dropped his boxers to the floor and cupped his balls with his other hand. "Now." His blood boiled.

The door flew open. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"You are." Nash lunged for Trace. Open mouths fused together. Nash thrust his tongue deep into Trace's cool, clean mouth. He tasted of toothpaste. The mint flavor kept him dipping in for more, stroking the soft tissues of Trace's inner cheeks. Nash grabbed the front of the towel around Trace's waist and yanked it off.

"Sit down."

Trace immediately obeyed. With the lid of the commode down, he sat. Nash eased Trace's thighs apart and knelt between them. "God damn, that's hot." City had trimmed the hair around his cock to less than half an inch long.

Nash opened wide and took Trace's rapidly swelling organ into his mouth. "Mmm." He wrapped his lips over his teeth and applied pressure to the shaft while he sucked hard.

Trace leaned back and spread his thighs wider. "That feels incredible!"

Nash flicked his tongue over the slit, pulled his mouth to the crown and then swallowed him whole again. Because Trace was clean from the shower, all Nash tasted was male essence. He couldn't get enough. He sucked harder, moved his mouth faster.

"I'm going to come!" Trace's thigh muscles bunched beneath Nash's hands.

Nash jerked his mouth from Trace and laughed. He wrapped one fist around Trace's shaft and one around his own. "That's the idea, City." Nash stood. "I don't have condoms."

"It's been five years for you and I was just tested."

"Then change places with me."

Trace rose. His sleek, tanned muscles, wet hair and clean smell all heightened Nash's arousal. Fierce, driving need gripped him. He wanted his cock shoved all the way into Trace's hole. Now.

They stood cock to cock. Trace glanced down. He grabbed hold of Nash and pressed their tools together.

Nash opened the medicine cabinet and snatched his lube. Filling his palm with the gel, he then stroked his shaft and the head of his cock until it glistened with moisture.

"I take it I'm about to get fucked." Trace smiled then kissed Nash.

Nash spun Trace around and slid his hand between Trace's firm cheeks. "Lean forward."

Trace put his hands on the edge of the tub and Nash greased his tight rim. His finger barely breached the pink, puckered rosette. Muscles clenched and released, searching...ready for cock.

Nash sat on the toilet. "Sit on me." He wrapped his fist around the base of his erection and held it straight up.

Trace stood above Nash with his legs on the outside of Nash's thighs and slowly sank onto his shaft.

"Easy."

Trace kept lowering until all of Nash's cock was in his rectum.

Nash thrust his hips.

“Ah fuck, hold on! You’re huge. Give me a moment to adjust.” Trace’s muscled thighs tightened as he lifted his body and slowly sank again.

“It feels like I’ve wanted to be in you forever. I don’t want to wait.”

Trace twisted his body and glanced over his shoulder. “Then fuck me.”

Nash sighed in bliss. Trace’s rim squeezed along his shaft. But he was staring at Trace’s back. Nash didn’t want a memory of indiscriminate sex with a faceless man. “I want more than a fuck. Turn around.”

Trace rose and pivoted around. This time when he impaled himself on Nash’s cock, the men were face-to-face. Trace wrapped his hands around Nash’s shoulders. Water droplets fell from Trace’s hair, trailed down his face. Nash watched a rivulet slip down the side of his chiseled face and drip from his strong jaw. Intense possessiveness raged through Nash. His gut clenched and a growl broke from his lips. He cupped Trace’s ass—hard. He pulled his cheeks apart. Thrusting his hips, digging his fingers into Trace’s firm cheeks, he helped Trace lift and lower on his cock.

“Do you like it deep? Tell me what you want.” Nash leaned forward and licked Trace’s flat nipple.

“Harder.” Trace lifted and lowered. Faster and with more downward thrust. “I want to come.” Trace gripped his own dick and squeezed. “I want *you* to come.”

Nash liked sex a little rough and on the raw side. Apparently so did City. Straining his muscles, clenching his buttocks, he gave Trace more length to slide on.

Trace stroked his cock while he pistoned up and down. Nash braced one hand on the wall and the other on the sink and gained another inch of upward thrust.

“I’m going to come...” Trace’s face strained as he clenched his teeth.

“Your ass is so tight!” Slick heat massaged Nash’s shaft from tip to base each time Trace took his cock into his body.

“Ah, fuck me, Nash!” Trace hollered his name as he came. Rivers of semen shot from his slit. Cum trickled down Nash’s chest, pooled on his abs. The pressure of

Trace's orgasm tightened and convulsed his sphincter, pushing Nash over the edge. He followed with his own release. He growled and came into Trace's rectum.

Nash ran his hands up Trace's back. He pressed a kiss to his sternum. "Did I hurt you?"

"The best kind of hurt." He pressed his lips to Nash's. Then he kissed him deeply. "We should take a shower, but my sister could be here any minute. We're going up to see Bud. Do you want to come?"

Nash raised an eyebrow. "I just did."

Trace stood and Nash slipped from his body. "I know, we both did. And I'm not taking another shower because I want to keep your cream inside me."

"You'll have me inside you again."

They both heard the car pull up out front at the same time. "She's here."

Nash pulled Trace into another brief but hot kiss. Tongues, quick nips of Trace's lips, then Nash pulled away. "I'll go with you." He hadn't been up to see Bud in a few days.

"Good." Trace picked up the towel and wrapped it around his waist.

"Hey, Trace, where are you?" they heard Donna shout.

"She'll come looking." Trace winked and stepped out of the bathroom.

After quickly wiping the evidence of Trace's orgasm from his chest, Nash walked down the hall to his room. Shit. His jeans were all in the washing machine. He went to his closet and searched for pants that didn't make him look like he was heading for Sunday services. Shorts. He never wore shorts on the ranch. A low groan rumbled from his chest as he stepped into them. Then he pulled on a tan collared shirt he hadn't worn in years. With his hair pulled into a ponytail, he went to the kitchen.

Donna sat across from Trace. They both sipped cups of coffee.

"Hi, Mama."

She rubbed big circles in her belly. "Hi yourself."

Nash grabbed his cup, reheated his coffee with more from the pot and joined them at the table. "So how is the old man today?"

"After this last laparoscopic surgery, I'm optimistic."

"Good." Nash swallowed the lump in his throat. "I'll be leaving when he comes home."

"What? Why?" Trace asked.

Donna turned toward her brother at his outburst.

Nash shrugged. "Call it difficult circumstances."

She glanced to Nash.

"Bullshit," Trace said.

Back to her brother.

"It's time for me to move on. You're here to take over."

"I told you I didn't want to run the ranch."

"We've both said a lot of things," Nash said. "None of it changes the situation. This is your home, your family."

"The Triple T is your home too. Don't bullshit me! You want it more than I do."

Donna interrupted. "Maybe I should leave?"

They both looked at her.

"Of course not." Trace stood and put his coffee cup in the sink. Then he leaned with his back against the counter and crossed his arms. "Bud promised you part of the Triple T. I'm not taking that from you."

"Bud didn't know you'd be back. And that isn't the whole of it." Nash shifted his eyes from Trace to Donna. He could see the wheels turning in her mind. If this conversation didn't get redirected she'd put the story together.

"I can't run the ranch and neither can Bud."

“Hire someone.” Nash rose and put his cup in the sink. Just standing close to Trace pumped hot blood into his cock. He wanted to sniff deeply and draw in the very essence of the man.

“Bud did. He hired *you*.”

“And I won’t work for you.”

Donna struggled to stand. “Now wait a minute. If you want to leave that’s fine, but if you’ve got a problem with Trace, I’d like to know why.”

“Sit down and put your feet up.” Nash urged her back into the chair. “No need to get your dander up. I don’t have a problem with your brother. I just don’t want to work for him.”

She tapped her fingers on the table, glaring at Nash and then glancing to Trace. “Did that bitch already start talking trash?”

“Donna, stay out of this.” Trace turned off the coffeepot and grabbed his keys off the counter. “Let’s go.”

Donna raised an eyebrow. “Don’t get mad at me. I was sticking up for you. If you wouldn’t have opened your big mouth—”

Trace’s glare stopped her from continuing her sentence.

Nash put an arm around Donna and followed Trace out of the house. “We’ll talk later,” he whispered in her ear. He didn’t want to leave the impression that Trace’s sexual preference had anything to do with his departure from the ranch. It did, but not the way she thought.

Trace got behind the wheel of Bud’s truck. Nash opened the passenger door. Donna slid into the middle then Nash climbed in.

The truck bounded down the dirt lane to the highway. Nash stared out the window with a heavy ache in his heart.

Chapter Five

Trace brought all the ledgers relating to the Triple T back to the ranch from the Lazy J. While Donna had been doing the books, she'd kept accounting receipts from past years stored at her house. He'd made the decision to stay, so he planned to familiarize himself with the profit-and-loss statements from recent years.

He organized one of the bedrooms into an office. Tomorrow he'd have satellite Internet installed. Before Bud was released from the hospital, he needed to make arrangements for a nurse to stop by each day to see to his care. He figured he had at least a few days before that happened.

Trace stretched his arms over his head then walked to the window. Looking out over the landscape, he wondered what area of the ranch Nash was working. Since he and Nash had visited Bud in the hospital, the atmosphere in the house had been strained.

Trace didn't have a doubt that if Bud hadn't extracted the promise that Nash stay on a while longer, he would've left by now.

Not that it mattered. Nash hadn't spent ten minutes in the same room with Trace in the last two days. Last night Trace hadn't been able to sleep. It wasn't in his nature to let an argument fester. The problem was that they hadn't really argued. There was no fight. Nash had agreed to stay, at least temporarily. He accepted that Trace was home to stay. And the offer of a share of the Triple T was still on the table.

So the only logical deduction regarding his behavior was that Nash feared anyone finding out his sexual preference.

He picked up his coffee cup and headed for the kitchen. As he refilled his mug, the telephone rang. The same old phone had been mounted to the wall for twenty years.

The cord stretched the length of the room. He answered and walked to the refrigerator for cream while he listened.

"It's Bob. Donna's in labor and she wants you there for this one."

Trace froze with the carafe in his hand. "'There' as in where?"

He heard Bob's heavy sigh. "Well, um...at the hospital."

"Of course, I'll pace the waiting room. Are you already there?"

"No, we're still here at the house. But you don't right understand her meaning. She's thinking this should be something you experience...you know what I mean?"

Trace furrowed his brows as he listened. He'd never heard Bob this nervous. Maybe this was normal for Bob when Donna went into labor. Trace wouldn't know because he'd missed all the births of his nieces and nephews.

"Give me the phone," his sister demanded of Bob in the background. "You're beating around the bush. This is baby number six and I don't have that much time."

"Here's Donna," Bob said.

"Trace, I'm having a baby and it's a miracle. I want you in the labor and delivery room with me."

"No."

"Why not?"

Because he didn't want to see his sister in pain and he certainly didn't want to see her legs in the air. "Don't you need someone to stay with the kids? I'd be better at that."

"Already taken care of."

"Then shouldn't your husband be with you?"

"He'll be there too."

"I don't want to."

"You might feel that way now but this isn't the kind of thing you can debate. It's now or never." Her voice turned sharp.

“Christ, Donna, don’t you think it’ll make Bob uncomfortable? He doesn’t want another man watching you have a baby.”

“You’re my brother and you don’t have to stand next to the doctor. You can stand next to Bob. And besides, Bob knows you’re gay. I told him why you moved away. He’s known for years. Hold on. Ah, here comes another one!” She panted and puffed quick breaths. After a moment she sighed and took a long, slow breath. “This isn’t going to take long so I don’t have the time to argue. I want you there...in the room. I’m not having any more babies. This will probably be your only opportunity to see a baby come into this world. Now get your ass to the hospital. Oh shit, here comes another contraction. Dammit, Bob, I’m not having this baby on the side of the road!” She started to pant. “Trace, bring Nash to the hospital. This might be his only opportunity too.”

“You know Nash is gay?”

“What!”

Oh shit.

“Oh you have some talking to do, little brother. But I’m not dropping this kid on the highway so I’ll see you there. You better be quick.” She hung up.

Trace replaced the receiver on the wall and dragged his hands down his cheeks. The shit just kept getting deeper. Well, he’d deal with the fallout later. Right now he had to find Nash then watch his sister give birth.

Trace purposefully left the front door unlocked. He stood on the front porch and glanced left and right. Nash could be anywhere. Hell, he might not be on the ranch property at all. Turning around, he went back into the house. The way Donna had been breathing on the phone, he didn’t have time to search.

He paused and smiled. Maybe a little part of him did want to be there for his sister. He jotted down the information for Nash and left the note on the kitchen table. The convertible would take another beating on the dirt road, but he could open her up on the highway and make good time to the hospital. He grabbed the keys and left.

Trace drove slowly down the dirt road and then stepped on the gas.

* * * * *

As it turned out, he'd arrived a little too quickly. He beat Bob and Donna to the hospital. Trace decided to check on Bud while he waited.

When he entered the room, Dr. Holman stood at the foot of the bed making notes on his chart. Trace stepped into the room and let the door close behind him.

"How is he?"

Bud turned his head, looked at Trace and smiled.

"He's doing great." Dr. Holman tucked Bud's chart into the slot at the end of the bed and excused himself. "Probably let him go home in a couple more days. I need to run a few tests."

Trace nodded then spoke to Bud. "I can't stay long, but I'll be back in a little while. Donna's in labor."

The lines of stress on Bud's face softened. "That's nice."

Trace pulled the chair over and sat down.

"So when are you going to get married and give me a couple grandkids?"

"You don't have enough?" Trace tried to laugh it off, but his pulse spiked. Here was the perfect opportunity to tell Bud, but Donna would be giving birth soon. "We have a lot to talk about." He patted Bud's hand. "And we will. But Donna wants me with her. I'll come back up after the baby's born."

Bud nodded and Trace went back to the maternity section of the hospital. Donna had been admitted and was in her room. He could hear her laughter in the hall. Wasn't labor supposed to be painful? He rushed into the room. Maybe he'd already missed it.

"Hi, you just made it." Donna lay on the hospital bed with her head propped. Two nurses busily attached monitors to her stomach. Bob sat in the chair with his elbows on his knees and his head in his palms. "Bob needs a sedative. He didn't think we were going to make it." Her eyes closed and she white-knuckle gripped the handrails of the bed.

“You’ll have that baby any time.” The nurse patted her stomach.

Trace sat in the chair next to Bob’s.

Once the nurses finished with Donna’s prep, she had an IV inserted and a pain-blocker drip. Between contractions, they talked about her previous births. And then it was time.

“Where do you want me?” He brushed a lock of hair from Donna’s forehead.

She clutched his hand and tears filled her eyes. “Right here, with me.” She squeezed his hand tighter as another contraction ripped through her abdomen. Trace could actually see her stomach tighten.

Donna’s doctor came into the room, scrubbed at the sink and sat in a chair at the foot of the bed.

Trace felt faint.

* * * * *

Nash fought fatigue and climbed the porch steps. A few hours of daylight remained but he didn’t have the energy to go back into the fields. Work could wait until tomorrow. Tonight he wanted to put up his feet, drink a beer and maybe go to bed early. Mostly he wanted to spend the evening with Trace. He was tired of fighting his head. Getting involved meant risking his heart, but staying away was killing him.

The door was unlocked so he knew he was home. “Trace?” He walked down the hall to the last bedroom where Trace had set up his office. He entered the room and inhaled. The expensive, masculine scent of Trace’s cologne lingered in the air. Awareness surged to his cock and his body warmed.

He checked Trace’s bedroom, then on the off chance checked his own room. When he couldn’t find him, Nash went to the kitchen and found the note on the table.

“Well, hell, I was wrong.” He smiled and slapped his thigh. “The little bugger decided to come early.” Tired a moment ago, Nash now felt energized. He rushed to his

room. He'd probably already missed the birth, so he grabbed a quick shower, changed into jeans and a tight black t-shirt and headed out the door with his hair still damp.

He slid into his truck. The engine roared to life and he drove to town. He wasn't sure what excited him more – seeing the new baby or seeing Trace.

Nash pulled into the space next to City's convertible. Before going to Donna's hospital room, he stopped and picked up flowers in the small hospital gift shop.

The nurse at the desk told him the room number. He hurried through the hospital and knocked on the door.

"Come in."

Laughter filled the room. He stopped and stared. Trace stood near the head of the bed holding a little bundle wrapped in a pink blanket.

"Hi, Mama." He approached and kissed Donna on the cheek.

"You were wrong," she said sleepily. "But then, it's a girl's prerogative to change her mind. Do you want to hold her? You might have to wrestle Trace for her." Donna's eyes narrowed as her gaze went from Nash to her brother. "And we need to talk."

"Here," Trace interrupted. "Hold my niece." Trace met Nash at the foot of the bed and handed over the baby. "Meet the newest member of the Lazy J. Stella Olivia Jennings."

Their eyes locked with the baby between them. Trace smiled and Nash let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

Nash turned to Donna. "She's as pretty as her mama."

"Well, we'd be in trouble if she came out looking like her daddy," Donna said.

Bob chuckled from the corner. His eyes drifted closed and he leaned his head back against the wall.

"I'm going to have Bob load me into a wheelchair and take me down to see Dad in a little while."

Nash carried the baby to Donna. She looked tiny in his arms. Her little head fit in the palm of his hand. "I should let you rest." He touched Donna's cheek.

She grabbed his hand and squeezed. Tears slipped from her eyes. "You know you're family." She stared hard into his eyes. "I love you like a brother. Nothing," she paused for emphasis, "*nothing* would change that."

"Um...Donna," Trace interrupted.

"But we can talk about that later," she finished saying, her gaze moving to Trace.

"I think I'll head out too. It's late and you need to rest." Trace slid his palms into his front pockets. "I'll be back up in the morning."

Donna stroked Stella's downy, soft head. "Okay." She glanced up. "We'll talk in the morning."

Nash waved to Bob and followed Trace out of the room. Trace leaned against the wall.

"Want to go get a beer?"

Trace nodded and they walked out of the hospital together.

"Leave your car," Nash said when Trace walked up to the convertible. "Might as well leave it here, we'll come back to get it later."

Trace climbed into the passenger seat of the truck.

Nervous energy buzzed through Nash's body. He needed to apologize for his behavior of the last couple days. It wasn't Trace's fault that he couldn't risk attempting a relationship, but now the dynamics were different. He'd promised Bud he'd stay on awhile and he couldn't avoid Trace indefinitely...he didn't want to.

Nash cast a quick glimpse at Trace. He sat casually in the seat, but his fingers tapped a rhythm on his knee. Nash reached over and covered Trace's hand with his palm.

Trace's head snapped around and their eyes locked. Nash moved his hand higher onto his thigh. "Don't start if you don't want to finish," Trace said.

Nash's cock surged. Blood swelled his flesh. He shifted his glance between Trace and the road and considered pulling over and plundering his sweet mouth.

Trace moved Nash's hand, bringing it to his steel rod. "There's no question about what I want."

Nash molded his hand over the hard bulge beneath the fly of Trace's pants. The thickness, heat and strength reminded him of the desperate man he'd become since opening himself to Trace. After two days of avoiding him, all he wanted was to make up for missed opportunities. One beer and then he was taking City home to bed and he'd keep him there for as long as he could.

Nash took his hand from Trace's crotch and downshifted the gear. Then he parked the truck in front of The Double Down. He braced his forearms on the steering wheel, his wrists limp, hands dangling. "What I do is my business," he finally said. "I'm not ashamed of you..." He looked over at Trace. "Or of being gay, but I've been around long enough to know when it's just easier to keep your mouth shut."

Nash couldn't be sure what the atmosphere would be like in the bar. Colette had a big mouth. No way in hell she'd kept her little conversation with Trace a secret between the two of them.

"As much as I would love to get on the mechanical bull with you, I'm not into public displays of affection. I don't want an ass kicking either. That was the reason I left Farley Gulch," Trace explained.

"But now you're staying."

"Yeah, and what I do in bed is my business."

Nash shook his head. It wouldn't work, not around here where a man depended on his neighbors. They'd be ostracized if they lived as partners. "And what about Bud? And your sister?"

Trace groaned and leaned his head back. "Fuck me, I'm sorry, Nash. I think I screwed the pooch on that one. I'll do damage control tomorrow."

“What do you mean?”

Trace lifted his head and stared for a moment at Nash. “I’m fairly confident I outted you to Donna. I didn’t intend to.”

This was exactly why he kept to himself. However, Donna knowing didn’t really bother him. Telling her he was gay never seemed necessary. However, not having to keep the truth from her would be a welcome relief.

“You’re buying,” Nash said and pushed open the driver’s door.

Trace walked around the front of the truck. He put a hand on Nash’s arm, stopping him from entering the bar. “Friends then?”

“More than friends.”

“Anything more and people will make assumptions,” Trace said. “I’m tired of this shit. I’m a gay man and I refuse to live any other way. I could give a fuck what anyone around here thinks of me. But I don’t want you uncomfortable.”

Nash’s stomach swooped. A lot of years had passed since he’d been openly gay.

“Don’t worry about it.” Trace gave him a comforting smile. “It’s okay. We’ll figure out the future later. Right now we’ll grab a beer and celebrate Stella’s birth.”

In that moment, Nash decided to let fate or destiny – whatever it was called when a man quit fighting the inevitable – determine the future.

He pulled open the door to the dingy dive. Smoke hung thick in the air. Johnny Nash crooned from the stereo and a few familiar faces sat at the bar. Colette paused in filling a draft and stared at them as they entered.

“I need to use the restroom. I’ll be right back.” Trace walked to the back of the building and Nash found a table.

Colette approached him. “Why did you bring him here?”

“Two drafts.”

She sat down and leaned in. “Haven’t you heard?”

“Yeah, we were just at the hospital. Donna named the new baby Stella. Oh, she’s sweet.”

“Not that. I mean, I’m glad Donna had her baby. But I’m talking about Trace. Everyone in town knows.”

Nausea churned in Nash’s stomach. He could barely stand the sight of Colette. The bitch had no limits. “And what would that be?” Nash narrowed his eyes and squared his shoulders. He wondered if she’d have the nerve to gossip to him about Trace.

“That he’s...changed. You know, since he moved away from home.”

Nash leaned back. “Can’t say. I didn’t know him before. Can you get those beers? We’re celebrating.”

She huffed and stood. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Nash was chuckling as Trace returned to the table. “Your girlfriend told everyone in town that you’re gay.”

They watched her approach with two drafts. She set them on the table without finesse. “Four dollars.”

Trace stood and took his wallet from his back pocket. He handed her a five.

“You’re buying tonight? Hmm...interesting.” She cocked an eyebrow and her hip jutted forward.

“Keep the change.” Trace sat back down. “We’ll let you know if we need anything else.” Collette rolled her eyes and walked back toward the bar.

Nash glanced from Trace to Colette. His pulse spiked. Adrenaline rushed through him. Like a freight train running full speed down the tracks, his life was rushing forward. He could start over somewhere else...

Or he could cowboy up and stake his claim to the life he wanted right here in Farley Gulch—with this man beside him—consequences be damned.

Pressure tightened his throat. Excited and terrified, he turned his chair and scooted it closer to Trace. “What do you want?”

Trace sipped his beer then set it on the table. Nash watched emotions flicker in his copper eyes. "A life I can live."

"Not enough. Tell me what you want."

A muscle jumped in Trace's jaw. "I want to live on the ranch, watch my sister raise her kids and make life easier on Bud."

Nash bowed his head, inhaled a deep breath and then looked up. "I know you want to be here for your family but...is that all?"

"Are you saying there's something else I could have?" He leaned closer. "Because if you are, I'd say I'd take Bud's advice. He said to keep you happy." Trace lowered his voice. "I have no intention of being the gay banner for Farley Gulch, but I won't hide either. I just want a life I can live. What do *you* want?"

"I want to be with you more than I could stand to be away from you." Nash grasped Trace's hand under the table. "Let's go home."

Nash desperately wanted to close the distance between their mouths.

"Don't you two look cozy?" Colette said as she sauntered up to the table, tapping a pen against her cheek. "Trace, aren't you worried someone might get the wrong idea about Nash?"

"Mind your—"

Nash put a hand on his shoulder. "Or they might get the *right* idea." Fuck, his heart pounded! Sweat dripped down his back as he turned to Trace. "Are you ready to go home?"

Trace smiled and stood. "Yep."

Colette gaped with her mouth open.

* * * * *

"Why?" Trace finally asked as they drove down the highway.

Nash turned down the dirt road leading to the Triple T. "Because it'll come out eventually."

Trace slid across the seat until he was flush with Nash's hip. He put his hand on Nash's thick leg and then slid his fingers along his inner thigh. Finally he cupped Nash's cock in his palm.

"Take it out," Nash hissed. "I haven't been able to get the image of your mouth on my rod out of my head."

Trace unzipped Nash's pants and pulled his glorious cock out. He wrapped his fist around the girth, stroking hard and slow. He tasted the skin on Nash's neck just below his ear. Hot, wet kisses followed licks and gentle sucking. Stubble scraped against his tongue. The flavor of his flesh made Trace's cock swell in his pants. But right now he wanted to show Nash how his public announcement of their involvement had affected him. He hadn't advertised, but there was no mistaking the impression he'd left with Colette.

The clean and fresh scent of Nash's hair filled his nose. Trace rubbed his cheek against the silky locks. He licked his neck again and then nipped the skin with his teeth.

"Do you want to fuck my mouth?" Trace whispered while he milked pre-cum from Nash's cock. He didn't wait for a response. He bent over Nash and inhaled his hot, masculine scent. Trace's mouth watered before he lapped the salty-sweet elixir from the slit.

Nash stepped on the gas and hit a rut in the road.

"Careful," Trace laughed. Then he sucked him deep. Hot, smooth flesh filled his mouth. The crown banged against the back of his throat. Trace relaxed his throat and took him an inch deeper. "Mmm." He moaned and sucked as he pulled his mouth back. While twirling his tongue around the ridge, he rolled Nash's heavy sac in his palm.

Possessiveness urged Trace on. He wanted Nash to know just how fervent his desire and commitment. Hopefully tonight signified the beginning of a long, monogamous relationship. He sucked him hard. Nash's cock pulsed in his mouth. The

essence of his cream floated across his tongue. Trace had Nash close to coming. He slid his mouth up and down faster and pumped Nash's shaft with his fist.

Nash slammed on the brakes and pulled to the side of the road. "Get out." Nash opened the driver's door and stepped out of the vehicle.

Trace crawled across the seat and climbed out. He grabbed Nash by the hair and sealed their lips. Frenzied mating of mouths coupled with hips grinding against each other.

Nash's hands were wild as he fumbled with the fly of Trace's pants. Trace pushed his hands out of the way and lowered the zipper.

Twilight cocooned them in a pocket of solitude. Night sounds, insects buzzing and the hoot of an owl in the distance, serenaded their erotic encounter. The whisper of wind caressed Trace's heated flesh. Passion burning in Nash's brown eyes set him afire.

Nash gripped the sides of Trace's head and savagely kissed his lips. "I wouldn't be staying," he whispered, "if I didn't believe there was a future for us." They stared at each other and a feral gleam of hunger in Nash's eyes caused Trace's breath to catch. "Now fuck me."

When Nash had told him to get out of the truck, Trace had assumed Nash wanted to fuck *him*. That he wanted to be mounted pleased Trace.

"We need lube."

Nash dropped to his haunches. He sucked Trace's cock until it was glistening wet with spit. Then he stood.

Trace wrapped his arm around Nash's broad shoulders. "Thank you."

Nash glanced at him.

"For giving us a chance."

Chapter Six

Nash cracked an eye open. Sunlight streamed through the window and Trace slept beside him. He ran a hand over his bare hip and along the corded muscles of his stomach. "Good morning." He pressed a kiss between Trace's shoulder blades and reached his fingers around to Trace's shaft.

"Morning," Trace mumbled and backed his ass against Nash's growing erection.

Nash reached to the nightstand, grabbed the lube he'd left there last night and poured some into his hand. Trace rolled to his back and Nash positioned himself between his lover's thighs. Trace rolled his hips and Nash traced the line between his cheeks then poked his hole with his finger.

Loose from sleep, Trace's body greedily sucked his finger deeper. Nash inserted a second finger and pumped in and out. Trace's cock stretched toward his navel, thick with arousal. Nash pulled his finger out of Trace's hole and, his hand wet with lube, he stroked his cock a few times then fit the head to the puckered rosette.

"I want you inside me." Trace wrapped his legs around Nash's hips. Digging his heels into Nash's ass, he forced him deep with one quick thrust.

Trace's rim was tight on his shaft. Pushing in, pulling out. Each stroke heightened his pleasure. The smooth walls of Trace's rectum gloved his cock. Euphoric bliss washed over him in waves. Each thrust brought another surge of erotic passion.

With his arms braced against the bed, face-to-face, Nash made love to Trace. Bodies joined, lives entwining. He stared into his breathtaking copper eyes and marveled how this man changed the way he wanted to live his life. Finally fulfilled again. His orgasm came upon him. He increased his speed. Trace grabbed his cock and stroked while Nash continued to pound into his ass.

"Fuck!" Trace's jaw clenched. His muscles trembled and his orgasm stole over him. Hot white streams of cum erupted from his cock, his whole body pulsing and contracting with the force of his orgasm. The pressure squeezed Nash's tool. Another thrust and Nash reach his own release.

"Yes. Fuck yes!" He slammed into Trace hard. Plunging in and out. He buried the length of his pole in Trace and filled him with cum. Nash slipped from his body and finally collapsed onto Trace's chest.

Trace wrapped his arms around him and held him close.

Damn, he felt good.

"You'll turn me into a morning person," Trace mumbled near his ear.

Nash chuckled and rolled off him. "Yeah, for another couple days."

Trace put his hands behind his head. "And then you aren't going to fuck me in the mornings?"

"Not like this."

"Why not?"

Nash went to the dresser and pulled out a pair of jeans. "Because Bud will be home from the hospital."

Trace sat up. "I'm going to have a talk with Bud." He slid off the bed and crossed the room. "I've kept my sexual orientation from him for too long. He doesn't have a choice but to accept us both."

"I can't do that." Nash couldn't imagine Bud accepting the situation as it was now. He'd loved waking in Trace's arms, but this was still Bud's home.

"You don't want to tell him you're gay? Perhaps you should have thought about that before you left Colette with the distinct impression that we're lovers."

"Knowing I'm gay isn't the same as knowing I'm fucking his son."

"Fucking him well." Trace smiled.

Nash chuckled. "I'll fuck you in the barn after I tie you up in the tack room." Nash went to the window and looked out over the property.

"There's no going back...and I don't want to." Trace came up behind him and wrapped his arms around his waist.

Nash sighed. "I suppose you're right." Whatever happened, he knew he couldn't turn off the growing feelings he had for Trace. He wanted a relationship with him.

"Join me in the shower?"

Nash nodded again. They might as well make the most out of the morning.

* * * * *

Trace and Nash went back to the hospital. When they arrived, the doctor informed them Bud's tests were back and assured Trace that Bud was on the mend. The shunt had worked and barring any complications, he'd be released the next morning as long as he had homecare for a couple weeks.

"I don't want to talk to Bud until after we see Donna and the baby," Trace said as they walked down the corridor. "And I need to let Donna know what's happened." Trace glanced at Nash. "Are you sure you're ready for this?"

Nash signed. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried. We both know Bud. Do I want to move off the ranch, get a place in town? No."

Trace put his hand on Nash's forearm, stopping them. "We don't have to make permanent plans today. My mom always told me not to borrow trouble. Whatever happens when I tell Bud is inevitable."

They shared a smile then entered Donna's hospital room. After allowing them a few minutes to ogle the baby, Bob conveniently asked Nash if he'd like to go for a cup of coffee.

Trace sat across from his sister, enduring her inquisitive stare. "Well, I can only guess you wanted to talk to me alone."

"I want to know what's going on." She spoke softly while she held a sated, sleeping Stella. "And don't play stupid. You and Nash are both all smiles. After your slip yesterday, I think I've got it figured out but I want you to explain your relationship with Nash to me."

"You were right. I couldn't resist." Trace moved to the rocking chair next to the bed so he could see the baby better.

"Oh I'm so happy for you! I never knew Nash was gay."

"I need to tell Bud," Trace said. "Today. As soon as I'm done visiting with you, I'm going to tell him about me." Trace took a deep breath. "And about Nash."

Donna raised an eyebrow then she smiled. "Good – and I'm glad."

"Dr. Holman said he's releasing Bud tomorrow. I'm not going to hide my relationship with Nash from anyone."

Donna gently caressed Stella's head. "You'll see. The folks around here are going to be fine with it. Especially with you and Nash together. Everyone respects him. That won't change."

Trace hoped she was right. "And you think Bud will just accept that his son is gay and involved with his ranch foreman?"

She glanced away from Stella and looked Trace in the eyes. "Dad loves you. That won't change either."

Bob knocked on the door then came into the room with Nash behind him.

"It's okay. You can come in," Donna said.

Trace laughed. "Yeah, my sister is not exactly subtle when she wants to know something."

"I don't have patience for subtly." She glanced to Nash. "I'm happy for you both."

Nash smiled and Trace's heart swelled. Damn, the man had gotten under his skin quickly. And it felt incredible. Not the fear that commitment usually caused him. Nash evoked emotions Trace had never felt before.

Bob slapped Nash on the shoulder. "Good luck with the old man. Just know you both have our support."

Trace truly did have a great family. He kissed his sister on the forehead then he turned to Nash. "I'll be back in a little while. Are you going to wait here?"

"Yep."

"Don't worry," Donna said. "A heart attack didn't kill him, and neither will learning that you're gay."

"He's an old salt, but he knows when to count himself lucky," Bob said. "You're home and you're happy." He touched Stella's head. "That's all a parent wants for their kid."

Nash followed Trace into the corridor.

"Do you think I'll cause him another heart attack?"

Nash shook his head. "You're his son. Bud's a good guy. He isn't going to turn his back on you now that you're home."

"But you think he'll have a problem with you?"

Nash nodded reluctantly.

"At least there'll be a doctor around if we need one."

"You shouldn't joke about Bud's health. Maybe we should tell him together."

Trace shook his head. He had to do this. The conversation was long overdue. "I won't be long. Just wait for me. If it goes well, he's going to want to see you—but if it doesn't, he isn't going to want to see either one of us."

Nothing else needed to be said. They both understood that their future rested on how Bud accepted the news.

Trace went alone to his father's hospital room.

Bud was propped in the bed with a cafeteria tray in front of him and the television on. He clicked off the sound when he saw Trace. "Come in and sit down." He pointed to the chair near the bed. "They're starving me. Broth, gelatin and applesauce."

Trace chuckled as he sat in the chair. Bud had more color but there were still tubes and wires crisscrossing his chest and monitors beeping around him—heart rate, oxygen levels, blood pressure.

Bud grumbled, “I’ve been in this damn hospital long enough. I want to go home.” He looked weak but managed to sound assertive.

“Tomorrow, if you do what you’re told.” Trace didn’t want to aggravate him further—and he also didn’t like the idea of shocking Bud with the revelation of his relationship with Nash. And tomorrow would be too late. At least in the hospital there were medical personnel if he needed them. The doctor could threaten Bud with an extended recovery time if he didn’t keep his temper in check.

Trace was quiet for a moment then released a heavy breath. He met his father’s tired eyes. “Dad...we need to talk.”

“Yep.” Bud pushed the tray away. “This must be important. You haven’t called me ‘Dad’ in a long time.” His breathing remained slow and easy. Trace didn’t want to change that so he approached the topic of his orientation and Nash slowly.

“Nash is a great foreman. I’m glad he’s decided to stay.”

Bud nodded. “I wouldn’t have been able to run the ranch without him.”

“Donna told me you offered him a share of the Triple T.”

“Yep, he’s earned it. Been like a son.”

Trace didn’t take offense at the comment. He was grateful to Nash for stepping into the role. God knew *he* never got along that well with Bud.

“Did Mom ever talk to you about me? About why I didn’t fit in around here when I was a teenager and why I left.” He watched the monitors.

“Your mother could talk the ears off the cornstalks. She told me everything. Problem was, I only heard about half.” Bud chuckled.

A warm feeling filled Trace. It was good to hear his father speak of his mother in that old familiar way. It made talking to Bud easier.

“But you seemed to do fine. Took off for the big city to make a name for yourself. College, career...and your sister told me about the fancy sports car.”

“I was miserable here. At times it seemed we couldn’t stand to be in the same room together.”

Bud coughed. “I just had a heart attack, son. Are you looking to kill me by starting a fight?” He stared at the soundless television. The heart-rate monitor showed a slow increase.

That was why this conversation had to take place in the hospital.

“Calm down. I don’t want to fight. The truth is that I want you to live a long time. Which is why Nash is going to run the ranch and I’ll take care of the books. All you have to do is enjoy your grandkids.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?” Bud glanced over. “Don’t tell me Colette got her artificial claws in you again. Damn, but that girl gets knocked up every year.”

Trace’s lips twitched into a smile. “Don’t expect any grandkids from me. It’s never going to happen.”

“Never? Hmph. You never know. You might meet someone, settle down.”

“Dad – I’m gay.”

Silence stretched between them. The heart-rate monitor spiked. It must have triggered the blood-pressure monitor, because an automatic cuff tightened on Bud’s arm.

“Do you need a nurse?”

His eyes turned glassy and blood rushed into his face. Then he choked and gripped the guardrail.

Trace shot to his feet and scrambled toward the door for the nurse.

Bud’s laugh stopped him from charging into the hall.

He spun around. “Christ! Are you trying to give *me* a heart attack?” Trace watched the monitors slowly stabilize.

Bud pointed to the chair. "Sit down." Trace moved around the bed and Bud pointed a finger at him. "No wonder you never dated any girls. I always found that damn peculiar. You have my good looks but never showed my way with the ladies."

"I never knew how to tell you."

"Gay, huh? And you're sure? Not some stage you're going through?"

Trace grinned. "I can assure you this isn't a phase." Part one went over better than he'd expected. But he still had to drop the other bomb.

"So I'm guessing there's more to this. If you're going to kill me, make it quick. Spill it all."

"It's Nash."

"I thought you said he's agreed to stay on? Or wait—is he threatening to leave the Triple T because you're gay?" Bud stiffened.

Trace shook his head. "Of course not. In fact, I want to honor your promise to him and give him a share."

"Good, good." Bud relaxed back into the pillow.

"There's more. I'm interested in Nash. *More* than interested...Nash is someone I could grow to love."

Bud's brows furrowed and his lips pursed into a tight line. "*Nash?* He knows? And doesn't want to kick your ass?"

Trace nodded. "Of course he knows. And no, he doesn't want to kick my ass." Had he been talking to Donna, she wouldn't have allowed him to get away with a statement like that without a witty comeback.

Bud just stared.

"Nash and I are involved. We want to see where this—whatever it is we've started—will go."

Bud's hands started to shake.

"Are you okay?"

He nodded but blinked rapidly and a muscle in his jaw clenched and released. "You've only been home a week! How the hell did that happen?"

"Are you sure you want details?"

"Hell no, not details, but I want to understand."

"I'm home to stay. And I'm happy about it. I realize this is where I belong...and it's partly because of Nash. I don't know what the future holds, but I know it's here in Farley Gulch. I know for the first time in a long time, I'm content with where I'm at and where I'm headed."

Trace expected yelling, condemnation—but not his father's show of emotion. Bud's eyes welled with moisture. He remembered the last time he'd seen his father cry...his mother's funeral.

"I never knew Nash was gay."

"Bud," Trace said solemnly. "The Triple T is your home. You shouldn't be uncomfortable in your own house. I understand if you'd rather I live off the ranch."

Bud patted his heart. "The old ticker almost gave out on me...but it brought you home where you belong. When I lost your mama, I lost you too." He blinked a few times. "Always regretted that I never took the opportunity to tell you how proud I am of you. I know I wasn't always the greatest dad. We didn't have much in common." Bud gave a snort but also smiled. "Guess I understand why now."

Bud reached a hand to Trace.

"We have a lot in common when it comes to the ranch, family...and Nash. We both know he needs the Triple T as much as the Triple T needs him. I love the ranch, but not ranching."

"Yep, that's right. And the Triple T is *our* home." Bud stared straight at Trace, looking him in the eyes. "And it's Nash's home. I love you both." Bud smiled. "Can I still tell queer jokes?"

“Yeah—if I can tell old man jokes.” Trace chuckled. For the first time in too many years, he laughed with his dad. “Nash is down the hall visiting with Donna and the baby.”

“Donna knows about you and Nash?”

Trace nodded.

“See, that’s the shitty thing about being in the hospital. I don’t know what in the hell is going on!”

Trace stood.

“Before you go...do I call him your boyfriend?”

Trace laughed. “I doubt you could say it with a straight face.”

“What would you know about a *straight* face?”

Trace paused by the bed. “I love you, Dad.”

“When you said you needed to talk, I thought you were going to tell me you were leaving again. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but I want you and Nash both at the house.”

“It’s where we want to be too.”

“Good.” He turned up the television. “Just remember I’m still the boss around there.”

Trace couldn’t keep the smile from his face as he walked down the hall. He pushed open the door to Donna’s room and Nash’s eyes snapped to his.

Donna spoke first. “Well, how did it go?”

“Maybe they’d like a moment alone,” Bob suggested.

“Oh Bob, we’re family. Trace knows he can say anything in front of us.”

“It went well,” Trace said, striding over to his lover. “Better than I expected.” He spoke to Nash. “You were right about death changing a man. Maybe he changed a long time ago, but I hadn’t changed enough to see it.”

“Sometimes it’s a hard ride to get where you’re going,” Nash mused.

“Yeah – and for the first time, it’s good to be home.”

About the Author

KyAnn Waters lives in Utah with her husband, two children and two dogs. She spends her days writing and her evenings with her family. She enjoys sporting events on the television, thrillers on the big screen, and hot scenes between the pages of her books.

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