

# Extreme Bull



*Catt Ford*

AT the last possible moment, ever so casually, Jeff Stratton raised his arms over his head and leaned his chair back, making a big show of stretching while he stuck his foot out directly into Clay Harris's path.

Clay tripped over it and growled, "Grow up, you fucking asshole!"

"Up yours, Harris," Jeff said with an amiable grin. "Where's your fucking reflexes?"

"Stand up and make your argument if you want to try your luck so bad!"

Another voice joined into the fray. "If you two are lookin' for trouble, save it for the ring," Sam rebuked the two young riders. "Your bull's up in two, Clay."

"Tell it to Stratton; I was on my way," Clay muttered. He kicked at the other man's boot, smirking at the muffled yelp when he clipped Jeff's anklebone.

"Hey, I didn't try to kill you before your ride!" Jeff yelled.

Clay gave him the finger over his shoulder without turning around as he walked away.

“Why do you always have to start?” Sam stood with his arms crossed looking down at Jeff rubbing his ankle.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Jeff looked up, his face full of naïve incomprehension.

“You don’t win extra points for injurin’ another rider behind the scenes,” Sam said dryly. “The only action that counts is in the ring.”

“It’s a competition.” Jeff shrugged, dropping the innocent act. “All’s fair in love and war, and bull riding is total war, man. Anyway, he does his share.”

“A real man doesn’t just want to win by any means.” Sam turned to leave but stopped when Jeff grabbed his arm.

“Then tell me what a real man wants, if it’s not just about the win!”

Sam stared pointedly at Jeff’s hand until the younger man let it fall. “What makes it worth the win is beatin’ another man when he’s in top form. Not chippin’ away at him until he’s so distracted he’d fall off a tame little pony.”

“Concentration’s all part of the game. If he can’t keep his mind on the ride....” Jeff shrugged.

“You think Doug Morgan ever fucked around like you?”

“He’s your friend; you’re not going to diss him,” Jeff complained in a low voice.

“He’s one of the greats. He didn’t need any penny-ante tricks to make his ride.” Sam watched the slow rush of color in Jeff’s face. “You could be too if you stopped this bullshit and just got on with the job.”

“You really think....” Jeff bit his lip, embarrassed about asking for Sam’s reassurance, but the other man had been around rodeo all his life, and he knew good riding when he saw it.

“It’s up to you. When you decide to put your money where your mouth is, I expect you may turn out to win a few buckles.” Sam chuckled as Jeff stuck his chest out without even knowing he was doing it. “You and Clay Harris. You’re both young, but if you don’t get hurt too bad, you got a career ahead of you.”

“Clay Harris?” Jeff scoffed, as if the mere thought of Clay being on the same level as him was inconceivable even though he did secretly admire the other rider.

Sam sighed. “Grow up, Jeff. And leave Clay alone, especially before he rides, or I’ll sanction you.”

Jeff watched the older cowboy walk toward the ring, knowing he would do as he said. He couldn’t even hold a grudge; Sam was like the elder statesman of the bull-riding circuit, and no one in their right mind would challenge him.

He followed Sam out to the ring and shouldered his way to the fence. Terrence was giving a poor showing in the ring,

flopping around on the back of a bull that didn't seem much interested. "How long?"

BJ answered without looking at Jeff. "He might make it to the horn, but he's not making any points."

As Terrence slumped forward, the bull snapped its head back, and Terrence jerked his head back to avoid the horns, sliding into the well and pitching straight off the back end of the animal. He landed face down in a cloud of dust. Two of the bullfighters were immediately out in front of the bull, chivvying it toward the gate, while one of them grabbed the back of Terrence's pants, hoisting him to his feet.

Jeff laughed as Terrence got up with a grimy face. "Caleb better get clown combat pay for babysitting sequin-boy."

The audience hooted as the announcer said, "Not enough bull to get into the money. No score this round for Terrence Gilbert on Weedwhacker. Up next is Clayton Harris. It's early in the season yet, but Clay's already in the top five on the leader board."

"Weedwhacker? Should have been named Eat Dirt," Jeff cracked.

Sam snickered but didn't look over.

BJ said, "Makes you wonder why Terrence wears those sequin-trimmed chaps. Only gets them dirty whenever he falls off."

Jeff shrugged. "Who's Clay riding?"

"Eggboiler, I think."

"Eggboiler? Who would name their bull Eggboiler?"

"I dunno. Eggboiler, Firestarter, something like that," BJ said. "I only know the names of the ones I'm riding."

"Yeah, right." BJ was notorious for obtaining video clips of all the bulls on the circuit and taking notes, so Jeff wasn't buying it for a second. "What's Eggboiler's record?"

"He can be rode," BJ admitted. "But he's tough. Clay stands to make some points if he can stick on him."

Jeff clenched his fists unconsciously at the commotion in the chute. He could see Clay's head and shoulders jerk as the bull slammed against the sides. "Hope he does."

BJ looked at him incredulously and put out a hand to his forehead. "You running a fever, boy?"

"What?" Jeff batted his hand away, cursing his pale skin and hoping he wasn't getting red again.

"You want Clay to score? I thought you wanted to beat him bad."

"I want to beat a man at his best, fair and square."

"When did *you* get religion?"

Jeff knew he was turning red, but he met BJ's eyes. "I may like to pull a guy's leg, but I wouldn't really do anything to mess up their ride."

BJ studied him for a moment before nodding. "Knew that about you."

Jeff was glad the heart-to-heart was over. What was it today that everyone was helping him to the nearest couch and going all headshrinker on him? "There he goes."

FIRESTARTER went airborne right out of the gate like a fighter jet launched off a carrier. Clay stayed with him, his body in a nice, tight formation, his head centered over his torso. He could feel the tense and release of steely muscle between his legs as the bull hit the ground and took off again.

Firestarter jerked his head to the left and circled once, stopping short to snap his head to the right and repeat the maneuver. Clay started to grin. Firestarter was a tough and canny bull, but he was in the zone today; he could feel it. The action felt like slow motion to him; he could feel it in his body the instant the bull changed directions. His abdomen tightened as the bull kicked up his back legs and lurched to the right. Timing it just right, Clay shifted with him, keeping his torso upright in the saddle.



He heard the horn go in the distance, but it didn't matter. He didn't want this ride to end, it just felt so good. Firestarter was of a different opinion, however, and he ran for the side of the ring, whirling at the last moment to try to slam Clay's leg against the fence.

Clay was ready for him and let go of the rope, leaping for the top rail of the fence and kicking loose of the bull. He balanced like a tightrope walker for a moment before doing a backflip into the ring, to the audience's delight. The clowns ran out in front of the bucking animal and herded it toward the gate. Clay climbed back onto the fence and straddled it, waiting for his score.

His chest was heaving, but he was smiling when he heard it: 91.25. "Beat that, Jeff Stratton," he muttered under his breath.

Clay flushed horribly when he heard the announcer go on, telling the crowd that Jeff Stratton was the only cowboy there likely to beat that score and that the two of them were in the top five and had a heated rivalry on the circuit, always trying to outdo one another. He'd hoped their private competition would stay that way, but rodeo was worse for gossip than any ladies' tea party.

"Congratulations, Harris. Nice ride, despite the openin' entertainment."

Clay turned to see Sam holding out his hand. He shook it. "Thanks, Sam. I appreciate it, coming from you."



“Came from the judges too. They seemed to like it, or you wouldn’t have scored so big.” Sam nodded approvingly at him and walked away.

Clay ambled over to where BJ and Terrence stood at the fence line. “Hey.”

“Hey. Nice ride. Didn’t even have to brush yourself off.”

The twinkle in BJ’s eyes told Clay the jibe was meant for Terrence rather than him. He was amused to see that Terrence had taken the time after his ride to wash his face and neck thoroughly. Probably slicked a comb through his hair too, although under the hat he couldn’t tell.

“Bull was well trained. Give a cowboy a ride and then deliver him right over to the sidelines after the horn blows,” Clay said.

BJ squinted, peering at Terrence. “You remember to wash behind your ears like your momma told you?”

“Is it a crime to like to be clean?” Terrence clenched his fists defensively and walked away.

“Man, he’s fun to ride,” Clay commented.

“More fun than Stratton?” BJ asked.

“With Stratton it’s not a game.”

“You two should have your own private rodeo.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“None of the rest of us have cracked 90 this year yet, and the two of you go on like there’s nobody else on the circuit.”

“Season’s young. You topped 90 last year, BJ. You will again,” Clay said, sensing what bothered BJ the most.

“Thanks. I hope so too, but when I do, tell Stratton he better not trip me up on the way to the ring.” BJ touched his hat and sauntered off to find his first ride.

Clay didn’t know the other riders lined up along the fence very well yet, and that let him feel free to study Jeff’s ride without having to make conversation. BJ was right; he did see Jeff Stratton as his primary competition this year, but that didn’t mean another rider might not hit a hot streak or that Jeff could get injured, which would take him out of the game. Clay never thought about getting injured himself; ideas like that could make you overly cautious, and bull riding was no place for a careful man.

Jeff was mounted on Under Eight, a bull that was famed for getting rid of its riders in under the required time to earn a score. When he nodded and the gate opened, Clay could see that the bull was every bit as tough as Firestarter. If Jeff managed to stay on for the full eight, unlike most of the bull’s past riders, he would earn a high score even if he didn’t put on that good a show.

Clay had to admit Jeff was giving the audience the price of their tickets though. Unlike Terrence, who could stick to the back of an animal but tended to flop there like a rag doll, Jeff looked as if he were part of the bull. There wasn't much air between his Wranglers and the saddle when the bull left the ground, and his hips moved smoothly with every motion, swiveling to meet each snap and turn.

In spite of the competitive spirit that thrived between them, Clay had to admire the way the other man could ride. And Jeff was up there smiling and grinning as if he felt the same exuberant joy on board the bull that he did. Clay didn't want to admit they were anything alike, but maybe he was just fooling himself.

They didn't *look* anything alike; Clay was stocky and sandy-haired where Jeff was dark with stick-straight hair and a bit slimmer, although still tough. They had one thing in common though: both of them liked to win.

The horn blew, and Jeff kicked free, sliding off the right side of the bull, which managed to turn its head and butt him in the rear before being drawn off by the bullfighters. The crowd in the stands laughed when Caleb chased Jeff, pretending to kick his rear also, and Clay sniggered at the thought of how mad that must have made Jeff. He would have hated it himself: to have a ride like that end in a head butt to the butt. Then he laughed out loud with delight; Jeff's ride was close, but he had scored only 91.0. Clay was the winner for the day.

“Watch your back, son; he’ll be gunnin’ for you tomorrow,” Sam advised as he passed by and saw the triumphant look on Clay’s face.

“Let him. I enjoy beating a man when he’s on the up,” Clay said.

BJ and Clay grabbed a table at the Save a Horse saloon that night because the cowgirl groupies were out in force. As they’d hoped, two pretty girls came by soon enough, each holding two mugs of beer.

“Is this seat taken?” the girl with brown hair asked.

Clay obligingly shoved over on the bench seat. “Just waiting for you, darlin’. I’m Clay. That there’s BJ.”

“Doris,” the girl said. She sat down and pushed one of the beers in front of Clay. “I saw you ride today.”

“Oh yeah? How’d you like it?”

“You got the top score today. Firestarter’s a tough bull.”

“You follow bull riding?” Clay noticed that BJ and the blonde girl were getting acquainted as well.

“Duh. Yeah, or would I be here now?” Doris smiled provocatively at him, and Clay knew he could have her tonight if he wanted.

“You like a winner?”

“Don’t all girls?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Clay’s attention was drawn across the room by Jeff’s distinctive laughter. He was sitting with a cute girl who was listening to him attentively as he described how he’d held back today but was going to beat Clay tomorrow.

“Excuse me,” Clay said. “Something I gotta take care of.”

“You’re coming back, aren’t you?” Doris pleaded, not standing up to let him out of the booth.

“Sure thing,” Clay promised vaguely. Once Doris stood up to let him by, he forgot all about her, his sights set on the girl sitting with Jeff. He crossed the room and held out his hand to her. “Clay Harris. Noticed you across the room. What’s a pretty little thing like you doing with a broke-down cowboy like him?”

The girl looked up at him, her eyes widening when she saw who it was. “Melissa Harden,” she said, flicking a triumphant look across the room at Doris.

“Clay, go tend to your own heifer and leave mine alone,” Jeff said with a hint of warning.

“Pardon him, miss, he never learned that ladies don’t cotton to being called heifers,” Clay explained. “Let me buy you a drink.”

Melissa seemed amused at the evident conflict between the two men and a little thrilled to be the bone of contention at the heart of it. “I would be delighted. I had to buy this big lunk a beer.”

“Not very gentlemanly of him.” Clay held out his arm. “Come with me, Miss Mel, and we’ll have a fine old time tonight.”

Jeff stood up, frowning. “You can’t just come over here and take—”

“I’m not taking. I’m inviting.” Clay’s eyes danced at the impotent rage evident in Jeff’s. “It’s Miss Mel’s choice if she’s going with a gentleman or staying here with you.”

“Sorry, Jeff, see you around some time.” Melissa stood up and took Clay’s arm, giggling with delight. “Where we going, cowboy?”

“Wherever you like as long as it’s in Fresno,” Clay said.

“I’m hungry,” Melissa announced.

“Then we’ll go out and get something to eat. See you, Stratton.” Clay tipped his hat politely and escorted Melissa from the bar, never sparing a thought for Doris awaiting him in his booth. If he had thought about her, he would have just

assumed that BJ would be double lucky tonight. For him, stealing Jeff's girl out from under his nose just capped off a nicely winning day.

MELISSA left Clay's trailer after midnight, claiming her mother didn't allow her to stay out late at night. Clay offered to take her home, but she asked for taxi fare and said it would work out better for her if she arrived at home alone.

He didn't mind. It was like all the other nights on the road: find a girl, do her, and then the emptiness set in. It was as if bull riding was some kind of aphrodisiac, sparking lust in him and creating a desire to bed a champion in the girls who followed the circuit on their TVs. When the tour came to town, it probably gave them their only chance to meet and sleep with a real cowboy. In fact, sometimes it surprised Clay how little the girls wanted from him, as if somehow the tables were now turned and he was a notch on their belts instead of the other way around. He knew from listening to the old timers that once upon a time it was almost a given that if you slept with a townie, you were as good as engaged.

Not that he minded the way things were; he wasn't ready to settle down yet. He had things to do and a life that no girl would want to live as he went from town to town in the season, riding bull after bull, trying for the finals.



Clay took one last puff on his cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray next to the bed. A little sleep and he'd be good to go in the morning.

"WHO'D you draw?"

"Under Eight," Clay said. "You?"

"Got Terry's lame-ass bull, Weedwhacker," BJ said in disgust. Then he cheered up visibly. "I heard he hates to have his ears flicked. I'm going to tease him in the chute and see if I can get a better ride out of him."

"Good idea."

Noticing how Clay's eyes were roving over the other cowboys, BJ said, "Jeff drew your bull from yesterday, Firestarter."

"It's a fair trade." Clay shrugged.

"He took that Doris home last night too," BJ added slyly.

"And I got Melissa." Clay laughed. "Bulls and girls are what you make of them, I guess."

"I had no idea you were such a fucking romantic."

Clay turned around, frowning to see Jeff standing there laughing. He made himself smile back, knowing it would

annoy Jeff. “It’s not who you ride, it’s how. Girls or steers, I’m going to beat your ass, and you know it.”

“Keep telling yourself that, cowboy,” Jeff drawled, with a faint emphasis on the *boy*.

“No problem, *son*.” Clay walked away, knowing he’d lose his cool and blow his top if he had to swallow any more of Jeff’s taunting. He needed to settle himself before the ride and get his concentration going.

He went into the stable, blinking at the change from dazzling sunlight to cool darkness, breathing in the comforting scent of horses and hay and saddle leather to calm himself. Somehow Jeff always seemed to get his goat.

Clay stiffened when he heard footsteps behind him and flattened his back against the wall to let whoever was in such a hurry get by. He gasped when a hard body rammed against his, squeezing all the air out of his lungs and pinning him against the rough boards.

He clenched his fists, getting ready to defend himself. He knew it was Jeff though; the body pinning him smelled of Jeff’s cologne and some other underlying scent that was essentially Jeff. If he hadn’t been taken by surprise, Clay might have been pissed at himself for having somehow taken enough notice of Jeff to know how he smelled.

“Can’t take the heat?” he sneered.

“I don’t know why I let you get under my skin,” Jeff responded in a low voice.

Clay put his hands on Jeff’s chest to push him off but left them in place, surprised at the heat emanating off him. “Because I’m better than you, and you can’t take it.”

“That’s not it.”

Before he could resist in any way, rough lips pressed against his, and a hot tongue insinuated itself into his mouth, searching and exploring, conquering. And he let it. Shocked at his own response to the furious kiss, Clay grabbed Jeff around the waist, pulling the slighter man flush against him. He could feel their hips start to work, the sharp edge of teeth on his lower lip, the roughness of Jeff’s stubble against his face. He sucked strongly on the other man’s tongue, wanting it inside him, frantic with arousal and fear that they would be caught, *and what in hell was he doing?*

Jeff tasted faintly of smoke and mint, and Clay thought he would recognize that flavor anywhere if he ever tasted it again.

And then Jeff wrenched himself away and sprinted out of the stables as if the devil himself were after him.

Clay wiped his hand across his mouth, panting to catch his breath. He was sure he was supposed to feel disgusted, but he didn’t. He didn’t know quite how he felt, except that this was not what he had expected.

He groaned and covered his face with his hands. “That motherfucker. This is just another one of his tricks to fuck me up before the ride.”

It was working.

That made Clay mad and effectively killed his growing erection. *Damn him. I’m not going to let him get away with this.*

Clay waited until his thighs stopped trembling and his breath was coming easier before he walked out of the stable. He looked down and saw one side of his shirt was hanging out over his jeans even though he couldn’t remember it being that way before. He tucked it in and raised his hat, brushing back his hair. It wasn’t in him to spend time staring into mirrors although he’d been told he was a good-looking man, but he found a restroom now to check for signs of what had just happened.

He looked pretty much the same, just surprised. Relieved, he made his way to the area where cowboys waited for their turn to ride. His hands were steady again, and he would need that strength to make the most of his ride. He had to keep his points up.

He couldn’t help turning his head, surreptitiously looking for Jeff. He wouldn’t put it past the other man to wait until the last second and then jump out in front of him to *remind* him and throw him off his game. Well, it wasn’t going to happen, that’s all.

Clay couldn't tell if he was disappointed or relieved when Jeff never showed up before his ride. It took a herculean effort to get his mind off those lips, slightly chapped, and that kiss, more demanding than he'd ever felt from a girl, and yet... somehow kinda sexy? Maybe *because* of the differences.

Shaking off that unwelcome thought, Clay imagined his ride, remembering some of the moves that Under Eight had pulled on Jeff the day before, seeing his own body balanced perfectly on the steer's back, moving as one. Closing his eyes and retreating to the comfort of the familiar task ahead of him, Clay went through the eight seconds he needed over and over, visualizing himself through a perfect ride.

Still, when he sat on top of the bull in the chute, feeling the movement of the tough animal between his legs, a thrill with a strangely erotic edge rushed through him. He gave the nod. When the gate was opened and the powerful bull surged forward, the sensual thrill of it all overcame him, and he was lost in the sensation of the bull beneath him and the lips claiming him in the darkness of the stable.

He never heard the horn. He knew the ride was over when he saw Caleb's urgent face as the clown ran by the side of the bull, gloved hands signaling him to get off. He bailed, kicking free and landing in the dust after a free fall that seemed to take forever. Hands grabbed him, and Caleb rushed him to the fence, cursing at him for daydreaming in

the ring. Men reached down and grabbed his arms, hauling him up and over.

Sam was there asking him urgently, “You all right? You didn’t get hurt when you fell, did you? You seem kinda dizzy.”

“I’m fine,” Clay said as if in a dream. “Score? What’s the score?”

Sam cocked his head listening for it. “That was some ride. 92.5. I’ve never seen you ride like that—” He stared after Clay in bemusement as the other man turned and walked away as if he were walking on air. “I better get him to the doctor. He musta been knocked on the head.”

BJ asked anxiously, “Did he seem concussed to you? He’ll be right pissed if he can’t ride tomorrow.”

“I don’t know what’s happenin’ with him, but I never seen him ride like that before,” Sam said.

“Jeff better watch out,” BJ chortled.

“WHO pissed in your beer?”

Clay looked up to find BJ standing there, a girl on each arm and a shit-eating grin on his face. “Hey, BJ. Good ride today.”

BJ snorted. “Coming from the man who’s gonna win it all, thanks. And seeing as you’re racking up the points, why are you crying in your beer?”

“I’m not,” Clay protested. “I’m just... thinking.”

“He rides with his brain, not his ass,” BJ told the girls. They giggled and nestled closer. “Look, man, you’re not pulling your share of the load. Get up off that bar stool and help a man out.”

Clay looked over to where a line was forming up for a dance and then shook his head. Jeff hadn’t come to the bar that night, which was probably a wise move. He tossed a bill onto the bar and slid off his stool. “Early night for me, man. Have fun.”

The music started up, and Clay edged around the lines of dancers to the door, grateful for the cooler air outside. The sound of people having fun inside the bar meant nothing to him. He had to figure this thing out, or it would continue to gnaw at him and interfere with his riding. And *nothing* interfered with his riding.

He cupped his hand over the end of his cigarette and lit up. He started to walk back to his trailer. He hoped that a walk in the cold air would clear his head. He pulled his collar



up, tugged his hat down against the wind, and dug his hands in his pockets, letting the cigarette dangle between his lips.

None of it helped.

All he could think about was the feeling of Jeff's body against his, the warmth of his lips, the strength in the hands that held him captive for a moment. He couldn't banish it from his head. There was something about it that haunted him. Just thinking about it made his breath come faster, and he could feel his cock move in his pants, starting to fill out.

He had to stop this.

Clay came back to himself with a start when he realized he was standing in front of a trailer. Only problem was, it wasn't his.

It was Jeff's.

There was a little dim light showing around the blinds in the windows, which meant that Jeff was still up.

Clay turned to walk away and then turned back, furious with himself. He had never run yellow from anyone or anything, and he wasn't going to start now.

Maybe it was better this way. Maybe he needed to just see Jeff, talk to him... find out how he knew... or maybe he

needed to knock Jeff's lights out, and then everything could go back to normal.

He dropped his cigarette and ground it out with his heel. Then he knocked on the door.

He couldn't hear anything from inside, but the door opened suddenly, light spilling out around Jeff.

"Can I come in?" Clay couldn't see Jeff's face with the light behind him, but he saw his shoulders tense up.

Jeff took a step back, and Clay could see his shirt hanging open, but he was still dressed except for his boots. He looked startled and then resigned.

"Might as well."

Clay climbed up the stairs and passed by, aware of how close they were to each other. He went into the tiny kitchen area and turned to face the other man.

Jeff was buttoning up his shirt, and Clay felt a tiny moment of regret as Jeff covered his taut stomach and tucked in his shirt. Jeff went to the ironing board and picked up a freshly pressed shirt to put it on a hanger.

"For the ride tomorrow," he explained briefly.

Clay smiled, watching him unplug the iron and fold the board up into the cupboard. Clay'd never had any idea Jeff might be vain about how he looked while riding, but it

seemed so as he did always appear neat and tidy, and it made Clay feel an odd moment of affection for him. Finally Jeff turned to him and squared his shoulders.

“All right, I figure I got a beating coming. Let’s get at it.”

“That’s not why I came.”

“Why did you then?”

“To find out why you did it.”

Jeff looked at the floor. “I don’t know.”

“Want to do it again?”

Jeff looked up to see his shock mirrored on Clay’s face. “What?”

“I said, want to do it again?” Clay winced when he realized how loud his voice sounded in the confined space.

Jeff opened his mouth and closed it. He couldn’t believe he was hearing right.

Jeff’s confusion made Clay chuckle, or maybe it was the relief of feeling that he had gained the upper hand again. He went toward Jeff, who stood his ground.

Jeff flinched when Clay stretched his hand toward him, but Clay only stroked over Jeff’s cheek with his thumb, wrapping his fingers around the back of Jeff’s neck, pulling him closer while staring into his eyes. He could feel the

sudden puff of Jeff's breath over his lips, and then he closed the gap between them, licking softly over the mouth that had tormented him since that first unexpected kiss.

Jeff stood there with his hands at his sides, still unsure whether Clay meant this or if he was going to get the beatdown he deserved. He kept his lips tightly pressed together.

Clay backed off, although he kept his hand where it was, caressing Jeff's hair. "You weren't so prissy earlier."

Jeff laughed suddenly. "I just can't believe this is happening."

"Neither can I." Clay leaned forward and was relieved to feel Jeff's lips relax under his. He darted his tongue into Jeff's mouth, relishing the low moan. Jeff's hands came up and circled him, pulling him closer.

Clay lost himself in the kiss, in exploring the unknown territory open to him. Kissing Jeff was completely different from kissing any woman, although he had known some wild ones in his time. There was more strength to the kiss, more mystery where Clay would have expected less. After all, they were both men; they wanted the same thing, didn't they? He became aware of the throbbing of his cock, hard and trapped in his jeans. He never would have thought that one kiss could have turned him on so much, but Jeff was driving him crazy. Their tongues tangled and slid over each other, chasing between their open mouths. Clay moved Jeff's head

where he needed it to delve deeper into his mouth and realized he had grabbed Jeff's ass, kneading the firm roundness of it and pulling the other man's hips closer.

Then he lost his breath as Jeff shoved him back against the wall, attacking him with sharp nips to his throat and shoulder, grinding frantically against him. He could feel Jeff's hands tremble as he tried to hold him prisoner.

"Hey, take it easy, slow down." For some reason Clay wanted this to be gentler, more deliberate. If he was going through with this, it was going to be on purpose. "If I want my dick ripped off I can get that done in the ring with a thousand people watching."

Jeff shuddered and groaned, leaning his forehead against Clay's. "Sorry."

"We don't have to do anything," Clay said. A shaky chuckle greeted his words.

Jeff rubbed his erection against Clay's, feeling the heat and hardness of the other man through his jeans. "In that case, I hope you draw a bull named Blue Balls tomorrow and he hammers yours."

"Does that mean you want to—"

"I never wanted to with anyone as much in my life, damned if I know why."

"Me neither."

Jeff tilted his head back and peered at Clay's face. "You queer?"

"Never have been," Clay said.

"So what the hell are we doing?"

"You mind if we analyze it later?" Clay felt if he didn't get some action soon, he was going to explode.

"Yeah, whatever." Jeff applied himself to Clay's mouth once more, greedily sucking his tongue.

Clay rolled them so that he was the one pressing the other man against the wall. He needed friction; he needed to thrust. It was such a different feeling from rubbing against a girl, all round softness and yielding. Instead Jeff was hard and strong, straining against him with equal need.

They kissed and rubbed against each other steadily. Jeff had his hands clamped at Clay's waist, as if allowing them to roam into forbidden territory would be unsafe. Clay grabbed Jeff's hips. He wanted more than anything to feel that hardness under his palm, to cup it and rub it until Jeff convulsed with pleasure beneath his hand.

Jeff was close; he stabbed his tongue into Clay's willing mouth urgently. He wasn't thinking any more about the uneasiness of this unexpected encounter. His legs threatened to collapse under him, they were shaking so bad, but he was intent on chasing his climax. All the nerves in his body seemed to be sending a river of fire to his groin. Then a

lightning bolt of pleasure erupted within him and had him squirming and whimpering like a cat in heat, grateful for the weight of the other man propping him up against the wall.

He could feel it when Clay came. The other man tore his mouth free, breathing heavily in Jeff's ear as he stiffened and ground hard against him. He could feel the racing beat of Clay's heart, or maybe it was his, or both. Sweat trickled down under his arms. His pants were wet and sticky, but he didn't want to let go of Clay.

Finally Clay pushed himself off the wall and stared intently into Jeff's eyes. "I need to get drunk."

"Sounds like a plan."

Clay didn't move.

"Get off me, and I'll get us a beer."

Clay took one staggering step back, and Jeff grabbed his arm, guiding him to a chair.

Clay watched Jeff stumble to the refrigerator and bend to pull out a couple of cans. He liked how Jeff's jeans smoothed out over his backside when he leaned over—

He was biting his lower lip when Jeff handed him one of the cans. "You ever do anything like this before?"

To his surprise Jeff turned red.



Jeff sat down, popped the can open, and took a long swig, grateful for the crisp carbonation against his parched throat. “Sorta,” he muttered, unable to look up and see how Clay was taking this.

“Tell me.”

“High school circle jerk.”

“Yeah? What team were you on?”

“Football.”

“Me too.”

“You mean you also—”

“Yeah.”

After a long pause, Jeff asked, “Ever think about doing it again?”

“Nope, not till you—”

“You gonna keep throwing that in my face?”

“Hell yeah! Where’s the advantage in not using it against you?”

“This is different.”

“Well, yeah, there aren’t eight other guys here.”

“It’s more than that,” Jeff insisted. “This isn’t sitting in the dark with your right hand in some other guy’s lap.”

“You’re right,” Clay admitted. He brushed the back of his fingers against Jeff’s cheek again, pleased that he leaned into his touch instead of drawing back. “I don’t want to keep my eyes shut this time.”

Jeff’s lips quivered as if he wanted to smile but wouldn’t let himself. “I think we need to get drunk.”

“Yeah, that’ll clear things up,” Clay said sarcastically.

“It couldn’t hurt,” Jeff pointed out.

Clay drained his beer and crushed the can flat with one hand. “Bring it on.”

WHEN Clay woke up, he was grinding against the warm body in his arms, wondering why he was still in his clothes. They felt tight and sticky. He nuzzled the girl’s neck. The person in his arms turned to face him and kissed him, surprising Clay when she turned out not to be a girl after all.

“Jesus!” He jerked backward, nearly falling off the edge of the bed.

His sudden movement made Jeff open his eyes, and he reared back as well. “What the—”

“Uh, I need a shower,” Clay mumbled, and he rolled off the bed, realizing he was wearing his boots and was, in fact,

still fully dressed. The headache hit him as soon as he was upright, and he staggered to the door. “Later.”

Jeff stared after him as the door slammed shut. *Fuck, why the hell did we do this? Nothing but trouble.*

He rubbed his hands over his face. Then he got up to take a shower.

AT the dining hall Clay stared into the black pool of a cup of coffee, hoping the aspirin would make his headache go away but also dreading it because then he might have to think about what happened the night before.

A shadow fell over him, and he looked up. Jeff stood there, a cup of his own in his hand, looking scared and mad and hopeful all in one.

“Look—” he started.

Clay gestured at the bench on the opposite side of the table. “Sit down.”

Somewhat mollified, Jeff did so. “Last night was not my fault.”

“I didn’t say it was.” Clay rubbed his eyes. Jeff looked just as desirable to him when he opened them again.

“It was a one-time thing.”

There was a desperate note in Jeff’s voice, but Clay couldn’t figure out if it was because he wanted him to agree or to argue.

“Maybe it doesn’t have to be.”

“Maybe it does.”

“Maybe we should talk about it later.” Clay tilted his head toward BJ, who was heading to their table with a tray of food.

“Is that the hangover diet I see?” BJ boomed, smirking when both men winced. “When did you two start hanging out?”

“We’re not,” Jeff said tersely and stood up. “I don’t even like him that much.”

Clay watched him stride away and sighed.

“Did I interrupt a budding bromance?” BJ teased.

“Oh, just shut the fuck up!” The bench clattered to the floor as Clay stood up and charged off in the opposite direction.

Terrence snickered while setting his tray on the table. “Are they getting it on, like Doug Morgan and Jamie Denson? The newest fag cowboys?”

“If you want to keep that fagbashing up, you can eat my fist for breakfast,” BJ said calmly. “And I’m sure Sam’ll be glad to take care of lunch and dinner for you. He’s a friend of Doug and Jamie’s.”

“When did the rodeo become fairy heaven?” Terrence complained. He shut up at the menacing look on BJ’s face.

“Maybe you better eat at another table,” BJ said.

A little scared, Terrence picked up his tray and moved to an empty table.

“What the fuck?” BJ muttered.

SO did he even like girls anymore? Jeff was starting to wonder, as he also wondered just what had possessed him to put a lip lock on Clay in the stable that day when he’d totally meant to sock him one when he charged in there.

And then BJ coming up to them and acting like they’d never even spoken to each other civilly before, like it was somehow amazing to see them drinking coffee at the same table.

“A guy makes one fucking mistake—” Jeff realized he was talking to himself out loud and shut his mouth. This is what came of long lonely days on the road. And it was early

in the season! They were only five stops into the tour; if he kept messing around like this, it could mean the end of his career.

He remembered Sam telling him if he was looking for trouble to find it in the ring. “That’s what I’m going to do,” Jeff told himself. “Ride it out in the ring. Go to town, get drunk, find a girl, and that’s that!”

He managed to banish all thoughts of Clay from his head by concentrating on visualizing his ride and staying away from the arena. And it worked except for when a sudden flash from last night would sneak up on him, and he’d find himself thrilling over the image of Clay reaching out to touch his face, his eyes kind of soft in a way Jeff had never seen them before.

His body’s betrayal made him mad, and when his turn to ride came, he punished himself by forcing himself to stay with the bull for the full eight seconds of the bone-jarring ride even though he wasn’t in synch with the animal at all. He was jolted up and down without grace or mercy until he was pitched off and landed in the dust.

He ran for the fence and vaulted it easily, landing on his feet and slapping the dust from his clothing with his gloves. He didn’t even wait to hear his score; he knew he wasn’t going to make the short go of the final ten, but at least he stayed on till the horn blew.

SAVE a Horse was packed that night as the tour was moving on to North Dakota the next day, and Jeff found a full bar of eager women to pick from. All he had to do was swing a loop and drop it over one of them. It was just that none of them seemed to strike that spark in him. And the fact that Clay had walked away from the ring with the winner's purse didn't make him any happier.

The last night in town was typically one where he scored big because he didn't have to worry about riding the next day, but tonight he just walked around with a bottle of beer in his hand, unable to decide.

He saw Clay push open the swinging doors and step inside, searching the room with pained anxiety on his face that lightened when he caught sight of Jeff. Some kind of feeling welled up inside him, but Jeff kept his face impassive. He was glad of it when the light in Clay's eyes shut down and the other man turned away abruptly, heading for BJ, who was sitting at a table with three girls.

"Hey, cowboy, want a ride tonight?"

The sultry voice drew Jeff's attention to a pretty girl with black hair and blue eyes standing to his right. He cleared his throat and plastered on a smile. "I'm always up for a ride, miss. Can I buy you a drink?"



“I can buy my own if I want one. I’d rather....” She winked and leaned closer to whisper seductively in his ear.

He nodded and offered her his arm. “Let’s go.”

She took his beer and emptied the bottle, watching him eye her as she slid the neck of the bottle between her lips and swallowed in long draughts. “Practice makes perfect,” she said.

“I need a lot of practice.”

“You fell into the right hands, cowboy.”

JEFF didn’t bother to wash her lipstick off his mouth when he left her hotel room at first light. He never did ask her name, but this was one walk of shame he hoped devoutly someone *would* witness.

It didn’t matter who.

When she had first come onto him, his first thought was that if Clay came knocking on his trailer door that night, he would get no answer. He knew, in fact, that if Clay had come, he didn’t have to open the door, but he didn’t trust himself not to. If he was securely someplace else, it would put a stop to the nonsense once and for all.

He had been unable to sleep next to the girl even though she was beautiful and skilled, and the sex had been completely satisfying. *Completely* satisfying! He repeated that to himself just to be sure.

He stopped by the grub hall at the center to grab a cup of coffee, pleased to see a few cowboys up and about, knowing that they would notice his disheveled state and draw the proper conclusions. Not that it mattered; it was hardly news when a cowboy nailed a girl in town.

A little deflated, he went to his trailer. It was empty; there was no love note slid under the door and no boot marks in the dust. No sign at all that Clay had even tried to get ahold of him.

“Fuck it all to hell,” he muttered, and he went inside to shower.

CLAY climbed into the driver’s seat of his trailer and turned on the GPS, punching in the name of the arena in Grand Forks. Thank heaven Charlie, his sister, had given the thing to him for his birthday two years ago, although with her usual procrastination he’d only had actual physical possession of it for three months. The finances of a rodeo rider didn’t always allow for such luxuries, and it was nice

when you didn't know a city. Made it easier to find your way and cut down on gas.

He hit the road, resolved not to think about Jeff at all. Clay had seen the dark-haired girl come on to Jeff, watched the little play with the beer bottle out of the corner of his eye, and figured he had his answer. Jeff was blowing him off. Which was fine although considering that *he* had started this whole thing, Clay thought it would have been better manners to let *him* be the one to end it.

"Nothing to end," he told himself. "Nothing at all. Nothing got started." He turned up the radio, found a country-western station, and started to sing along. Badly.

JEFF successfully avoided Clay by staying away from the arena in Grand Forks when it wasn't his turn to ride, scoping out the feed hall before going in, and keeping far away from his trailer. It was working perfectly, except that all that caution kept Clay on his mind all the time.

By the second day, he was starting to calm down, and it showed in the ring. He was mounted on a nasty spinner named Tea Party. Jeff acknowledged the owner's sense of humor, because it *hadn't* been one, but the up side was he'd come away with the high score of the day, beating Clay for the top spot and earning the winner's purse. It made him

gloat just a bit, but when BJ urged him to come down to the bar in town to buy him a drink by way of celebration, Jeff refused.

“I got something better to do than get drunk and chase skirts.”

“What’s better than that?” BJ asked, with an amazed stare.

“Gotta get some rest before we get on the road tomorrow,” Jeff said. “I need to stay in the money if I’m going to stay with the tour.”

“Clay’ll be at the bar,” BJ said slyly, watching to see how Jeff took it.

“All the more—if he gets good and plastered, all the better for me when we hit Virginia,” Jeff said. “Besides, aren’t you taking a chance driving and drinking?”

“Okay, maybe you got a point, but you’re missing half the fun of the tour.” BJ shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“I’ll do that.” Jeff watched him walk away in relief, and he wasn’t that close with most of the other riders so he got off scot free once he ducked BJ.

He turned into the narrow alleyway that led between the barns and where the trailers were parked, a convenient shortcut he’d discovered to reach his trailer without passing by Clay’s. As he rounded the corner of the barn, he stopped

short, just in time to avoid colliding with Clay, who seemed to have had a similar idea.

“Hi,” Clay said.

“Oh, hi.”

“Congratulations on your ride,” Clay said.

“That was no tea party.”

Jeff laughed nervously as they said the same thing at the same time. “Thanks, I guess.”

Clay nodded and walked past Jeff, circling as widely as he could in the narrow space. “See ya.”

“Sure thing.” Jeff was aware that his heart was pounding, and he felt sweat collect under the brim of his hat. He wanted to turn around and watch the easy roll of Clay’s hips as he walked away, but he forced himself to stay where he was. This thing between them had gotten too dangerous, and the last thing he wanted was to see Clay looking back at him. He wasn’t sure what he might do if Clay had that soft look of longing in his eyes again.

He gasped as he was slammed against the wood of the barn, and Clay’s mouth was on his, hot and seeking. His wrists were pinned above his head, and Jeff moaned into the kiss, humping his hips like a bull in heat.

Clay held him captive there, kissing him deeply as he ground against him.

Jeff wrenched his mouth away. “What the hell—”

“Sorry,” Clay muttered. He pushed himself away reluctantly and released Jeff’s wrists. He picked up his hat and slapped it against his jeans before hurrying away.

Jeff stood there in a daze, his wrists still over his head, until he came to himself and realized how ridiculous he must look. He bent to pick up his hat. That Clay! Who did he think he was, coming at him that way? Completely ignoring the fact that he was the one who had started to make things difficult between them by doing the exact same thing, Jeff lunged after Clay. He needed a good, swift ass kicking, and Jeff was just the one to give it to him.

When he headed right toward it, Jeff was appalled to realize he knew exactly where Clay had parked his trailer but justified it by telling himself that if you were going to avoid someone, you had to know where they hung out in order to do it.

When he arrived at the empty spot, he stood clenching his fists impotently. Damn that Clay! He couldn’t just drive off like that! Jeff’s sense of humor revived enough to taunt him: Clay had done just *that*, and if he wanted to kick Clay’s ass, he better get his own in gear and start the drive for Virginia, or wherever the hell they were going.

JEFF pulled into the Richmond fairgrounds and cruised the lot, looking for Clay's trailer. When he found it, he drove his to the opposite end of the lot, parking as far from Clay as he could. During the drive he decided he needed to keep his mind on his job and his dick in his pants, at least if there weren't a woman in the room. Clay was obviously trying some new psychological strategy to unnerve him so he could take the season, and Jeff wasn't going to simply cave and hand it all over to him.

If he just stayed away from Clay everything would be fine. And he probably shouldn't drink either. If he recalled correctly, there had been beer involved that one night. He definitely remembered the hangover, even if he was a little fuzzy about just how everything had come about.

He decided that he would shadow Sam, and that would keep things under wraps. Clay wouldn't dare pull anything in front of Sam.

The next morning, Jeff caught up with Sam on the way to the ring. "You know which bull I drew, Sam?"

"Yeah, Twister, and he earned his name honest."

"Heard of him. He jumps off the ground and twists in the air, doesn't he?"

Sam shook his head over the excited glow in Jeff's eyes. "Puts a cowboy on the rack. Most bulls are jumpin' straight up, maybe do a little belly roll in the air and twist when they land, but this devil puts a lot of torque into his roll. And he's a snap-spinner. You'll think he's goin' left, pure and simple, but his front end'll go northeast while his back end is headin' for Texas."

"Sounds like my kind of bull," Jeff said with a laugh.

Sam stopped walking. "Listen, Jeff, don't get hurt. You pick up an injury, and the tour's over for you. All you gotta do is qualify for the final forty-five. Don't put it all on one bull."

"Isn't that the only way to do it?" Jeff recognized the concern in Sam's face and tried to explain himself better. "You told me Doug Morgan rode that way. I'm not saying I'm in his league, but I can't ride the next bull till after I get off this one. And while I'm up there, I aim to give it my all."

A reluctant smile made laugh wrinkles dig into Sam's leathery cheeks. "You do what you have to, boy."

Jeff touched his hat in salute and walked jauntily to the ring, joining BJ at the fence.

Sam looked after him and murmured, "Not sure you're not as good as you think you are, kid."

BJ pulled his hat down lower over his eyes when Jeff walked up. "Maybe you were right."



“I don’t think I caught that.” Jeff put his hand behind his ear and leaned closer to shout, “Can you repeat it?”

BJ closed his eyes in pain. “When I woke up this morning, the sun was drilling a hole in my skull. I don’t need you adding to it. Shut the fuck up.”

“How much did you have last night?”

“The usual. I think maybe you were right about just heading out, but you didn’t say anything about drinking when you got there.”

“You okay to ride, BJ?” Jeff thought he was looking a bit green.

“I can ride even if I’m unconscious; it’s just gonna hurt more later when I stop.”

“What bull did you draw?”

“Horny Houdini. At least I got something going my way.”

“Yeah, you could just as well throw a leg over a hamburger from Wendy’s,” Jeff said.

“Yeah, he ain’t worth much. Low-point ride.”

“I guess you got to decide, do you want to live or score high?”

“I think I’ll settle for living, thank you. You got stuck with Twister. Sam give you the scoop about him?”

“Yeah.”

“Break a leg.”

“That’s show business, BJ. It’s not exactly comforting to hear that at a rodeo,” Jeff observed dryly.

“What do you think this is if it isn’t show biz?” BJ laughed and then groaned in pain. “Listen, you ride that bull and show him who’s boss. If anyone can, it’s you, and I mean it.”

“Will do.” Jeff tipped his hat, touched that BJ would even say that, before he sauntered toward the chute where his bull was penned, hearing the snorting and slamming from the irate animal.

Clay waited until Jeff had disappeared within the maze that led to the chutes before he joined BJ at the fence.

“You hear he drew Twister?”

“Yep. Why? Think he can’t handle it?”

“He can handle it okay,” Clay said shortly. He didn’t want to get into some touchy-feely conversation with BJ about his worries over Jeff’s ride. “He’s a daredevil.”

“No! Really? When did you tumble to *that*?” BJ laid on the sarcasm thick and rich.

The gate burst open, and Twister leaped into the air, showing off that trademark move. BJ leaned over the fence

to watch, but Clay stood with his back to the fence, his elbows hooked on the rail, pretending he wasn't interested.

"He's a good rider. I don't think he knows *how* good. I hope he earns a really good score." Clay paused for a moment, but he couldn't keep from adding, "So I can beat it."

BJ rubbed his eyes. Maybe this hangover was fucking with his head more than he'd thought. "What is *with* you two? A couple years on the tour and it's just the usual competitive crap between cowboys, and now all of a sudden this year it's war?"

"I guess we found out we just don't mix; oil and water, you know," Clay said stiffly.

"Birds of a feather, more like," BJ scoffed.

"I'm going to beat his ass this year, no matter what."

"Well, you got your work cut out. He's on fire out there." BJ jerked his head toward the ring.

Clay turned around to look. He'd been trying not to notice Jeff's ride, but BJ's comment and the sound of the crowd's wild appreciation made it hard. The sight of Jeff on the back of the bull, his body all fluid and lithe, hips working, his spine curved one moment and snapping straight and tall the next with the twisting motion of the animal made him want to applaud and cheer along with BJ, who had stepped up on the bottom rung of the fence by now,

yelling and waving his hat, hangover forgotten for the moment.

The horn blew, and Jeff let go just as the bull bucked up its back end, flipping him high into the air in a spectacular arc. He hit the ground rolling, came up onto his feet in one graceful movement, and took off for the fence. He jumped for it just in time with the bull snorting at his heels. Clay could see him grinning as he swung a leg over and straddled the fence, waving at the enthusiastic crowd and clasping both hands over his head in triumph.

“On fire,” Clay repeated in a low voice. It was a good ride. He might just have to tell him so.

JEFF was pissed. It was one thing if he wanted to ignore Clay, but to figure out that now Clay was ducking *him* just pissed him right the hell off. He’d see Clay in the distance and work his way through the crowds trying to catch up to him, but it was like Clay had some kind of radar scanning device on him. By the time Jeff got to where Clay had been standing, the man would be gone.

He tried staking out the grub hall but never managed to spot Clay. The man had to eat, didn’t he? He had to drink coffee sometime!

It would have been a breach of competition etiquette to jump Clay before his ride, and Jeff wasn't that desperate. However, he did take up a position front and center on the fence, flanked by Sam on one side and BJ on the other to witness Clay's ride. Every cowboy always knew where Sam was, so Jeff knew that Clay had to be aware of his presence even if he refused to look over that way. And somehow, some way, he was going to *force* Clay to acknowledge that he was standing there, big as life.

Jeff smirked a bit as he watched Clay's ride. Not one of his best, and he hoped maybe this *thing*, whatever it was going on between them, had finally managed to shake Clay's concentration. The bull Clay was mounted on wasn't doing him any favors either, a bit sluggish but not so bad that the judges would grant a reride, most likely.

Jeff stayed right on Sam's heels as he went to talk to Clay after the ride, amused when Clay gave him a quick glance but then ignored him.

"You want to ask for a reride?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, if you think they'd give it to me," Clay said, brushing the dust off his jeans.

"You won't know till you ask." Sam nodded briefly and strode off to the judges' box.

"Seen you ride better," Jeff said.

Clay took a deep breath. He couldn't go on pretending Jeff wasn't standing there, big as life, especially as his—"Thanks. Yeah, not one of my best. Saw you on Twister earlier."

"And?"

"It was a good ride," Clay said grudgingly.

"It was a great ride, admit it!"

"Don't you ever get tired of blowing your own horn?"

"Do you?"

Clay bit his lip. He had a feeling they weren't talking about bragging rights any more, and the memory of the few kisses they'd shared seemed to be seared into his mind and body. He felt hot and uneasy at the thought of it. "Not here!" he hissed.

Jeff's temper had cooled to a simmer, but this unwarranted implication that he was trying to start something turned up the flame. "What the *fuck* are you talking about?"

"Meet me at my trailer later. After supper." After flinging this terse order at him, Clay turned on his heel and walked away to meet Sam.

And Sam was the only thing that was saving him from a beatdown right here and now, scandal be damned, Jeff

decided. Clay needed a piece of his mind, and he aimed to give it to him.

DARK came early in March, and Jeff was still eating his supper when he saw Clay get up and leave the grub hall. Clay looked over the assembled men to see where Jeff was sitting, but his face didn't give away that he'd been searching for him.

Probably wanted to be sure he wasn't waiting to jump him outside, Jeff thought. He had no interest in kissing Clay at all, and he would make that point perfectly clear when they talked. It had been Clay who jumped him, and he needed to be told about that.

The door to Clay's trailer stood open in invitation when he arrived, which just pissed Jeff off even more, along with the fact that Clay hadn't thought it necessary to tell Jeff where he had parked. The man was so arrogant he thought all he had to do was whistle and Jeff would come to heel like a dog? Well, he had a lesson in manners coming, and Jeff thought he was just the man to deliver it.

He pushed the door open. An excited little thrill danced down his spine at the happy, expectant look on Clay's face, but he was riding a wave of anger that couldn't be denied. He hauled off and socked Clay on the kisser.

Clay ducked fast enough that the blow glanced off his cheekbone and grabbed Jeff by the upper arms, slamming him against the wall. “You’ll break a hand one day going for the jaw.”

“It’ll be worth it.” Jeff glared at his captor, and with a mighty surge, freed himself, speedily turning Clay so that he was against the wall and slamming his weight against him to keep him there. “What the fuck were you thinking kissing me in that alley?”

“You didn’t seem to mind at the time,” Clay said with a smirk that Jeff wanted to wipe off his face.

“You fucking asshole,” Jeff growled. He backed his hips up to slam them into Clay’s once more. “You don’t know me.”

The smirk died from Clay’s face. “You’re just so hot, I couldn’t resist.”

“Really?” Jeff knew there was a stupid grin on his face, but he couldn’t seem to wipe it off.

“I missed you.”

“Damn,” Jeff groaned. “We have to stop this.”

“Okay, right after we do it again.” Clay studied the uncertainty in Jeff’s face. “Please?”

Jeff dropped his head, burying his face in the crook of Clay’s neck, inhaling the other man deeply. “Maybe.”



“I want you.”

The throaty voice in his ear combined with the hot breath on his neck made Jeff shiver with lust. How did this man do this to him? He didn't know at what point he'd gotten hard enough to pound nails, but he rubbed his aching cock against Clay's groin, glad to feel an answering hardness there.

He attacked Clay's mouth and released his hands to grapple with the buckle on his belt. If he was going to do this again, he wanted skin. He wanted to see the object of his lust.

Clay pushed him away long enough to say, “Next time you undo that belt it'll be the first-prize buckle on there.”

“Not a chance, cowboy. You'll only get your hands on that buckle when you take my pants off,” Jeff taunted with a savage grin. He took Clay's lips again, thrusting his tongue between them. When he finally got Clay's jeans undone, he pushed them down the other man's thighs. His hand trembled as he circled his fingers around the hard flesh that stood up proudly between them.

He caressed the ridge of the head delicately even though he just wanted to grab on and pump. His thumb swept over the head, picking up a couple drops of fluid to help lubricate his hand.

He kept his mouth on Clay's but gave a smothered yelp when he felt hands at his own belt, fumbling with urgency. The air was cool on his ass as his jeans were yanked down, but Clay's hand was hot on his dick, pulling on it with confident sureness.

There was none of the uncertainty he sometimes experienced with women, no searching for the spot; Jeff knew just what to do as he handled Clay. The quickening of his breath and tiny moans told Jeff when he found a sensitive spot. The way Clay's cock felt sliding against his palm was incredibly arousing.

Jeff lifted his hand to lick it and returned to stroking the other man. He could feel their hands moving together, picking up speed. Clay's hand covered his, and Jeff's hips bucked as he felt their erections pressed together, hot and hard. The erotic dance of hips and cocks and lips culminated in an explosion of light behind his eyelids when Jeff came, spurting hot liquid over their joined hands.

"Oh yeah," Clay moaned, working his hand furiously. He grabbed his own cock and gave a twist at the end of each stroke, coming quickly after Jeff, who was still swaying in a post-orgasmic haze.

They stood pressed together, trying to catch their breath after the cataclysmic high they'd shared. Clay slid his hands around Jeff, digging his fingers into the firm cheeks.

Jeff jumped when the door to the trailer opened suddenly.

“Uh, sorry, excuse me,” came Sam’s voice. He pushed the door almost all the way closed and spoke through the crack. “Clay, there’s been a change up in the draw tomorrow. You’ll be ridin’ Boom-Boom. Just thought you’d want to know.” The door shut completely with a firm click.

“Oh my God, he saw my ass,” Jeff moaned.

“No, he didn’t,” Clay said comfortingly. “My hands were covering it.”

“Oh, that’s so much better!” Jeff tried to break free of Clay’s grip.

“Your shirttail was over my hands,” Clay offered.

“Great, but he still knows exactly what was going on!”

“Well, what the hell was he doing barging in without knocking?”

“I’ll ask him that when he grills us about what *we* were up to,” Jeff said with heavy sarcasm.

“Relax, it’s only Sam. He’s friends with Doug and Jamie, he won’t care.”

“Other people will.”

“It had to come out sometime.”

“No, it didn’t!” Jeff managed to free himself and pulled up his pants. “And what do we tell him? That I needed help learning how to button up my pants and you were teaching me?”

“Why do we need to tell him anything? Sam won’t care. He’s a friend of Doug Morgan’s, and he’s fine with—homos.”

“So now we’re queer?”

“What if we are?”

“I don’t want to ride in the gay rodeo and get bashed by ‘real’ cowboys.”

The forlorn note in Jeff’s voice shook Clay. “You still like women?”

“Yeah. Kinda.”

“Kinda?”

“I like ‘em, they just never put a kick in my gallop like you do.”

“Maybe we’re not queer. Maybe we’re bisexual.”

“I think I like open-minded better,” Jeff said gloomily.

“Okay, but you’re not being very open-minded about it. How you expect anyone else to accept it?”

“Can we lock the door while we’re having this conversation?” Jeff squirmed free, and Clay let him go. Jeff

pulled up his pants and buckled his belt. “Sticky again. I’m going to run out of drawers.”

“I guess that’ll force you to do laundry for once.” Clay hoisted his jeans up and buttoned the top button, letting his belt hang free as he went to lock the door. “Stay with me tonight?”

Jeff’s lips quirked slightly. “Are you going to fall off the bed and run out of here in the morning again?”

“I’ll try to restrain myself, seeing as we’re in my trailer.” Clay held out a hand, and Jeff took it reluctantly. “I want to see you.”

“Like, take off my clothes?”

Clay laughed at the outraged expression on Jeff’s face. “Yeah, bare naked. I want skin.”

Jeff touched the reddening mark on Clay’s cheekbone with his free hand. “Sorry.”

“It’s nothing.” Clay took Jeff by the hand and led him back to the bedroom.

“Wow, this is nice,” Jeff said looking around. “It’s bigger than mine.”

“Yeah, it is,” Clay said proudly, letting his hips sway with his loose belt flapping from side to side.

“Not that, you fucker. The trailer!”

“Bought it from Bobby Dean when he retired. Gave me a good price.”

Uneasily the two men stood in the doorway, trying not to look at the bed, which took up most of the room. Jeff felt the warmth of Clay’s fingers twined with his and gave them a squeeze. “Okay, I’ll go first.”

He stepped away, feeling self-conscious. Clay was looking at him like he was a big juicy steak and Clay hadn’t eaten in a week. But Jeff wasn’t going to turn back now. He was no chicken, and besides, his pants were uncomfortable and sticky.

He unbuttoned his shirt, feeling his face turn red as Clay avidly followed his fingers. When he wrenched the shirt off and tossed it toward the window seat, Clay let out a deep sigh that made Jeff smirk proudly. He looked down at his abs and brushed his hand over them before resting his fingers on his belt.

“Want help with your boots?”

“Sure.” Jeff braced one hand on the dresser and held out his foot.

Clay knelt and tugged at the boot, causing Jeff to stagger to regain his balance and making them both chuckle. Jeff held up his other foot, and Clay took care of that boot.

Jeff took a breath and undid his jeans, gathering his boxers along with them and pushing them down to pool at

his ankles. He knew his dick wasn't much to look at soft, but Clay seemed to like it.

Clay reached out and trailed a fingertip lightly over the purple bruise on Jeff's hip. Jeff's knees gave out when Clay leaned forward and licked over the head of his cock.

"Steady there, cowboy," Clay murmured, and he grabbed his hips. He looked up at the lean, sleek lines of Jeff's torso, his firm pecs with dark nipples, his wide shoulders, and his slim hips. He slid his hands around to knead the lush roundness of Jeff's ass, letting his fingers trail in the valley between the cheeks.

Jeff bucked forward at his touch, his cock slowly filling and rising before Clay's fascinated gaze. He couldn't resist leaning forward and capturing the bobbing head in his mouth to get another taste. He gagged when Jeff thrust forward.

"Sorry," Jeff gasped. He rested his hands on Clay's shoulders to balance himself, trying to keep from lunging forward and strangling the other man. He was totally turned on at the sight of Clay, fully dressed, kneeling in front of him, his eyes closed blissfully as he sucked on Jeff's cock. His dick was as hard as if he hadn't come only fifteen minutes ago, something he thought he'd left behind with his late teens, but the sight his cock sliding in and out between Clay's lips was more arousing than it had ever been with any girl.

Clay drew off, letting his lips catch on the ridge of Jeff's cock before releasing him. "You're gorgeous, baby." He drew a finger down the sexy trail of hair that led from Jeff's naval to his cock.

"Your turn," Jeff said breathlessly. He needed to get himself under control again, and he wanted to see Clay. He lifted Clay's shirt over his head, wondering why this seemed more sinful and forbidden to him than any woman he'd ever undressed.

Clay stood up and smiled, undoing the one button holding his jeans up and letting them drop. His boxer briefs did little to restrain his stiffening cock.

"Take them off," Jeff ordered hoarsely, clutching Clay's shirt in front of him.

Clay toed his boots off and pushed the briefs down his thighs and off, standing proudly naked. He moved his hips, making his hardening cock sway from side to side. "What do you think?"

"Top score." Jeff dropped the shirt and came forward to touch the hard, chiseled body and run his fingers through Clay's chest hair.

"Not the best?" Clay backed Jeff up until the backs of his thighs hit the bed, pushed him down onto the mattress, and fell on top of him. He rubbed his body over Jeff's, unable



to believe that they had finally gotten here and that it felt so damn good.

They were kissing and rolling together, legs entwined, hips working in a frenzy of lust and desire, when Jeff started to laugh. Clay lifted his head when he felt Jeff's body start to shake.

"Let me in on the joke."

"It's no joke. I'm just... surprised."

"Surprised by what?"

"How good it feels. I never thought, with another guy...."

Clay sat up, swinging a leg over Jeff's body to straddle him. He grabbed both wrists and pinned them by Jeff's head, bending closer until they shared a breath between parted lips. "There's something about you, Jeff. Always something."

"I'm just an ordinary guy—" Jeff stopped when Clay shook his head vigorously.

"You're not. You're special."

"Special how?"

"You taste good." Clay leaned forward and licked Jeff's nipple, liking the shivering response. He lipped at the hardening nub, nipped at it gently, and licked and sucked it until Jeff was writhing and pleading beneath him. He looked up, his lips shiny, and asked, "What do you want?"

“Damn!” Jeff arched his back, trying to get some friction where he needed it most. “Don’t make me beg.”

“I like it when you beg,” Clay taunted softly. “I want you to tell me what you want me to do to you.”

“Suck the other one,” Jeff said. He groaned when soft, wet lips enveloped the other nipple, teasing it until it was as hard as the first. When Clay leaned forward, his dick rubbed against Jeff’s, so hot and hard, so different from the softness of a woman. And Jeff was finding that being held down by Clay’s weight and hands was kind of hot too, even though he knew he could easily get away. He spread his legs and bucked his hips up.

Clay flattened himself against Jeff’s body, trapping their cocks between them, enjoying the slide of hot, silky skin against his groin.

“This is too much,” Jeff muttered.

“Not enough,” Clay countered. He released Jeff’s wrists and kissed his way down the whipcord slim body, jumping when he felt a callused hand on his cock. “Oh yeah, damn, baby, that’s so good.”

He held himself up on hands and knees, surprised when Jeff slid down the bed with a wicked grin. He dropped his head to watch and groaned with heartfelt delight when he felt Jeff’s lips around his cock.

Jeff's dark eyes met his, and Clay lost himself in sensation as Jeff licked him from head to base before sucking him in. His hips started moving, and he thrust hard, enjoying the gurgling sounds from the other man, unable to hold back. He felt as if he were soaring in the sky on the wings of a wild bird for just a moment before he fell back to earth in an explosion of pleasure, fireworks going off behind his eyes. He heard his own voice crying out, and then he was kneeling there, trembling and sweating.

"Here, lie down. I know the feeling. Weak legs," Jeff said, pulling Clay down onto his side.

"What about you?"

Jeff liked the way Clay mumbled when he was satiated with good sex. "You can do me when you recover."

Clay felt a little silly lying there with a goofy smile on his face while Jeff looked like the cat that got the cream, so he rolled Jeff onto his back and dove down onto his cock. Jeff yelped and surged upward. Clay grabbed his hip, rubbing a tiny circle with his thumb as he struggled to catch his breath and not gag at the same time. He found Jeff's balls and fondled them as he sucked.

The whimpering and squirming made him sure he was onto something good, so Clay worked his hand, stroking the part of Jeff's dick he couldn't handle in his mouth. The spurt of cum surprised him; he'd forgotten about that part but after a moment of indecision decided if Jeff could swallow it,

he damn well could too. It was salty and a little bitter but had a creamy consistency he thought he could get used to.

He held Jeff's softening cock in his mouth, licking it clean till the movement from Jeff's hips stopped. Then he licked his way up the enticing furrow along the top of Jeff's thigh and over to the six-pack of his stomach.

When their mouths met in a lingering kiss, Clay tasted his own cum in Jeff's mouth. They swapped spit for a few minutes until Clay pulled away to take in a giant yawn.

"Time for me to get going," Jeff said.

"No, stay. I want you to."

After a moment of indecision, Jeff yawned. "Okay."

Clay reached over to turn out the light, pleased when Jeff rolled into his arms, facing him, insinuating one leg between his. "Was it good for you?"

The silence that followed made him question what they'd done and whether Jeff really wanted to be here.

"You know it was, you fucking score whore. You want me to give you a point ranking next time?"

Clay chuckled. "For me too."

BOTH men woke up easily at five a.m. out of long habit. They were sleeping face to face, curled up in each other, but this time, when Clay opened his eyes, he was eager for the sight of Jeff's face.

Jeff was awake and already grinning at him. "I'm disappointed."

"In?"

"No falling off the bed, no hysterical crying and running out of the room—"

"I did *not* cry!"

"Can't prove it by me."

Clay kissed him. "That help?"

"Some." Jeff heaved a sigh as he rubbed himself against Clay.

"Second thoughts?"

"And third."

"So what do you want to do about this?" Clay picked his words carefully, trying not to put anything out there that might panic Jeff.

"Get a shower, get some breakfast, get ready to ride."

“Yeah, maybe that’s best.” Clay opened his arms, and Jeff slid away from him to sit on the edge of the bed. Clay ogled him, wondering when he’d become an ass man.

Jeff bent over, and Clay realized he was pulling on his pants. “You can shower here.”

“I’ll go back to my place. Clean boxers,” Jeff explained. He stood up and stamped into his boots, bending over to kiss Clay on the mouth. “Meet you at the chuck wagon for breakfast?”

“Yeah.” Clay watched with regret as Jeff found his shirt and buttoned it up.

“See ya.”

“WHEN did you two kiss and make up?” BJ asked, setting down his tray.

Jeff answered without a blush. “Last night. It was right out of a regular *ro-mance* novel.”

It was Clay who was too embarrassed to talk this time, and he wondered how Jeff could remain so composed, especially in the light of what had gone on between them last night. He felt especially embarrassed when he remembered some of the things he’d done. It was weird looking at Jeff

calmly eating breakfast and remembering how they'd been rolling around naked together on his bed.

"Well, it's good to see you two getting along. It'd give the sport a bad name if the fans saw the two best riders at each other's throats all the time." BJ nodded wisely.

"You're not doing yourself justice, Beej," Jeff said.

"I'm not kidding myself. I'm a good rider, but this isn't my year. Touch wood," BJ rapped the table, "if neither one of you falls off, one of you are gonna win the season."

"It's not *if* you go down, it's *when*," Jeff said. "Your winning time'll come."

"You know it, dude. I'm just snapping at your heels." BJ pointed at Jeff with a piece of bacon. "You better be careful. Don't fall asleep in the wrong place, or you might wake up dead."

Jeff smirked at the look on Clay's face. "I'll be very careful where I sleep," he teased.

"Fucker," Clay said under his breath. He turned bright red and grabbed his hat when he spotted Sam making his way towards their table. "Gotta go, got something to take care of." He jumped up and left Jeff sitting there with BJ.

Jeff craned his neck to find out what scared Clay off like that and saw Sam coming toward them. Then it was his turn to go red. "Um, see you Beej, got something to do before the

ride.” He hightailed it out of there, wondering if he would ever be able to speak to Sam again without stuttering or blushing like a schoolgirl.

Sam set down his coffee cup and swung a long leg over the bench, smirking as he watched the two riders hurry away.

BJ cocked his head and stared at him quizzically. “Want to let me in on what’s going on?”

“Nope.” Sam grinned.

JEFF caught up to Clay and nudged him with his shoulder, falling into step beside him. “You could have waited for me.”

“I just can’t face Sam right now.”

“You! What about me? It was my—” Jeff looked around cautiously, suddenly realizing what he’d almost said out loud.

“Yeah, thank God for that!”

“You are such an asshole.”

“True, but maybe that’s why you like me.”

Jeff decided the conversation was getting too dangerous for a public place. “Where do you live?”



“Texas. You?”

“Idaho. Saving up for my own spread.”

Clay nodded. “That what we all want, isn’t it?”

“Like all of us?”

“Cowboy dream. Have your own spread, be your own boss.” Clay took a breath. “Like Doug Morgan. He has a place, and he used to ride to make money to keep it going.”

“Heard Jamie bought in and Doug retired from riding. He trains bulls now. Has a few of his own in the rodeo.”

“And they run stock,” Clay plowed on, ignoring the opening to speak about Doug and Jamie. The *gay* cowboys.

They walked in silence for a moment. “So where do you work in the off-season?”

“I work for my dad. He’s got a small ranch, raises organic cattle for restaurants even though he thinks it’s bullshit.”

Jeff nodded wisely. “Grass-fed tastes better, and it’s better for you and kinder on the cows.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“Went to U Idaho. Now I work with the university extension in animal sciences,” Jeff said.

Clay's face lit up at their shared interest. "You're an Aggie? Me too. Texas A&M. So they don't mind that you take time off to ride?"

Jeff sighed. "I have to work part time. No benefits, no vacation or sick time. But it's worth it."

"Which? The riding or the work?"

"Both, actually. Working with the farmers in my county I learn more than I teach. And I love to ride. Can't imagine my life without it."

"Me neither, but one day, we'll have to hang up the spurs too."

Jeff nodded but gave Clay a wicked smile. "But it is not this day."

"*Lord of the Rings, Return of the King,*" Clay said promptly.

"Okay, this is spooky. You're a cowboy geek."

"Takes one to know one." Clay hesitated. He had to go get ready for his ride. He bumped Jeff's shoulder gently with his own. "Want to catch a cup of coffee later?"

"Sure thing." Jeff beamed as he watched Clay walk away, wondering if the offer of coffee meant what he thought it meant.

COFFEE turned out to be just coffee.

“We’ve got a long haul to St. Louis. Maybe we better get on the road.”

Clay wondered if maybe Jeff was having second thoughts about it all. “You know that rest stop outside Watertown? Where everyone stops for the first leg?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Couple years ago I was doing calf roping, and I had my horse along. I wanted a place where I could walk him around, let him eat a little grass. There’s another stop, fifty miles further on. Hardly anyone on the circuit stops there.”

Jeff’s face brightened. “Give me your cell phone number.” He programmed it into his phone as Clay recited it. “I’ll see you there.”

Tired as he was, it was worth driving another fifty miles just to have the chance for a little private conversation. Jeff wasn’t hoping for much more; he didn’t want to put a name on the longing that drove him to seek out Clay’s company even though they seemed to fight more than—anything else. It was wearing to always be looking over his shoulder and worrying about comments from the other cowboys.

BJ was beginning to notice that something was up, and Sam—Jeff shuddered at the memory of Sam busting in on

them. He still hadn't been able to look Sam in the eye since, and Sam was doing a lot of smirking, but at least he hadn't told anyone. Sam wouldn't do a thing like that.

He secured the loose items in his trailer and drove into town to fuel up. He had to wait in a long line of other cowboys pulling out for the next stop and lost sight of Clay's rig in the meantime. By the time he pulled onto the highway, Jeff was feeling pretty lonely. Used to be that never bothered him; usually he used the time to think about the next town, the next ring, and the next bull.

Clay was getting to him, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that. And he wasn't sure how he felt about what they were doing together. As long as it was a private matter, it wasn't anybody's business but theirs. It wasn't that he needed it; he could quit any time. But the excitement of their shared secret almost rivaled being on a tricky bull's back. Just hang on for the ride, Jeff told himself. It would end one day, and then it would be over.

It was after dark and cold in the cab. His radio wasn't working, hadn't since the second stop on the tour, so he had nothing to distract him from the mileage markers flashing by as he drove. Cars passed him constantly on the left, cutting in sharply in front of him to show their disdain for his old trailer.

He was startled when his cell rang, and he fumbled getting it out of his pocket with one hand. Flipping it open,

he glanced at the name and smiled. Clay's voice was soft in his ear as he sang, "*Meet me in St. Louis....*"

"I can't believe you know all the words," Jeff said when the song ended.

"My sister likes old movies."

"You know what they say about Judy Garland fans," Jeff teased, and then he stopped. Crap, a gay joke! He hadn't meant to make any overt reference to what was going on. Didn't want Clay to have second thoughts until after—

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Listen, we're about to pass the big rest stop, and then it's the next one. I'll flash my lights once we're near to it, and you can follow me."

"Okay, great."

It was amazing how much of a lift it was to see the lights on a trailer up ahead of him flash a couple times, how much less lonely it felt just knowing that he knew the man on the road ahead of him. That he would have someone to talk to instead of just trying to fall asleep in the cold trailer by himself and driving on the next day.

Which just made him wonder how well he really knew Clay. He'd seen him around on the circuit for as long as he'd

been riding. They had clashed immediately with the mutual antipathy of men who size each other up as their main competition. It was like Clay was a little burr under his saddle, keeping him on his toes, so he kept trying harder to beat him. Which made this all the more complicated.

Until today, he hadn't even known where Clay lived, and now he knew Clay lived in Texas. Not a casual drive from Idaho.

"Slow down, cowboy, it's not like you're going to take a walk down the aisle with him," Jeff jeered at himself. The sound of his own voice in the cab startled him, and he was glad when the turn signal started blinking on the trailer ahead.

He followed Clay's rig into the circular drive and onto the grass under a stand of trees. There were a few other vehicles parked there, but not too many. There were no fast food restaurants or gas stations, only restrooms and some water spigots.

He pulled on his jacket and dug his hands in his pockets as he walked toward Clay's trailer. He could see the orange glow of a cigarette in the darkness.

"Smoke?"

"Sure."

Clay held the pack out for him. Moonlight drained the color out of everything, and Jeff wondered how Clay was

feeling. He looked blue and cold. Then Clay cupped his hands around his lighter, and the warmth of the tiny flame reflecting off his hands made him more real to Jeff.

They smoked in silence, looking out over the trees and fields dotted with lingering patches of snow. This was the awkward part. Did they just return to their own trailers or did Clay want to....

Clay dropped his stub and ground it out under his heel. "Coming?"

"Not yet," Jeff muttered.

"Funny."

He jumped when he felt Clay's warm fingers close around his hand, but said nothing, merely followed him, his nerves all jumpy in his body. He wanted Clay's touch badly, but he felt that maybe they needed to talk about what they were doing.

Once he was inside, however, pressed against the door, he melted under the soft kisses Clay dropped on his lips. He heard the tell-tale click of a lock and started to chuckle.

"Fool me once," Clay said, and he kissed Jeff again.

Jeff clung to him, unwilling to say anything or do anything that would stop the wonderful feeling of Clay's mouth on his, and their bodies pressed close although he could feel very little through their bulky jackets.

Clay pulled him off the door and turned so he was walking Jeff backward toward the bed, kissing him all the way. “Let’s get naked.”

The only light in the camper came from the moonlight streaming in the windows. Standing on the opposite side of the bed, Jeff watched Clay undress as he did the same, wanting to see that glorious body again before he was too close to do anything but feel. Every piece of clothing removed unveiled secret skin covering hard muscle and sinew that he longed to touch. The doubts were pushed to the back of his mind for now. Talk was overrated anyway.

When they came together in the middle of the bed, Jeff heard a tremulous sigh from both of them. Their skin was hot as they rubbed against one other, blazing like some fire had been set between them. The sweep of Clay’s tongue against his and the mere touch of his hand sliding down his back was unbearably erotic to Jeff. He shivered from sensory overload, and yet, he wanted more.

He pushed his leg between Clay’s legs so their groins nestled together, wanting the smooth glide of skin as he ground his cock against Clay’s. One of Clay’s hands was on his ass, clutching his cheek, fingers digging in and pulling him impossibly closer.

Jeff broke for air, gasping with arousal; Clay rolled onto his back, pulling Jeff along so he was straddling him. “Cowboy up?”



Jeff gave a shaky laugh. “Cowboy up.” When he leaned down to kiss Clay, he felt their hard cocks trapped between their bellies digging into him. He braced his hands on either side of Clay’s head and got to his knees, dragging his dick slowly over Clay’s torso.

“God, you’re so hot,” Clay groaned. His eyes glittered in the dim light as he watched the movement of Jeff’s hips. He reached up and pinched Jeff’s nipples, pleased with the gasp he got. Clay slid his hands down to Jeff’s hips, pulling him back down to sit on his lap. “Ride ’em, cowboy.”

Watching the lean body undulate above him, imitating in slow motion what Jeff did in the ring when mounted on a bull, Clay wondered if anything could look hotter. He planted his feet on the bed and raised up, watching the ripple of Jeff’s abdomen and groin muscles as he adjusted to the bucking motion, mesmerized by the sight of the other man’s hard shaft bobbing against his stomach. He felt the sexy slip of skin and muscle over the jutting hipbones with his thumbs, digging his fingers in as Jeff expertly balanced on top of him, knowing he’d never look at him in the ring the same way again now that he knew exactly what that body looked like under the ordinary clothes making those same movements on the back of a bull.

Jeff moved his hand to encircle their erect cocks, pressing them together. Clay could feel Jeff’s balls, tight and full, dragging against his.

“I’m close,” he warned.

“Me too,” Jeff gasped.

Clay watched fascinated as Jeff’s body seemed to stretch luxuriously and quiver, his head lifting and his mouth falling open, his eyes closed to mere slits as he moved faster.

At the first spurt of liquid, Clay moved his hand to cover their dicks, catching the fluid and using it to lubricate their movement. His hips bucked up off the mattress, lifting Jeff with him as they moved faster, and then he was coming too. His eyes squeezed shut, but his mind filled with visions of Jeff moving above him.

He circled Jeff’s waist with his free hand when he felt the other man come to rest against his chest. The beat of his heart seemed to throb in his spent cock with their hands still joined around it.

When he felt Jeff’s lips on his cheek he turned his head to meet them.

Slowly Jeff slipped off Clay’s body to one side, their legs still entwined. Clay stroked Jeff’s flank and rested his hand on his hip, feeling a weird kind of intimacy in doing that. It was the first time they had actually planned to get together and... do things. And instead of wanting Jeff to leave right away, he actually looked forward to keeping him here all night, being able to look at him while he slept, to touch his skin, stroke his hair....

THE morning sun gilded Clay into some kind of olden Greek god, Jeff thought, even while he poked fun at himself for such a flight of fancy. He had a sudden desire to see Clay naked on the back of a horse at sunrise, thinking he would look like some kind of ancient warrior, his body finely chiseled with muscle, strong arms and firm thighs, gleaming in the sunlight.

But that would chafe like hell and, besides that, was totally impractical in this world. Jeff was still chuckling quietly to himself when Clay opened his eyes.

“What are you doing?”

“Just had a funny thought.”

“Not that, with your hand.”

“This hand?” Jeff held up his free hand.

“The other hand.” Clay reached down to capture the hand lightly stroking his erection.

“Oh, *that* hand. I could stop.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I don’t want to bother you.”

Jeff yelped in surprise when Clay pinned him on the bed, grinding down against him. He spread his legs, trapping Clay's cock between them. It was short and wild; Clay thrust against him, Jeff arched up searching for friction. Their chests were heaving when they stopped.

"Good morning," Clay said eventually, raising his head to nip at Jeff's throat.

"I need coffee."

"We'll have to drive to get it. Want to clean up?"

Without a hookup, the hot water was limited so both men did their best with washcloths and towels.

Jeff watched Clay get dressed, regretting a society that made such a man wear clothes. "What's that scar from?"

"This?" Clay touched the scar on his side with his fingers. "Bull got me with his horns once."

Jeff nodded. He had scars too, and both of them were currently sporting a collection of bruises and scrapes from the falls and bumps they took.

Regretfully, Jeff put his hat on. It seemed to signal the end of their intimacy, and he felt Clay begin to withdraw from their secret bubble, retreating back to the impersonal friendliness of two men who pursued the same prize.

"Where can a man get a cup of coffee?"

“There’s a greasy spoon at the next stop. Want to get breakfast?”

“Yeah. I’ll follow you.”

Jeff returned to his own trailer. It was too early for most of the other people parked there to be up and about.

He followed Clay’s trailer out onto the highway, the hum of the tires a familiar backdrop to his life.

WHEN they pulled in at the next major rest stop, Jeff walked into the diner behind Clay, nearly crashing into him when he came to a sudden stop. “What the fuck’s wrong with you?”

“Caleb and BJ are at a table,” Clay hissed.

“So? Let’s go sit with them.”

“How’s it going to look, us walking in together?”

“Like we met in the parking lot? Clay, we’ve known each other over two years.” Jeff waited, but Clay stood still, biting his lips. “All right, I’ll go over first. You eat at the counter by yourself if you want.”

The irritation building inside him made him ask himself what kept drawing him back to Clay, choosing to forget about those achingly private moments they had shared. Jeff

turned away and stomped to the table, dropping onto the bench seat next to BJ and shoving him over with his hip.

BJ yelped in surprise. “Geez, Jeff, why don’t you join us?”

Muscling BJ over helped restore some of his lost good mood. Jeff stole a piece of bacon off his plate and munched on it. “Don’t mind if I do.”

“Where’s your friend Clay?” Caleb asked.

Jeff glared at the other man and opened his mouth to blast him but before he could, Clay walked over and asked, “Room for one more?”

“Sure.” Caleb moved over, sliding his plate out of Clay’s reach. “Just asking Jeff where you were.”

“Why would *he* know?” Clay demanded angrily.

Caleb looked surprised. “Just you two keep an eye on each other, always trying to outdo each other. Figured that’s why.”

“Okay, as long as that’s the reason.” Clay picked up a menu and held it in front of his face.

Jeff hated how Clay’s mood had changed from when they were in the trailer. He didn’t quite know what to make of this *thing* himself, but damned if he was going to snap everyone’s head off over it.

Sensing danger, BJ talked just to fill the silence. “So, Caleb, how many times have you pulled old Terrence out of the dust so far this year?”

“Who told that guy he could ride bulls?” Caleb asked. “He’s not that bad on a horse, but damn me if he can stick on a bull for the full eight.”

“Get a load of his fucking sequins too. I suppose they like that sort of thing in the regular rodeo?” BJ asked.

“Dude, it’s worse than it looks. Those things *sting* if he catches you in the face with them,” Caleb exclaimed.

“He grew up in Vegas,” Jeff said.

“Ah. That explains it,” Caleb said. “Still, he looks like a cowboy from a movie poster, not a proper bull rider. Kinda gay.”

The dead silence made Caleb look up, wondering what he’d said.

BJ struggled on. “Well, at least Terrence isn’t a dead loss on a bucking pony. I thought he used to do okay. I’m surprised he hasn’t broken a bone this year.”

“It’s not *if* you go down, it’s *when*,” Jeff recited. Clay glanced up and gave him a look of pure hatred that confused him.

“Season’s young,” Caleb said cheerfully. “Give him time. I trust Terrence to break something before the year’s out. Just hope it’s on him and not the poor bull.”

“Or the clowns,” Jeff said, wondering why Clay was so fucking annoyed.

BJ started talking about other riders, and he and Caleb analyzed their strengths and weaknesses with accuracy and wicked ridicule.

Jeff shoveled his food in, wanting nothing more than to be away from the table and Clay, sitting there all touchy and stone-faced. He didn’t think he could go on this way; trying to outguess Clay’s moods was worse than dealing with a woman.

“Let me out,” BJ said.

Seeing that he was ready to pay and leave, Jeff swallowed a last gulp of coffee and stood up. “I’m done. Coming, Clay?”

“You go on ahead,” Clay mumbled. He stood to let Caleb by and sat down to wrap his hands around his cup of coffee.

“Fine.”

The three cowboys paid at the cashier and went outside. “I gotta fill up,” Jeff mentioned.

“Me too,” BJ said.



“See you there,” Caleb said, pulling up his collar.

Jeff pulled under the overhang at the pump and started to fuel up. He squinted at the grey clouds; the sky was bright, but it smelled like rain to him. BJ was over at a different island, gassing up his truck.

Clay pulled up on the other side of the pumps in his rig, and Jeff faced away from him. He planned to ignore Clay from this time forward, and apparently Clay had the same idea. Jeff could hear him taking off the gas cap, putting the fuel pump in, and starting it up, but he didn’t say a word.

“Uh, excuse me?”

Jeff whipped his head around. The middle-aged man speaking to him looked like any other city man on the road, dressed in a suit with a raincoat over it, but he spoke with a slight lisp.

“Yes?” Clay looked over as Jeff spoke.

The man continued in a low voice. “Are you two cowboys?”

Jeff met Clay’s gaze and stifled a laugh, drawn together somehow in the face of this citified dude accosting them.

“Uh, yeah.”

“*Real* cowboys?”

“Yeah,” Clay answered this time, stepping closer. “What’s it to you?”

“I always told myself if I ever met a real cowboy, I had to offer to suck his cock,” the stranger said. He smiled nervously and licked his lips. “How would you two like a blow job? There’s the restroom—or one of your campers—”

“Get away from us, you cocksucker!” Clay exploded. The growing uneasiness that had kept him on edge all morning suddenly erupted, and he realized it was the memory of having Jeff’s cock in his mouth that was bugging him. Only once, but he’d done it, and now this stranger put a face on his fears, jamming his nose into it like he was a dog being housetrained.

Jeff was as shocked as the stranger, but he moved between him and Clay, putting his hand up in the universal stop sign. “No, but thanks. Get lost.”

“Are you sure?” The stranger took a few steps back. Clay’s reaction appeared to scare him, but it also seemed to titillate him.

“Who the fuck do you—”

Jeff put himself between Clay and the stranger again. “I think you better take a hike, *now*, if you want to live.”

“Damn.” The stranger scurried off.

“Goddamn faggot!” Clay growled.

“Listen, we’re not any—”

Clenching his fists, Clay turned on Jeff. “You want to get your face smashed, you just keep on saying what you’re about to. You may be the same, but I’m not!”

“What makes you so different then? And what does that make me?” The face of the stranger seemed to clear things up for Jeff in a way. He was just an ordinary guy, kind of like how Jeff saw himself, not some flamer who dressed like Terrence. Maybe this liking being with Clay was just some harmless variation.

Clay struggled to answer Jeff, watching the emotions flit over his face. Jeff looked so impossibly beautiful to him right now, and the thought that he couldn’t have that.... “We’re not like them. You aren’t, and I’m sure as *hell* not.”

“If I’m going to do this, I’m at least going to own it,” Jeff said, doggedly not backing down despite Clay’s enraged expression.

“You do what you have to. I’m done,” Clay snarled. He turned and yanked the dripping hose from his trailer, jammed on the gas cap, and slammed the door. He revved the sluggish engine, which made Jeff snicker even though he was feeling as if the Earth had stopped turning. Clay stomped on the gas and peeled out, as much as anyone could in a trailer.

BJ came over and stood next to Jeff, hands on his hips as he watched Clay leave. “What got under his saddle today? He wake up on the wrong side of the bed?”

“How the *fuck* should I know where he woke up?” Jeff snapped. He took a deep breath to calm himself down. “Sorry, it’s just....”

“What did that other guy want?” BJ persisted.

“Wanted to suck a cowboy’s dick. Too bad you came over too late, but maybe you can still catch him in the restroom.”

“Wow, he’s lucky Clay didn’t kick his ass for him,” BJ said.

“Or me.”

“You would never do that.”

“What do *you* know? If you don’t shut up about stuff you don’t know anything about, I might kick yours,” Jeff said rudely. He slammed his hand against his trailer, making his friend jump in surprise, and stomped around it, taking off to avoid having to talk to BJ any longer.

When they got to St. Louis, damned if Jeff was going to give Clay the time of day. He’d had a narrow escape, and he would keep it that way. From now on, he and Clay were strictly competitors, and that was all.

“HEY.”

Jeff walked past Clay without answering.

“I want to apologize.”

“Okay, you’ve apologized.”

“I don’t know what got into me this morning.”

“I don’t either, and I don’t want to know.” Jeff kept walking.

“You want to—”

“I want to beat your ass in the ring, and that’s all I want,” Jeff said distinctly. “Fuck off.”

“You fuck off!”

“Fucking off now.” Jeff hurried on, spying Sam in the distance. He knew Clay wouldn’t continue trying to talk to him in front of Sam. Hell, he wasn’t sure he could look Sam in the face, but at least it would keep Clay away from him.

Clay stood looking after Jeff, feeling desolate while watching him walk away, but then his anger started to grow inside. How dared Jeff tell him to fuck off? He had to understand, this thing between them, it was over. That was all he’d come over to say to Jeff. He meant to apologize for

this morning but make it damned clear that it was over. That even when it was still going on, it wasn't queer; it was just some weird itch that had to be scratched. They'd scratched it, and that was it.

He had an urge to hurry after Jeff and make him agree, make him promise that he'd never tell anyone about anything they did. But that would give Jeff the upper hand. And besides, Jeff didn't want anyone else to know about them any more than he did.

He would have to be content to wait and see. One thing he knew for sure; he had to stay away from Jeff. He was never going to be anywhere alone with him again.

Clay had a terrible feeling that however wise that might be, it wouldn't put an end to the weird longings Jeff seemed to raise within him. He thought he'd left this kind of thing behind him long ago. He'd gotten the best of it once, and he thought it would never come back to bite him in the butt again, until this thing with Jeff... and now Jeff was mad at him. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered now but winning.

MAYBE it was that intense focus on winning that did him in, Clay thought. His efforts to stop thinking about Jeff made him stiff and tense on the back of his bull, and he blew his

ride. He actually fell off. Jeff ended up with the high score for the day, and he'd gone into town with BJ and Terrence to celebrate.

Clay didn't have the heart for it, even if BJ had asked him to come along, which he hadn't. He'd lost in the ring, and he'd lost... a friend. Maybe he should just call it a day and go home. But he wasn't a quitter. He'd never been one, and he wasn't going to start being one now.

When he remembered singing *Meet me in St. Louis* to Jeff, he writhed with humiliation. St. Louis was turning out to be the worst stop on the tour so far. He and Jeff weren't speaking, his rides were crap, and he'd pissed off all his friends by snarling at them.

And he was horny.

This was fucked.

JEFF pulled into a lonely rest stop when he realized his eyes kept falling shut as he was driving. In spite of his addiction to riding dangerous animals, he really didn't care to die a fiery death on the road. He'd thought his anger would carry him all the way to Texas, but apparently he'd run out of gas even though his trailer hadn't.

He went to the restroom to relieve himself and splashed water onto his face. It didn't help rouse him although he did feel cleaner, so he decided to catch a nap there and get back on the road whenever he woke up.

When he walked back to his rig, he stopped short when he recognized the one pulled in next to his.

Fucking Clay. Was he following him? It just seemed a bit too pat that they would choose the exact same rest stop. He had to have been following him. Jeff wondered if he could make it inside his trailer without Clay noticing. Looked like he was going to have to drive a bit further tonight after all.

He wasn't going to be chicken about it; he walked around his trailer and came face to face with Clay coming around the corner of his.

Jeff touched his hat out of habit but didn't say anything.

"Jeff—"

Jeff stopped but didn't look at Clay. "Yeah."

"I'm sorry."

Jeff nodded and continued to the door of his trailer. Clay followed him.

Jeff turned to face him. "Get lost."

"I just wanted to explain—"



“It doesn’t matter.”

Clay couldn’t see Jeff’s face. It was a black night although stars were bright in the sky. There was no moon or clouds to brighten things up. He couldn’t read him, but the stance of Jeff’s body was wary.

“I don’t want to be queer. My dad—he’d have a heart attack—and when I saw that guy at the pumps—” Clay stopped short, aware he was making a mess of it.

Jeff remained silent while Clay stewed.

“I want us to be friends,” Clay finally said.

“I don’t expect my friends to turn on me without warning,” Jeff said.

“Look, I’m having a hard time with this. I’m struggling—”

“Then leave it alone, Clay, all right?” Jeff opened his door, stepped up into his trailer and slammed it shut.

Clay could hear the lock snick. “I gotta take a leak,” he announced to the empty sky.

Hoping a brief respite would give him some idea of what to do next, Clay went to the restroom. When he came back, he hovered around Jeff’s trailer, pacing back and forth and chain smoking, wondering what he had to do to at least regain some semblance of normalcy between them. Even if

they never... *did things*... again, at least they could speak to each other.

Jeff's door opened suddenly. "You're making me nervous. You're like, stalking me."

"I'm *not* stalking you!" The idea that he was after Jeff! Jeff was the one who started it! "I just wanted to explain why I went off like that."

Jeff sighed and came out of the trailer, firmly shutting the door behind him before walking to a nearby fence. He lit a cigarette and leaned against a post. "All right, spill your guts and get it over with."

"When we got to the restaurant and saw BJ and Caleb there, I just got to thinking how they would start to wonder if they always saw us together."

"They hang out together a lot. Did you ever wonder about them?"

Startled, Clay said, "No! I never did."

"Maybe they're getting it on at rest stops too."

"They would never do that!"

"That's what people think about us, Clay. We're just two cowboys. We know each other. We hang out sometimes," Jeff said patiently.

“But we never did before. We were rivals. We were always pissing each other off!”

Jeff sighed again and took a drag on his cigarette. “Sam told me to quit ruffling your feathers and grow up. We’re still competitors in the ring, but we can have a civil conversation outside of it. Maybe I grew up. Maybe it’s time you did.”

“What do you think is going on with us?”

“Maybe we’re just horny, and this is a quick easy way to get our rocks off on the road.” Jeff knew he was lying when he said it, but it seemed to make Clay feel better.

“Yeah, that’s probably it. Less complicated than romancing a girl at every stop,” Clay agreed eagerly.

“I can quit it any time,” Jeff said.

“Me too.”

“So can we stop the heart-to-heart and get some rest?”

“Sure thing.” Clay stuck out his hand to shake but realized Jeff couldn’t see it in the dark. “And about that guy, at the rest stop—”

“The fag that offered to suck our dicks?” Jeff chose his words deliberately.

“Yeah.” Clay shivered. “I just—my dad would have called him a freakin’ fairy—I don’t want to end up like that—”

“Okay, then don’t.” Jeff pitched his cigarette into the steel barrel by the fence and pulled his jacket closer, wrapping his arms around himself against the sudden chill he felt. “I need some shuteye.” He walked back to his trailer and went inside, locking the door behind him.

“I won’t,” Clay said defiantly. He stayed by the fence smoking one last cigarette. When he finished it, he went back to his own trailer and lay awake the rest of the night, staring at the ceiling and beating himself up.

If it hadn’t been for his stupid outburst, he wouldn’t have had to spend the night alone in a cold camper. Jeff was so close and yet so far away. But it was better this way. There was no possible way anyone could mistake them for fags, and from now on, he would stick to finding a girl and making do with that.

When he woke up in the morning, Jeff’s trailer was gone. It was only then that he realized how much he’d been counting on finding some greasy spoon in the morning and having breakfast with him.

He got on the road again, determined to find Jeff wherever he’d stopped and join him. He’d show Jeff that he didn’t mind them being seen together. At the back of his mind though, a nasty little voice told him that maybe he overslept on purpose so that whatever restaurant he found Jeff at they wouldn’t be seen coming in together.

When he spotted Jeff's trailer outside the Little Gem Diner, Clay pulled in next to it. This was a popular stop for truckers, not so much for the cowboys. But he didn't care. Time to build some bridges.

He opened the door, and every man in the place looked over at him without interest when the bell tinkled. He stood there for a moment, surveying the place until he spotted Jeff sitting in a booth by a window. He walked over and paused, his hand on the back of the booth. "This seat taken?"

Jeff looked up and his lips twitched, like he wanted to smile but wouldn't let himself. "Nope."

"Mind if I take a load off?" Clay didn't wait for an answer, just slid in.

"Be my guest."

Clay turned the cup upright on the saucer, and a girl came by promptly to fill it with coffee but rushed off without taking his order. "Been here long?" There was no plate in front of Jeff.

"Nope."

The girl hurried back and slapped two plates on the table, filled with smoking eggs, bacon, sausage, hash browns, and toast. "Need anything else?"

"No, we're good," Jeff said.

Clay's eyes narrowed as he surveyed his food. "You ordered for me?"

"Maybe I'm hungry."

Clay glared at Jeff. Jeff smiled at him triumphantly. Clay opened his mouth but started to laugh instead, the relief of being on speaking terms again just overtaking him. "You're not getting any of my grub."

"Oh well, them's the breaks, I guess," Jeff said, and he picked up his fork.

Clay looked down at his plate of food, afraid that he might start giggling if he looked at Jeff, that he would give away how happy he felt, not only that they were speaking again but just that he was sitting here with him. He moved his leg when he felt something brush against his shin. A moment later he felt the same thing, except a little firmer this time.

Was Jeff playing footsie with him under the table? Part of him was terrified that someone would see, but he held completely still, just to see if Jeff had done it on purpose. The toe of a boot stroked his shin more insistently this time.

Clay made a sudden movement as if to look under the table but stopped; that would have been way obvious. Instead he glanced up cautiously, intending to check whether any of the men in the place were looking their way, but the sight of Jeff smirking into his plate stopped his gaze.

Jeff gave him a sly look from under his lashes, and Clay felt like he might burst he wanted to laugh so bad. Jeff was playing with him. Well, two could play at this game. He moved his foot, but Jeff withdrew his legs just as the waitress stopped for a moment to ask if everything was okay. For once, he wasn't chewing, and Clay assured her that they were fine and didn't need anything more. She left the check face down on the table.

He let his napkin slide off his lap and dove under the table to see where Jeff's legs were at so he could return the favor. He made the discovery that the table's pedestal was a hefty one, and Jeff had teased him from behind it. Now Jeff's legs were on the outside of the pedestal, and if Clay tried anything, at least one table would have a clear view of everything he did.

"You fucker," he said quietly as he surfaced again with his napkin.

"Strategy, my friend; it's all superior strategy."

"I'll get you back. You know it." Clay knew he was turning red, so he took the opening and turned their talk to riding. Soon, they were arguing over specific rides they had taken and what certain bulls had done to throw them as if nothing more suspicious than their rivalry in the ring hovered between them.

When they walked outside after leaving money on the table, Clay could see his breath in the air. “How far you figuring to drive today?”

“Oh, about to Joplin, if I can make it,” Jeff answered.

“I know a rest stop a little further on, outside Lincolnville.”

“I bet you do.”

“Well... want to meet up there?”

Jeff paused for a moment. “Maybe.”

Clay looked after him as he walked to his trailer. He was pretty sure he would be sleeping warmer tonight.

CLAY was still uneasily on his best behavior when they left the diner he knew of on the outskirts of Lincolnville. None of the cowboys ever stopped there. In Joplin, familiar fast food franchises lined the route, and it was easy to get something familiar that reminded them of home.

But Clay always liked this little diner. They had country food like a chicken fricassee with dumplings that reminded him of his Aunt Dora's. And Jeff had seemed to like it too. They'd both eaten in complete silence until they couldn't eat any more.



He was careful to let Jeff pay for his own check. Didn't want this to smell like a date in any way. Because it wasn't, it was just two friends—

“What?”

“I said, want a smoke?” Jeff held out his packet.

Clay shivered when his fingers brushed over Jeff's, warm despite the frosty air. They wouldn't be able to stay outside too long tonight. “Thanks. Follow me, and I'll show you where the rest stop is at.”

“Right.”

It made Clay feel happy to see headlights in his rearview mirror again, especially when they followed him off the highway and into the lot off the side of the road. This rest stop was empty. There were no amenities at all, except for a lonely water fountain by a falling-down fence next to the view over the river. But that made it better. Hardly anyone ever stopped here. It appealed to the drifter in Clay.

He got out and walked to the fence, waiting. The light was fading from the sky in shades of blue and pink and yellow. The bare branches of the short trees were black except for patches of snow that clung to them. The river slipped along smooth as silk, reflecting the last light in the sky against the dark banks.

He felt rather than saw Jeff come up beside him and lean on the fence. “Nice view.”

“Always liked it.” Clay watched as the pearly skies became grey and the water provided the last gleam of light in the desolate landscape. He pulled up his collar against the cold, but he didn’t want to go inside the trailer. Not alone, anyway, but he was too scared to ask Jeff if he wanted to go with him. Just for a drink. Nothing more.

Clay felt warmth against his side and looked to his left. Jeff was staring right at him with an expression that made him feel funny inside. Desire simmered under his skin; he wanted to reach out to Jeff, but he just couldn’t. And then Jeff leaned in closer to him, his tongue parting Clay’s lips, slipping inside, penetrating Clay’s defenses in a way that a kiss from a woman never had. He pulled Jeff against him, sucking eagerly on his tongue, loving the feel of the hot, wet muscle twining around his.

Usually Clay never made noises during sex, let alone kissing, except for maybe some polite ones, but he heard himself whimpering desperately now. He grabbed Jeff possessively and held him tight in the relief of just feeling that hard body against his again.

Finally he had to pull away to breathe. “It’s cold out here.”

Jeff simply stood within the circle of his arms, their cheeks pressed together, and waited. “Yeah.”

“Come on.”

When they were inside Clay's trailer, the door between them and the world outside, only then did Clay feel safe enough to surrender to the feelings Jeff always roused in him. Without words, they kissed, hands unfastened clothing, and then they gave that first grateful gasp when skin touched skin.

They fell to the bed together, hands groping between their bodies, stroking, caressing each other. He couldn't release Jeff's lips; he kissed him madly while their hands were gentle. It was almost as if they had rehearsed it; first he stroked Jeff, feeling their hands working against each other's bellies. Then Jeff's hand pushed his away, and Clay tugged on his own cock, knowing just what to do to get himself off. Their legs tangled as they rocked, hips thrusting, cocks rubbing until they erupted over each other. Jeff strained against him, and dimly Clay heard his cries mingled with his own.

The ease with which Jeff handled him and the way he'd left him to bring himself off when he needed his own familiar touch made this far more intimate. It must be something about both of them having dicks and knowing how it felt.

Jeff's body started to shake, and Clay knew without having to look that he was laughing. "What?"

"Have we ever lasted longer than ten minutes?"

"Ten might be pushing it." Suddenly Clay wanted to laugh and sing sappy love songs about riding the range

together. He grinned at his own outburst of sentimentality, thinking about how Jeff would poke fun if he knew.

Jeff lifted his head and squinted at Clay. "You're looking pretty blissed out for a guy who doesn't want to be queer."

"You're not so upset either," Clay pointed out. "We're... just friends, helping each other out on the road."

"You ever do this with a friend before?"

Clay didn't like the skeptical tone in Jeff's voice, but he had a right to ask, he supposed. "Once. We were drunk."

"How'd that go?"

"Ruined the friendship. He could never look me in the face again, no matter what I tried to...." Clay shifted restlessly, and Jeff pushed himself away, making Clay regret losing his warmth. His skin cooled quickly where Jeff had been resting against him.

"Are you worried about that with us?"

"We aren't friends. Or we weren't."

"I'd like to think we are now," Jeff said, almost challenging him.

"Me too."

With a sigh Jeff moved to lay his head on Clay's shoulder again and reached for his hand, lacing their fingers

together. He couldn't ask what this meant; that would be girly. And besides, Clay had a tendency to go off whenever he brought it up.

Clay couldn't leave it like that between them; the words burst out of him like he couldn't help it. "I want to do things to you I don't want to do to a woman."

"Like what?" Jeff just knew he had a dumb glow on his face, but he couldn't help looking at Clay like that.

"I want to make love to you."

"You—you mean...."

"Yeah, all the way." Clay ran his hand down Jeff's side and cupped his hipbone. "I want to be inside you."

Jeff pushed Clay's hand away. "Why? Am I supposed to be the girl?"

"No! No, I want you to make love to me too."

Mollified, Jeff snuggled closer to Clay again. "I don't know. I think I'm scared to do that."

"I am too."

"I'd have to think about it. I heard it hurts."

"Only for a while. Supposed to be great after that," Clay said.

"And you know this how if you've never done it?"

“Internet.” Clay closed his eyes. He didn’t want to see Jeff laughing at him, or worse, accusing him of really being queer after all.

“Internet’s a wondrous place. Research a cow breech-birthing and any kind of sex act known to man.”

“Or woman.” Clay could have kicked himself. This wasn’t the time to bring up women. As he predicted, he felt Jeff draw away from him.

After a long silence, he asked, “Stay over?”

“It’ll be a lot warmer, without a hookup for the heater,” Jeff said.

“Yeah. Makes sense.”

The close mood had been broken by his careless words, first bringing up wanting to have sex another way and then mentioning women. Jeff remained beside him but turned away. Clay rolled onto his side and slowly moved closer, cuddling up to Jeff in the spoon position. He felt reassured when Jeff found his arm and pulled it over his body, resting his hand over Clay’s on his stomach. He pulled the blankets up over them.

Eventually, lulled by Jeff’s quiet breathing, Clay fell asleep.

CLAY woke up to find Jeff staring at him with a forbidding expression on his face.

“You wanna fight now and get it over with?”

“What? Why? What are you talking about?”

“Every time we do this you blow a gasket next morning and stomp out like a girl who got told she was coyote ugly enough to chew your arm off. I’m not going to put up with it.”

“Uh, no, I wasn’t planning to this morning.”

“All right then. Let’s go get some breakfast. We can get to Dallas today, and then we got time to work out and get some riding in.”

Clay would have liked to snuggle a bit, maybe even kiss, but Jeff rolled off the bed promptly and pulled on his clothes.

“Shake a leg. I don’t got all day.” Jeff smirked and opened the door, letting in a blast of cold air that made Clay yelp before he jumped down and slammed the door shut. Clay could hear Jeff’s engine rev.

Something was different, like Jeff was determined to act like just two friends looking for a little relief. Clay got dressed in a hurry, remembering that he’d asked for that, in a way.

He just hadn’t considered the down side very carefully.

COMING back to his home state was always a thrill, but Clay was more concerned with not losing sight of Jeff. In the end, he did anyway; they got caught in the morning traffic, and he was too late to see where Jeff had parked at the grounds of the Dallas Center.

He eventually found Jeff's trailer but had to park a couple of rows away. All he could think about was how obvious it was going to be to try slipping into Jeff's trailer in the crowded lot, and he berated himself, because he should have been thinking about the ride instead.

The cold, damp air smacked him in the face when he got out of his rig, and he pulled down his hat, grateful that the center could accommodate the event inside. His dad had told him about how only fifteen years ago, cowboys had to ride in any kind of weather unless the judges were out in the open, when they would cancel for their own comfort. At least his dad would be too busy on the ranch to make the drive to see him ride, but he'd be watching on the television, like every weekend, which made it all the more important that he keep away from Jeff inside the arena when the cameras were on.

Hoping to catch up with Jeff inside, Clay headed for the registration tables. He was distracted while the girl inside the glass booth found his paperwork and handed him his badge and parking voucher, twisting around to look for any sight of



Jeff. He looped the ribbon of his badge over his head and stuffed the parking permit into his pocket.

“Hey cowboy.”

Someone clapped him on the back and laughed when he staggered.

“Hey yourself.” Clay stood there with a wide grin on his face, so glad to see Jeff again that he didn’t know what to do with himself. He dug his hands into his pockets.

“Doug Morgan is here. He’s running some bulls in the draw. I’m going to see if I can meet him.”

“What’re you going to do if you do?” Clay asked, falling into step beside him.

“Ask for his autograph and any advice that’ll help me trounce you in the ring,” Jeff said.

“Sounds like a plan, except I’ll be standing right next to you hearing it.”

Jeff looked happy at that. “Oh well, guess I’ll have rely on my superior riding skills in that case.”

“In your dreams, slick.” Clay nudged Jeff and received a playful elbow in the ribs in return before recollecting that they were in full view of anyone who wanted to take notice.

“There he is, and Jamie Denson.” Jeff headed right for them, an avid smile on his face.

Clay hung back but stared at the couple almost as if they were animals in the zoo and he could learn their secrets just by observing them. Neither of them *looked* queer. They looked just like any of the other cowboys walking by, no girly-colored shirts, scarves, or jewelry, until he caught the gleam of a silver ring on the middle finger of Jamie's right hand. He checked Doug's hand; there was a matching ring. Aside from that and the fact that they stood just a hair closer to each other than he would be comfortable with, there was no sign that they were... *together*.

Just thinking that made visions of naked masculine bodies writhing together in a passionate tumble of arms and legs and... other parts... rise up in front of his eyes. He wondered how they looked together and what exactly they did. He wondered how he and Jeff looked together, wrapped in a similar craze of lust and arousal.

"Clay, get your ass over here," Jeff yelled, so loud that Clay glanced around to see if anyone was watching them.

Clay moved closer. He put his hand out to Doug while Jeff said his full name as if Clay mightn't know who he was. Doug's hand was big and callused, warm and hard; and when their palms touched and their fingers wrapped together Clay had a sudden jolt of nerves as he wondered what Doug's hands had touched as he explored Jamie's body, roaming.... And then his hand was released, and Jamie was shaking it. After all, he had touched plenty of parts of Jeff; this wasn't any different.

Except he wasn't gay. Just giving it that name instead of the usual homo, queer, or faggot seemed to weight the whole issue gnawing at him with a kind of solemn gravity that he didn't expect or want. It seemed to open the door to a whole new possibility that he might not be who he'd always thought he was.

In the midst of worrying about wearing spangly scarves and adopting Terrence's sequin-fringed chaps, Clay became aware that the conversation between Doug and Jeff had become purely technical, and he was missing a great opportunity to learn from one of the best.

"...one of the sure tells," Doug was saying. "Bulls are creatures of habit; they don't like putting out any more effort than the rest of us."

"Couch potatoes if they get the chance," Jamie put in. "Not like a feisty bucking bronc. *They'll* buck till they get you off their back unless they're off their feed."

Doug gave Jamie a smile that thrilled Clay, filled as it was with intimacy and knowledge. "Yeah, Jamie, we all know you'll never give a bull a chance, but Jeff has a point."

Clay felt proud that his boyfriend—his *friend*—had managed to impress Doug Morgan, although he would have liked to hear whatever it was Jeff had said.

"If a bull is giving you a sluggish ride, you got a choice," Doug went on. "You can leave him be and ask for a reride at

the end. Or you can kick him up a notch. One of the sloppiest bulls I ever rode wasn't giving me the time of day. So I asked myself what does this bull expect? And the answer was that I was going to stick to him like glue, so I started shifting around on his back all slippery-like. Well, sir, that unsettled him, and he started in to fight me in right earnest. Then I had my work cut out to stay on board."

"Especially as he took you by surprise," Jamie put in.

Clay stammered into speech for the first time. "He took you—you—"

Doug laughed, his skin crinkling around his eyes as he flicked a glance over at his partner. "Not all surprises are bad ones, are they, Harris?"

Clay stiffened, wondering if Doug was insinuating something. "No, sir, I guess not."

"Sam tells me you two are in a clinch for the finals," Doug said.

Clay felt a smile start up and hoped he didn't look smug. "I wouldn't say that, sir."

Jamie moved a bit closer to Doug and said, "Barring injuries or whatever. I hope you two have a good year."

Doug's hand came up and rested on Jamie's shoulder briefly. Clay looked away, feeling that the moment they were sharing was too private for his eyes. Everyone on the circuit,

not just the regular rodeo, knew about how Jamie had broken his neck and Doug had taken care of him. It was one of the kinds of mishaps that all cowboys dreaded, and yet Jamie had made it through and was still riding today, although not on bulls. And he'd been lucky, having someone like Doug to take him in and give him a place to heal.

Clay wanted to turn and walk away, but Doug was the bull rider he hoped to be someday, minus the homo part, and it would be stupid to pass up a chance to learn from him when he could. Jeff was already shaking hands with both men and looking around to see what was keeping him standing there like a post.

"Maybe we could catch dinner later," Jamie suggested.

"We'll be there," Clay said firmly.

Jeff's brows snapped together at Clay's calm assumption that he could make plans for the both of them as if they were a couple when Clay had gone to great lengths to make clear to him that they weren't.

"Great," Doug said. "I gotta catch up with Sam. See you later, Jamie." Jamie nodded, but the two men didn't touch or act in any way gay.

A group of stocky cowboys walked past them, loudly discussing cocksuckers with pointed sneers at Jamie and Doug. Clay lifted his head and stared angrily at them, wondering if he'd be sanctioned if he took a few of them out.

Doug ignored the cowboys, walking off in the direction of the office.

Jamie just shrugged when he noticed Clay's glare. "It happens. They're ignorant. Hopefully they'll learn."

"How can you just take it? We should go after them, teach them a lesson—"

"And next time they see you alone, they'll jump you and beat the shit out of you," Jamie said. "It's not worth it."

"Clay," Jeff started but stopped, unsure of what to say.

Clay crossed his arms and waited. "You got something to say?"

"Don't do something stupid, that'll attract attention—"

"Look, I can't do this."

Jeff glared at Clay, pissed that he couldn't even listen. Was he so afraid that Jeff might say something indiscreet? "Can't? Or won't?"

"Whatever. I just... can't." Clay spun on his heel and hurried away as if he were afraid Jeff might try to stop him.

Jeff started after him but stopped when it became clear that Clay wanted to be rid of him.

"Fuck."

"I hear you."

Jeff turned his head to see who had followed along behind him, but the voice was sympathetic. It turned out to be Jamie Denson.

“It can be hard,” Jamie said.

“What can?” Jeff asked warily. If Clay couldn’t take the heat, he sure wasn’t going to out him by some careless comment.

Jamie nodded in the direction Clay had gone. “Admitting that you’re gay. Especially if you don’t want to be.”

“He’s not gay.”

“Bi, then. It’s got to be worse if you swing both ways. More confusing when it happens.”

Jeff sighed. He almost didn’t care enough to defend himself and claim to be one hundred percent red-blooded male with only loose, beautiful women on his mind. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Doug had a hard time with it, you know?” Jamie watched Jeff’s face, seeing the desire to know war with his impulse to just walk away. “He’s one of the old school; get drunk, go to a glory hole, get your dick sucked, and pretend it never happened the next day.”

“Really?”

“Till he met me.” Jamie straightened his shoulders and stuck out his chest a little. “And I still had to chase him down, hog-tie him, and pretty much force it out of him that he loved me.”

“Doug’s a pretty private guy. Is he going to be okay with you telling me this?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell him I told you. He won’t mind because he saw it too.”

“Saw what?”

“You love him.”

“Love?” Jeff was aghast. “This isn’t about love. This is about... about... getting your rocks off on the road without... complications!”

Jamie laughed. “Yeah, it all seems pretty uncomplicated to me.”

“Well, I don’t give a damn anyway. He doesn’t want this, so it’s a moot point.”

“Keep telling yourself that if it makes you feel better.”

Nettled by Jamie’s knowing grin, Jeff burst out, “He tells me to fuck off on a regular basis, just about every stop of the tour. If he’s struggling with it this bad—”



Jamie waited, but Jeff clamped his mouth shut while his jaw worked feverishly. “You two got something special. Don’t throw it away.” Jamie turned to walk away.

“What would you do?”

“You’re asking me? A pony rider?”

“I’m asking... I’m asking...,” Jeff said, feeling like a fool, but he had to know how to fix this.

“How do you win in the ring?”

A slow grin spread over Jeff’s face. “Thanks, Jamie.”

“Don’t mention it.”

JEFF decided to leave Clay alone for a while. It hadn’t escaped his attention that Clay always came sniffing around after enough time had gone by, but this time he needed to decide if he really wanted Clay. Being with Clay had been the most amazing sex he’d ever had, but even an adrenaline junky might want a smoother ride in the sack, considering what he did as his job.

The problem was that Jeff could see that other guys were good-looking; he just didn’t want any of them. Take Doug now, he was older, but he was in great shape. His stomach was still flat, and he was a handsome man. And

Jamie, he was almost as beautiful as a girl, but in a tough masculine way that saved him from looking like one. But Jeff felt nothing more than a friendly desire to get to know them better. Because they were like him.

One-man men. Which kinda sucked if the one man was skittish as a bull with a split hoof. Which made him even more pissed off at Clay for keeping on with these hissy fits. He wasn't sure he had the patience to take Clay back again and then get kicked in the teeth for his trouble. If he wanted that, all he had to do was ride careless in the ring.

No matter how much he wanted to, if Clay came around all hang-dog like last time, Jeff was just going to tell him to put his apologies where the sun don't shine.

Which was a noble sentiment, except he never got the chance. Clay avoided him as hard as he was avoiding Clay. All his time went into getting ready to ride, riding, and then getting rested for the next day. Alone.

*Yeehaw*, Jeff thought sourly.

CLAY stalked through the center practically daring anyone to accost him. The grim look on his face lightened some as he caught sight of Doug Morgan and Jamie Denson. Jamie waved at him and took off, but Doug came up to greet him.

“Hey, Clay. How’re you doing? That was some ride last night.”

Clay shook the older man’s hand, reluctantly admitting, “Jeff Stratton took me in points.”

“It’ll even out. Sam was telling me you two been rivals for quite some time,” Doug said.

“Yeah.” Clay almost snapped his answer, only his respect for Doug stopping him on this side of polite.

“You remind me of me in some ways.”

“Really?” Clay started to thaw. After all, being compared to one of the great riders was a compliment, especially coming from the man himself.

“Yeah, I was an idiot just like you.” Doug chuckled quietly as Clay snarled. “Don’t throw it away.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. Listen, son, love is a rare thing in life. Grab onto it when you find it, no matter how it’s wrapped.”

Clay wanted to deny that he knew what Doug was talking about, but he needed to spill it to someone. “I fucked up again.”

“I fucked up a million times, but Jamie never gave up on me,” Doug said. “Think about it.”

“How did you—”

“Don’t worry, nobody else is looking at you and seeing a big red F branded on your forehead,” Doug said dryly. “Besides, I couldn’t tell. Jamie had to tell me.”

Clay laughed. “More like it’s branded on my butt anyway.”

“Go get your boy before you lose him.” Doug gave Clay a clout on the shoulder that made him stagger.

Nothing effeminate about *him*, Clay thought, rotating his shoulder. And then he felt all warm inside at the thought of Jeff being his boy. All he hoped was that maybe Jeff could forgive him again. Even though it made him shudder over what this could mean for the rest of his life.

“JEFF, can I talk to you?”

Jeff froze in place, looking up from hammering his gloves on, making sure each finger was shoved on all the way. “Not now, Clay.”

“But I need to—”

“I need to concentrate on my ride, Clay. Not now.” Jeff brushed by him, his gut twisting at the crushed look on Clay’s face, but he just couldn’t deal with him right now. He

couldn't have his heart torn out of his chest and stomped into the dust whenever Clay got cold feet.

He regretted his decision before he'd walked too far and turned around, but Clay had already disappeared. Jeff sighed, but he had a feeling that the war in the ring was going to be enough for him to handle, and he just had to hold off dealing with the war inside him for a while longer.

It killed him to think that maybe there was nothing left to salvage between them. But maybe it was better this way. All he had to do was keep out of Clay's way for the rest of his entire life. Eventually even *Clay* would catch on that there was nothing left to talk about.

"WHAT'S biting you?"

"Nothing!"

"Yeah, you're always real calm like that when nothing's bugging you."

"Sorry, BJ, it's just...." Jeff shrugged. "On the road, away from home, wanting to win—"

"Yeah, I got you. Sometimes I wonder how much longer I'm going to do this, but I want to win at least one final." BJ's eyes took on a dreamy look. "Show that buckle to my son

one day, tell him how I used the winnings to buy my spread....”

“You got a son?”

“No, but I hope to one day.”

Jeff laughed. “Counting your chickens before they’re hatched, Beej.”

“Thanks, Mr. Kill-joy, how about you?”

“No chickens, no eggs. I just need to win,” Jeff said softly.

“Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” BJ asked, just to be saying something. The bleak look on Jeff’s face made him want to help in some way.

“To get to the other side,” Jeff answered.

BJ turned his head away. He kind of had an idea what was bugging Jeff. He hadn’t seen him around Clay since St. Louis, and both men looked miserable except when they were riding or when they were laughing too much. Then he snickered himself and pointed. “Get a load of Terrence.”

Jeff lowered his head onto the top rail and shook with laughter. “Terrence is sure having a day, isn’t he?”

“Slow bull, and he doesn’t seem to know how to kick him into gear,” BJ agreed. “Usually T-Bone is pretty salty.”

Terrence lolloped sideways in the saddle, the bull lurched in the opposite direction, and Terrence fell off, one foot still caught in the rope. The bull took off, irritated that it hadn't managed to lose its rider completely, and Terrence bounced across the ring, sending up a cloud of dust every time his body hit the ground.

"That bull should be called Trampoline! He's sure giving Terrence the bounce!" Jeff cracked.

"Or maybe Terrence should," BJ said.

Sam sniggered. He was supposed to be impartial, but sometimes he couldn't help it watching the antics of the younger set. "Jeff, sometimes you got a way with words."

Jeff flushed, just like he seemed to every time Sam spoke to him since he walked in on them in Clay's trailer. "Kick loose, you fool," he muttered as the bull turned to pull Terrence across the ring in the other direction.

One of the clowns, Jeff recognized him as Caleb, ran at the bull from the other side and managed to hoist himself partway onto the bull's back. When the bull slowed to take care of this new distraction, another clown rushed in and freed Terrence's boot.

Caleb dropped off the bull immediately and ran in front of his nose. The bull took off following him, and Caleb led him right to the gate. Winded and frustrated, the bull went quietly.

“We gotta take Terrence to the bar tonight and get him drunk so we can learn all his trade secrets,” Jeff said, hoping desperately that BJ would agree to go along. He didn’t want to sit alone in his trailer that night.

“Hell, he’ll spill ’em all sober, not that you’d want to follow *his* advice,” BJ said. “But it’s a definite idea.”

BJ hooked up with a girl almost instantly when they reached the bar and abandoned Jeff, leaving him alone with Terrence. He really hadn’t had a lot to say to Terrence before, but Jeff didn’t want to deal with the girls trolling the crowds for a one-nighter.

“So why do you ride bulls if you suck so bad at it?” Jeff asked.

“I don’t suck at it!” Terrence glared at him and gulped his beer.

“Listen, I’ve seen you ride broncs. You seem like you’re at least having fun on board a horse. You gotta ride like you love it, man, or you’ll never be any good at it. You’re paying high fees to ride in the bull tourney, and you’re low man on the totem pole. Why don’t you give it up and go back to the regular rodeo before you kill yourself?”



Terrence glared some more and then sighed. "It's my girl. I want to impress her."

"And she's impressed that you're gonna rock bottom a whole season?"

"Last year when I was on the road she took up with a bull rider. Said he was a real man. I thought maybe I could get her back if I rode bulls too."

Afraid that Terrence was going to start crying into his beer, Jeff said, "Maybe it's the way you dress?"

"What's wrong with the way I dress?" Terrence bristled.

"You look like Liberace's wet dream of a cowboy," Jeff said frankly. "You're covered in glitter. You wear chaps with sequin fringes."

"I like a little flash."

"More than a little."

"Where's that faggot?"

Both their heads came up defensively as a large drunk in a brown cowboy hat with a snakeskin band swaggered toward them.

Jeff's fists clenched in anger until he realized the cowboy's sights were set on Terrence. "You know this guy?"

Terrence grinned and muttered out of the side of his mouth, “Nope, but I might know his girlfriend, in the *biblical* sense, if you get my drift.”

“Oh man.” The cowboy was a townie and drunk, but Terrence was his friend, sort of, so Jeff stayed put even though this wasn’t his fight.

“You’re the one who slipped around with my girl,” the cowboy bellowed. “You goddam cocksucker!”

“He’s not that much of a cocksucker if he did your girl,” Jeff said.

“You keep out of this. You,” the cowboy jabbed Terrence in the chest with a finger, “are a fucking faggot, and you need your ass kicked. I aim to do it for you.”

Terrence shoved the man away. “I’m no faggot, faggot.”

“Look at you! You’re wearing a fucking little girl fucking cowgirl shirt with rhinestones on it!”

“And sparkly fringe,” Jeff muttered, but then he roused himself to defend Terrence. “He can’t help it. He grew up in Vegas.”

“Doesn’t make him less of a faggot, faggot!”

“Watch out who you’re calling faggot, queer!”

“Plowing your field makes me more of a man than *you* are,” Terrence taunted, his fists ready. “You’re not taking care of her if she goes out looking, dude.”

“Dude! *You’re* calling *me* a fucking dude!”

Jeff was kind of interested to see how Terrence would handle himself in a fight, but the drunken cowboy was bigger than both of them. “You sure you want to do this? He’s the wrong end of a horse, but he’s a *big* horse.”

“I’ve been needing a fight, and he saved me from having to start one on my own,” Terrence said with a savage grin.

Wondering where that spunk was hiding whenever Terrence was riding in the ring, Jeff waved a hand. “Be my guest. Yell for me if you need help.”

“I won’t need help.” Terrence ducked as the drunk threw a wild roundhouse and stepped inside his reach to land three short punches to the torso before dancing out of range. Girls and guys gathered around to watch, cheering and making bets on the two men.

“Terrence, you dog. You know the sweet science?”

“Call me Terry! Took boxing in college.”

Jeff groaned. Somehow Terrence always seemed to come up with a pansy comment at the wrong moment, and he wasn’t even a pansy! As he thought, the mere mention of

college immediately rubbed the drunken cowboy the wrong way.

“You hear that? Fuckin’ faggot boy went to *college!*”

Jeff decided to keep his own degree under wraps for now. He hovered on the edge of the action where he could jump in if needed but gave Terrence the room to make his showing.

The drunk blinked in confusion as Terrence weaved and danced in front of him, landing a punch here and there, but always out of reach of his wild swings. Finally the cowboy got frustrated and pulled a knife.

“Terrence, he’s got a knife!” Jeff warned.

“I see it.” Terrence swept a beer bottle off a nearby table but slipped on the empty peanut shells and sawdust just as the cowboy darted at him with the blade.

Jeff leaped between them, kicking the cowboy’s wrist and sending the knife flying just as Terrence swung the bottle. The cowboy fell backward, making Terrence miss him and instead clip Jeff on the wrist. It sent a shiver of pain up his arm.

Jeff groaned and clutched his wrist but kept a wary eye on the drunk. By then, the bouncers had rushed over and were none too gently helping the drunk to his feet.

“All right, boys, take it outside. No fighting allowed in here.”

Terrence and Jeff were escorted outside along with the drunk, but luckily he seemed to have forgotten the entire fight and staggered off in the direction of another bar.

“You all right?”

Jeff shook his wrist out. “I’m fine, but what the hell were you thinking, getting into a brawl in town? If Sam hears about this—”

“You’re not going to tell him, are you? I know you’re all buddy-buddy with him,” Terrence said apprehensively.

“Me? Buddies with Sam? Are you nuts?” Jeff laughed despite the lingering ache in his wrist.

“Yeah, he thinks you’re the cat’s pajamas.”

Jeff rolled his eyes at that but asked, “He *does*? How come he never told me?”

“Probably doesn’t want it to go to your big, fat head.” Terrence laughed but sobered quickly. “Look, I really am sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“Don’t worry about it, I know you didn’t.”

“Well, I guess we better get back.”

“Yeah. And maybe you should dress down a bit when we hit the bars.”

“What’s wrong with how I dress?”

Jeff sighed. He wasn’t going to have this argument all over again. “Shut up, Terry. I need some ice.”

THE ice hadn’t worked and neither had the aspirin. Jeff woke up to his wrist throbbing in pain. He twisted it, testing it. It hurt, but he could move it, so it very likely wasn’t broken. Tonight was an important ride. If his wrist was sprained, it would just have to wait till later. He had to beat Clay—beat the other riders.

He dug out an old ACE bandage and wrapped it around his wrist as well as he could. It would at least add a little support. Then he pulled on his gloves to hide it. He knew it wouldn’t be a problem under the lights of the arena that night. He would just have to keep it out of everyone’s sight during the day.

Clay—Sam would likely notice he was wearing gloves and ask about it. He’d have to lie low until his ride.

GRIMLY, Jeff dug his hand under the bull rope, nodded when the cowboy at the chute had pulled it as tight as he could bear, and made a fist, pounding on the rosin-caked glove to get his wrap. It hurt, but not too bad. Pain came with the job, and he wasn't going to get all weepy and start wringing his hands over a mere sprain. Especially as it would kill his wrist, he thought with grim humor.

The bull moved restively under him as if it could sense his weakness. Jeff knew that animals could sense another animal's fear, and he was just another animal to the bull; a particularly annoying one that the bull wanted off its back as soon as possible.

Well, he wasn't going quietly.

He gave the nod. The gate swung open, and Jeff tucked his chin down and bit back a groan as the bull jolted forward, pulling on his wrist. It was worse than he thought it would be, but he hung on for dear life. There would be no reride for him today no matter what. He had to make his points in this round or else.

Each time the bull took off Jeff felt pain stab at his wrist, but he wouldn't cry out. He clenched his teeth until he was afraid they might break from the shattering ride, but he hung on, waving his free hand in the air. He went for the style points, raking his spurs feverishly, hoping to distract the judges from looking too close at the awkward way he was hanging onto the rope. Squeeze and pull, squeeze and pull.

He heard the roar of the crowd and when the horn blew, he had never been as happy in his life to be able to ditch a ride.

He kicked free but found his hand was hung up on the rope. He tried to stay as close to the bull as he could, getting pulled off his feet as he frantically tried to work his fingers loose. He groaned in pain from the strain on his wrist before Caleb reached him. The clown yanked on the rope, pulling it free; Jeff fell into the dust clutching his left hand and struggled to make it to his knees. Caleb didn't ask questions. He just grabbed the back of Jeff's vest and dragged him to his feet, running him to the sidelines.

Cowboys lined the fence, leaning over to hoist him out of the ring, but the only face Jeff could see was Clay's, white and strained.

"What the fuck happened? What's wrong with your wrist?" Clay asked.

Grinning stupidly and wondering if he would ever be able to look at Clay without grinning stupidly, Jeff said, "I think I sprained it, but I covered him."

"You're going to the medic," Clay ordered. He reached out to grab Jeff's right arm, forgetting all about the cameras or anything other than that Jeff was hurt.

Sam interrupted. "You're up next, Clay. I'll take him."

"It doesn't matter," Clay said.



“You can’t miss your ride. There’s no reride for walking away,” Jeff insisted. “I’ll be fine; it’s just a sprain. Sam’ll take good care of me.”

“I will surely do that,” Sam said, grinning. “Go get your ride, Clay. He’ll still be there when you get done.”

“It’s only eight seconds or less,” Jeff teased. “Cowboy up.”

“You goddamn fucker, it’ll be more than eight,” Clay said, but then he grinned. If Jeff could crack jokes he likely wasn’t going to die. He pointed his finger. “You do what the doctor says, or I’ll kick your ass.”

“Take a number,” Sam said. “Get goin’ now.”

CLAY rode his bull like a demon, impatient to get it over with. He heard that his score was a point higher than Jeff’s, but the jubilant feeling of winning warred with his concern for his... *boyfriend*. Doug was right. He cared about Jeff in a way he hadn’t since his very first girlfriend in high school, when he thought he would die if he couldn’t marry her.

His passion for her lasted a mere six weeks, but he’d only been fifteen at the time. Now he thanked God it hadn’t worked out, because how horrible it would have been if he’d met Jeff after he was married?

Jeff was sitting on the examination table, his shirt and vest hanging off his right shoulder, with his left wrist wrapped in something bulky.

“What is it?” Clay demanded.

“What’s your score?” Jeff demanded in turn.

“Beat you by a point. Now what the fuck is wrong with your hand?”

“Fractured ulna,” the medic said, holding up an X-ray. “I’m icing it to get the swelling down.”

Clay didn’t bother to look at the X-ray. “You were in trouble before you fell off; I saw it on your face. When did this happen?”

“Terrence accidentally clipped me with a bottle last night at the bar,” Jeff said, feeling irrationally happy that Clay had noticed something was wrong.

“I’m going to kill him,” Clay announced, clenching his hands.

“Not on purpose,” Jeff said hastily. “He was aiming for some drunk that called him a—”

“A what?”

“A faggot.” Jeff waited for Clay to go nuts again.

“Told him to stop wearing those pansy sequins,” Clay muttered. “So you’re telling me that you went in that ring, *knowing* that you were too banged up, and put yourself at risk for *points*!”

“I thought it was just a sprain. And I had to break your streak,” Jeff explained.

“You’re lucky you didn’t break the radius as well,” the medic put in helpfully. “Or displace the fracture. You’d be looking at surgery then, and a plate and screws.”

“What he said,” Clay snarled. “You idiot!”

Jeff opened his mouth to retort but suddenly began to laugh in relief. If Clay wanted to lie to himself about caring, he was going to have to do better if he was going to carry on like this over one little fracture. “I can take care of myself, you know.”

“Obviously you can’t!”

“Uh, excuse me! I’m ready to put on the cast if you two don’t mind keeping it down.” The medic glared at both men. “Kill each other when I’m off duty, okay?”

“Fine!” Jeff said.

“Fine.” Clay stalked to the far side of the room and sat down, his arms crossed over his chest. His anger faded as Jeff tried to hide a wince.

By the time the cast was on and the medic had recited a screed of instructions and given Jeff a container of pain medication with a childproof cap, Jeff was drooping.

Clay got up and said to the medic, “Thanks. I’ll get him back to his trailer.”

“I was going to give him a sling,” the medic said.

“You get it, and I’ll take care of his shirt.” Clay gently worked the sleeve over the cast. He buttoned Jeff’s shirt, carefully keeping his fingers from brushing over the tanned skin so temptingly close, even though he really wanted to touch.

The medic returned with the sling and helped Jeff put it on. Only then did Clay actually look into Jeff’s eyes, and he was shaken by the mixture of weariness and trust he saw there. He didn’t feel that he’d done anything to warrant that trust and started kicking himself internally for letting Jeff down.

He held out his hand. “Come on, I’ll give you a lift.”

Jeff allowed Clay to wrap his hand around his good arm and lead him out of the first aid station. “I really didn’t know it—”

“Don’t worry. I have no right to yell at you.” Clay sighed. “I was just so scared when you fell off. I could tell you were in pain while you were still on board.”

“How could you tell?”

Clay was embarrassed to reveal how he studied Jeff, how he could tell just how he was feeling by how his body moved. “You look different when you’re having a good ride.”

Jeff shuddered a little, thinking of the ride. “That wasn’t a good one.”

“No reride for you.”

“They wouldn’t let me; that dick in first aid probably reported me,” Jeff said sadly.

“Let’s go to my trailer.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Clay grinned. “I never actually have before, have I?”

“Prick.”

Sam came up to them, grinning as he overheard the last words. “Clay, gotta borrow our boy here for a minute and trot him out in the ring.”

“What for?” Jeff protested. His arm ached, and he wanted to close his eyes. Maybe take a pain pill.

“You got hurt. Folks’ll want to know you’re okay.”

“Okay then,” Jeff said after a pause. He’d been so focused on his competition with Clay and needing the points

to make the finals that he'd never given a thought to the audience.

"All they saw is that you got hurt," Sam said. He ushered Jeff back to the ring, peering between the rails of the fence. "You got yourself a passel of fans, you know. You and Clay both. We'll just let Terrence fall off his bull, and we'll go inside, let you take a bow. Then you can take a load off."

Clay remained in the shadows, not wanting to steal Jeff's thunder. He was just as surprised to hear that Jeff had a following, although he deserved it. He was a scrappy rider.

Sam unhooked the gate and led Jeff inside after Terrence's bull ended the ride. "Just hold up both your hands so's they can see that brace, and take a bow."

Jeff raised his hands tentatively, surprised and pleased when the crowd roared with shouts of approval. Several groups of people in the stands stood up to applaud and more followed their example. He turned to bow to each section.

Caleb trotted up and held out his fingers like horns, bending over to dash at Jeff. Sam laughed and said, "Don't gore him, Caleb. He's one of our boys."

Jeff stuck out his hand and shook Caleb's. "Thanks, dude. If I never thanked you before, you do a great job."

The people in the stands seemed pleased with this demonstration and cheered louder.

“All it takes is to be a little bit smarter than a cow, and you’re a bullfighter,” Caleb said, consulting a big clown watch with no hands on his wrist. “Gotta go. Got asses to save and bulls to wrangle.”

“Go for it,” Jeff said.

“Come on, cowboy, gotta let ’em buck.” Sam put his hand on Jeff’s back, guiding him out of the ring, pausing to let him wave one last time.

“Thanks, Sam,” Jeff said. It had been just what he needed after blowing his chances for the year and getting injured. Just the fact that Sam had engineered the moment meant more to him than the crowd’s affirmation.

“You’ll do,” Sam said. He clapped Jeff’s shoulder and strode off.

Clay was waiting for him past the chutes. “Ready?”

“Yeah,” Jeff sighed.

“Come on. Let’s go to my rig.”

Jeff walked silently beside Clay, feeling like he would bite Clay’s head off if he tried to help by grabbing his arm or guiding him along, but Clay just walked beside him, not touching him. When they came to his trailer, Clay unlocked the door and stood back so Jeff could climb the stairs on his own.

“Did that medic give you a pain pill?”

“He gave me a bunch in this,” Jeff admitted, getting the container out of his pocket. “Not like I could get one out myself,” he muttered as Clay twisted the cap.

“It’s okay, I’m here. I’ll open it for you.”

Jeff swallowed the tablet with water that Clay held for him. “Thanks.”

“Let’s get you undressed.”

“You horndog.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Can’t wait to shuck you out of your clothes,” Clay joked. He knelt to tug off Jeff’s boots and rubbed his hands over his thighs. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“What, fight with you? Or ride with an injury?”

Clay laughed. They all rode with injuries. That was just part of it. And life without an occasional fight seemed dull, not that either of them showed any tendency to knuckle under in the name of peace. “Neither, I guess. I could say don’t make me worry about you, but I guess that’s not in the cards either, is it?”

“Unlikely.”

Clay stood up and pulled Jeff to his feet to unbutton his shirt. “You can stay with me while you’re mending.”



Jeff's lips trembled a little. "The season's over for me, Clay. I don't have the money to follow along just because I want to watch you win it. I'll be heading back to Idaho tomorrow. I'll catch your victory on TV."

"Fuck." Clay unbuttoned Jeff's jeans and drew them down his legs, waiting for him to step out of them. "Socks?"

"Off please." Jeff held up one foot at a time.

Clay helped him sit on the bed again in his boxers. "Better keep those on unless you want me to ravish you in your wounded state."

"Idaho is not wounded, and ravish? Fancy ten dollar word for a cowboy."

"I got A's in English." Clay undressed and got into bed, noticing how they were becoming more comfortable with the understanding that they would sleep in the same bed.

When he was on his back, he drew Jeff closer.

"I can't do much."

"We don't have to do anything but sleep. I just want to hold you."

Jeff struggled with his feelings; usually he was the one to do the holding, but he admitted to himself it might be nice, just this once. "Okay. I'm beat."

Snuggling together, Clay positioned Jeff's injured arm carefully across his chest, wondering what was happening to him. He'd never felt such a surge of protective emotion for another person, and here it had to be a man who didn't want to be protected. He looked down at Jeff's lashes, fanned silky and dark against his lean cheeks, thinking he was asleep, judging by the slow draw of each breath. "I never expected anything like this to happen to me," he whispered.

Jeff's body started to shake with laughter. "Neither did I," he said without opening his eyes, but his mouth curved into a smile.

"Did you ever think you might be queer?"

"Well, I never went around checking out men's butts before—"

"Whose butt are you checking out?" Clay asked in outrage.

"Yours mainly."

"That's okay then."

"What's it like for you?"

"It's like being with myself but better, because it's not me." Clay struggled to express his feelings, not sure he was getting it quite right.

Jeff opened his eyes. "I feel like you know me."

“That’s part of it,” Clay agreed. “You know what my life is like; we want the same things—”

“Not all the same things,” Jeff said. “I want to beat your ass in the ring, but this....” He moved his cast in frustration.

“Hey, no fair nailing me with that thing because you’re pissed,” Clay said.

“I thought I could do it this year.”

“Maybe next year’ll be your year,” Clay said, trying to console him.

“I guess this year it’s all you.”

“I’m not the only one out there riding. And who knows? I could fall off and break my neck like Jamie did.”

“Or Terrence could win.” Jeff solemnly rapped Clay’s forehead. “Knock on wood.”

“You superstitious?”

“Aren’t all cowboys?”

“So are we, like, boyfriends?”

Jeff pushed himself up to stare at Clay. “I guess. I’d like to be.”

“Good. Me too.”

Jeff laid his head back down on Clay's shoulder. "So how do you see this playing out?"

"I don't know. I guess we see how it goes."

Jeff didn't know what to say. Tonight they would be together, and in the morning, he would be heading for home. He couldn't afford to stay on the road with no hope of winning a purse along the way if he couldn't ride.

The tour would go on as usual, and Clay would be far away, busy with the competition. There would be women available and even men, a convenient way for Clay to get his rocks off. Even if Clay thought about him, he would be a thousand miles away.

So it was over.

JEFF woke up to the smell of coffee. Clay sat on the side of the bed, holding a paper cup under his nose, smiling down at him.

"Wake up, sleeping beauty."

Jeff grunted when he moved his injured hand, remembering why he was in Clay's trailer. "Thanks." He sat up and reached for the cup with his good hand.

They sat next to each other, sipping the hot coffee, not touching, not speaking. Jeff didn't know what to say. Clay would have to get on the road by ten to make it to the next stop. He didn't want a lot of soppy goodbyes, but he'd never been in a situation like this before.

Clay stood up expectantly. "Want to grab a bite?"

"No." Jeff set his cup down and stood up, hating the fact that he needed Clay's help to get dressed. "You have to get going. Where are my boots?"

Silently, Clay helped him into his jeans and shirt, fastening them without letting his fingers brush Jeff's skin. He placed Jeff's boots where he could stamp into them and stood back.

Jeff leaned on the wall, not wanting to put a hand on Clay to steady himself. If he were honest with himself, the big difference wasn't that Clay was a man, it was that he'd never cared enough about another person before that it was wrenching to say goodbye.

"I'll let you get going."

"Right. I'll call you."

"Sure."

Jeff went toward the door, edging past Clay, and put his hand on the knob. He looked at Clay one last time. He couldn't take it, just leaving on such a cold note as if they

weren't even friends. He closed the distance between them, flinging himself against Clay, clutching his waist with his good arm.

"Gonna miss you."

Clay's arms were around him, holding him so tight it was squeezing the breath out of him. "Gonna miss you too."

*This is the last time. The last time I get to hold him,* Jeff's mind screamed at him. He buried his face in Clay's neck, breathing him in, swallowing hard around the painful lump in his throat that wouldn't go down. He knew he should just go. There were no promises that could reassure him. They couldn't keep it together for more than two days on the road with nothing holding them back, and now it would be a long time before he saw Clay again, maybe till November if Clay made the finals.

Clay kissed Jeff's shoulder, it being the only part he could reach. Suddenly it became very important to let Jeff know how he felt about him, but he didn't have the words. He was never good with expressing feelings. And besides, what did you say to a boyfriend? But Jeff was more than a boyfriend, he was the one who helped Clay to be his true self, and he never wanted to let him go.

They jerked apart at the sound of a knock on the door. Clay turned away, ducking his head to brush his hand over his eyes. Jeff retreated to the far end of the trailer and stood with his back turned.

“Hey Clay, know where Jeff’s at?”

Clay stood back to let Sam enter. “He’s here. Just saying goodbye before we hit the road.”

Sam had to duck as he stepped inside, and he stood with his head tilted to one side. “Jeff, glad I caught you. Been talkin’ to the sponsors, and they want you to stay with the tour.”

“Doing what?” Jeff turned around, having succeeded in forcing his emotions down. “I can’t even clown with this. Or clean a stall.” He held up the cast.

“They want you to provide a little color to the announcin’,” Sam explained. “Sit up there in the booth, tell folks about the action from a rider’s perspective. Besides, you got a way with words that blisters my chaps.”

Jeff was silent, suspecting a joke.

“How much they going to pay him?” Clay asked.

“Not as much as a winnin’ purse,” Sam admitted. “But enough for gas and food. It’s your choice, Jeff. When you heal up, you’ll be able to go back to ridin’, even though you won’t qualify for the finals, missin’ so much of the season.”

Slowly, Jeff’s face lit up. He looked past Sam to see the same hopeful look on Clay’s face. “What do you think?”

“It’s got to be your decision if you could take it, watching without being able to ride,” Clay said. He glanced self-consciously at Sam and took a deep breath, adding softly, “I’d like it if you came along.”

Sam coughed to hide a smirk behind his hand. “I’ll leave you two boys to talk it over then. Get back to me with a yes or no before quittin’ time.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Jeff called out.

Sam waved a hand and jumped down out of the trailer.

“Why does he always catch us together like this?” Jeff asked.

“Maybe we’re being obvious.”

“Maybe.”

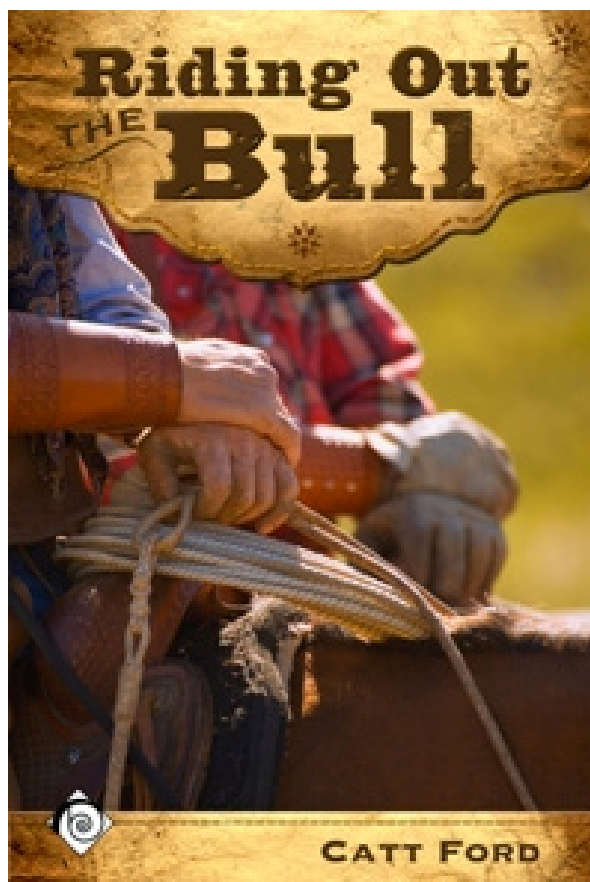
“So you gonna do it?”

“I might go along for the ride,” Jeff said nonchalantly.

Clay grabbed him around the waist and swung him in a circle. “Yeehaw! Cowboy up!”



Read Jamie and Doug's story in *Riding Out the Bull*.



Available only at Dreamspinner Press

[www.dreamspinnerpress.com](http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com)

CATT FORD lives in front of the computer monitor, in another world where her imaginary gay friends obey her every command.

She likes cats, chocolate, swing dancing, sleeping, Monty Python, Aussie friends, being silly, spinning other realities with words, and sea glass. She dislikes caterpillars, cigarette smoke, and rude people who think the F-word (as in faggot, or bundle of sticks) is acceptable.

A frustrated perfectionist, she comforts herself with the legend about the weavers of Persian rugs always including one mistake so as not to anger the gods, although she has no need to include a mistake on purpose. One always slips through. Writing fiction has filled a need for clever conversations, only possible when one is in control of both sides, and erotic romances, where everything turns out happily ever after, for the most part.

Visit Catt's blog at <http://catt-ford.livejournal.com/>.



*Dreamspinner  
Press*

For more of the  
best M/M romance,  
visit

*Dreamspinner Press*

[www.dreamspinnerpress.com](http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com)

Extreme Bull ©Copyright Catt Ford, 2009

Published by  
Dreamspinner Press  
4760 Preston Road  
Suite 244-149  
Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Catt Ford.

This book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of International Copyright Law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction, fines and/or imprisonment. This eBook cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this eBook can be shared or reproduced without the express permission of the publisher. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press at: 4760 Preston Road, Suite 244-149, Frisco, TX 75034  
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

Released in the United States of America  
May, 2009

eBook Edition  
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-008-6