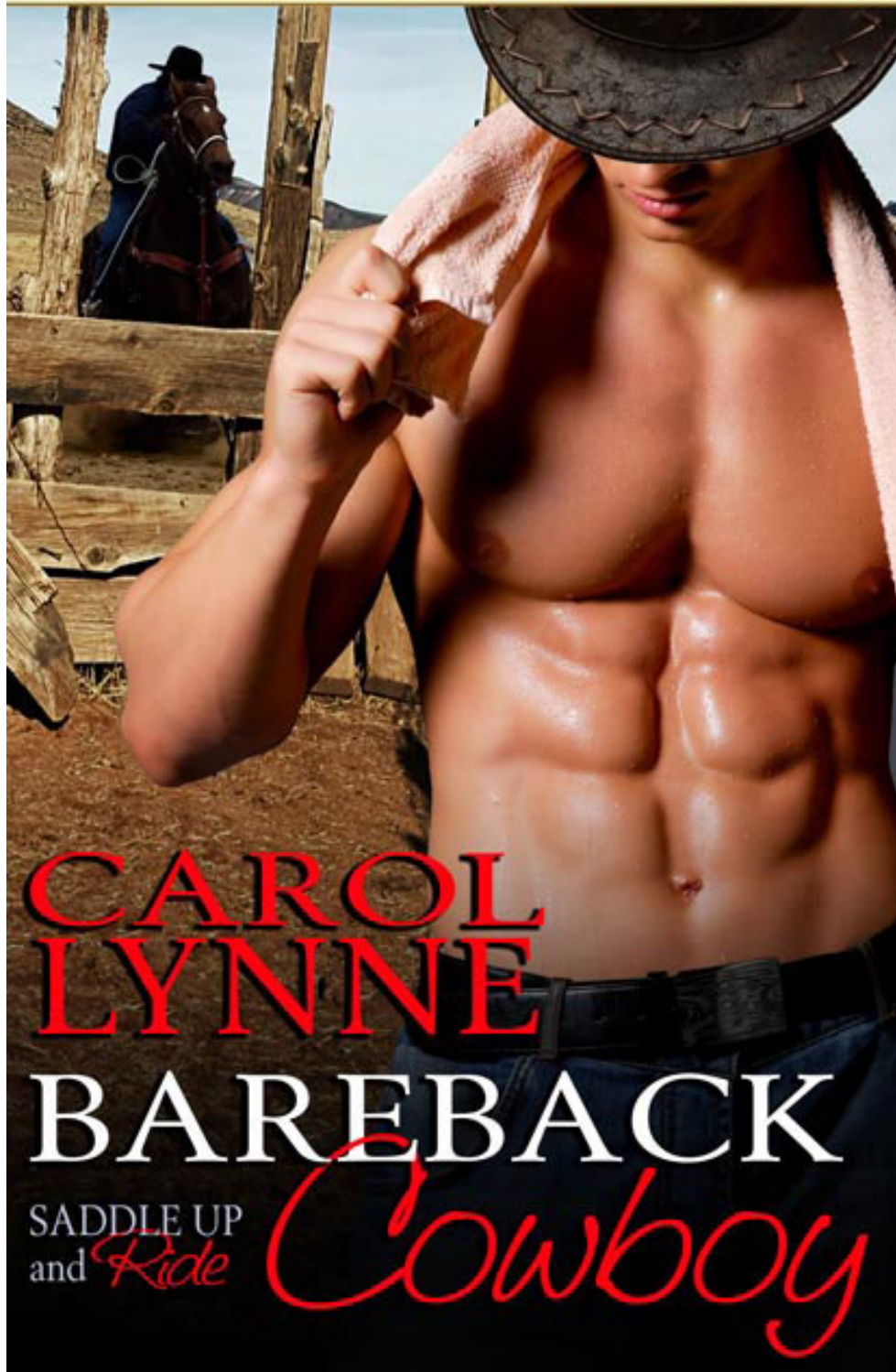


ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



CAROL
LYNNE

BAREBACK

SADDLE UP
and *Ride*

Cowboy

Bareback Cowboy

Carol Lynne

Book two in the Saddle Up and Ride series.

Ethan Griggs is quite happy living on Justice River Ranch. He spends his days as head wrangler, tending to the horses he loves and the guests he's learned to tolerate. When Bridger Collins arrives at the ranch, Griggs' world is turned upside down. Despite his usual hands-off policy with the guests, he's immediately drawn to the younger man.

Bridger thrives on the cowboy way of life. The son of one of the richest men in the country, Bridger would rather fix a fence than sit behind a desk counting his money. The sexual chemistry he seems to share with Griggs is simply icing on the cake.

With his week-long stay coming to a close, Bridger is forced to choose between the life he wants with Griggs and the life planned for him since birth.

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Bareback Cowboy

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BAREBACK COWBOY

Carol Lynne

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A&M: Texas A&M University, State Institution of Higher Education, Texas

Starbucks: Starbucks Corporation

Chapter One

Ethan Griggs grumbled under his breath as he waited for the last flight to arrive. The other eight guests were already loaded into the back of the van along with their luggage, but one of the planes had been delayed and the men were getting restless.

He checked his watch and pushed away from the side of the van he'd been leaning on. He stuck his head through the open window and addressed his passengers. "I'll be back."

Because of the flight delay, Griggs had been forced to park the van in the lot instead of out front where he normally picked up guests. As he made his way to the terminal building, he grabbed the pack of cigarettes from his front pocket and lit up. He wasn't supposed to smoke around the guests, but he was in dire need.

He stopped outside the door and stood in the small smoking section as he inhaled. The rush of menthol and nicotine into his bloodstream seemed to calm him immediately.

The sidewalk was busy with people going in and out of the terminal, but Griggs zeroed in on a sweet-looking young stud in low-rise jeans and a cowboy hat. The guy was patting his pockets, one after the other. He was obviously looking for his lighter.

Griggs walked over and held a flame in front of the cowboy. "Need a light?"

The young guy looked up at Griggs, flashing a set of deep dimples. "Thanks."

Griggs was struck by the intense gray eyes that stared back at him. Rimmed by long, thick, black lashes, the kid was to die for. Too bad he was so damn young.

The cowboy stuck out his hand. "I'm Bridger."

Griggs started to shake the man's hand but stopped. "Bridger Collins?"

"Yeah?" Bridger finally dropped his hand.

"I'm Griggs, from Justice River Ranch. I've been waiting for you."

"Really? Cool. The airline got me on a different flight. When I came out and no one was here, I called the ranch to make sure you hadn't left without me."

Griggs winced. He hated cell phones, but Deacon always made him carry one in the van. "Sorry, I've got my phone turned off."

Bridger shrugged and took another drag of his cigarette.

Griggs noticed the duffle at Bridger's sneakered feet. "Did the rest of your luggage not make it?"

Bridger exhaled and picked up his bag. "This is it. Boots, couple pairs of jeans, shirts, socks, underwear and my meds."

Meds? "Are you sick?"

"No. I've got diabetes, but I've lived with it most of my life."

Griggs stuffed his cigarette into the nearest receptacle and gestured toward the parking lot. "Van's over there."

Bridger put his cigarette out as well and followed Griggs. "So how far is it to the ranch?"

"About an hour. We'll stop at a little place on the way for lunch."

"How many guests will you have this week?"

Griggs glanced at the hot younger cowboy.

"I've got nine including you. Another one of the ranch employees picked up a load of guests from one of the hotels here in Billings."

They reached the van to cheers of excitement. *Yeah, the guests had obviously been about to revolt.* Griggs took Bridger's bag and stuffed it into the back with the rest of the luggage. He still couldn't get over how little Bridger had packed. Most guests barely managed to make the airline's weight limit with their luggage.

He closed the split rear doors and climbed into the driver's seat. "Buckle up," he informed his passengers as he pulled out of the parking lot.

Beside him, Bridger turned around to address the rest of the van. "I'm Bridger Collins. Thank y'all for waiting for me."

One by one, the men introduced themselves. Griggs knew by the end of the week new bonds would be formed by the virtual strangers. He'd heard of friendships lasting for years. People may joke about city folks playing cowboys on a Montana dude ranch, but by the second day their butts would realize there's nothing playing about it.

Although the accommodations at Justice River were top notch, it was still a working cattle ranch. Guests paid a pretty penny to experience the life of a rancher and that's exactly what they received.

Griggs concentrated on the road as he drove out of Billings toward Red Lodge.

"What stock breed does the ranch run?" Bridger asked.

"Angus." Griggs glanced sideways at the gorgeous younger man. "Have you been around cattle?"

"Yeah." Bridger swung his feet up to rest on the dashboard. "My dad has some."

Griggs tightened his grip on the steering wheel as Bridger too off his hat, releasing silky black curls. The kid shook his head before turning to grin at Griggs, flashing those sexy dimples again.

"Damn, that feels better. Mom made me promise to keep it out of sight until I got here. Guess she thought I might have some trouble along the way." Bridger dropped the well-worn straw hat to the floor between their seats.

Griggs returned his attention to the road. He knew exactly what kind of trouble the kid was likely to get himself into and definitely didn't have time to go looking for trouble.

* * * * *

"Is this Roscoe?" Bridger asked.

"That's what the sign said," Griggs grumbled.

Bridger rolled his eyes at the cantankerous cowboy. Since leaving Billings he'd done his best to engage the stud in conversation, but he'd only managed to get one- and two-word replies.

"Cute," Bridger commented as the van parked in front of a stone and log restaurant.

"They've got good food." Griggs opened the door and climbed out.

Before sliding out of the passenger seat, Bridger adjusted his half-hard cock. Grouchy or not, the tall Native American was doing a number on his libido.

He followed a few of the men inside. It wasn't surprising to him that he appeared to be the youngest of the group. He didn't mind. Except for attending classes, he rarely spent time round people his own age.

The small group of guests gathered in front of the hostess stand as Griggs talked to a woman he appeared to know rather well. A laugh erupted from the gorgeous cowboy, surprising Bridger. He wondered how often Griggs actually let his control slip enough to cut up and have fun.

They were shown to a long table at the back of the restaurant. Bridger took a chair, noticing the way Griggs stood back until everyone was seated. There were two empty spots, one next to him and one at the opposite end of the table. He met the black eyes of the cowboy and waited.

After a slight raise of his eyebrows, Griggs sat as far away from Bridger as he could get. The subtle dismissal stung, but Bridger wasn't about to let Griggs know. He turned to the man on his left. "Pete, right?"

The thin, older man nodded. "Pete Allenbrand."

"So where're you from?" Bridger asked, his gaze flicking toward Griggs.

"D.C.," Griggs answered.

"Wow. That's cool. You work for the government or something?"

"No. I'm a school teacher. I've been saving for a trip like this for years. I always had dreams of being a cowboy, but being raised in the city..." Pete shrugged. "Anyway, I decided to fulfill a dream before I got too old to enjoy myself."

Bridger passed a menu to Pete. "I can understand the dream of being a cowboy. It's what I've always wanted, but my father has other plans for me."

"You in school?"

Bridger almost laughed when Pete looked over the top of his glasses at him. Yep. The guy was definitely a teacher. "Yeah. Right now I'm at A&M, but I hate every minute of it."

"Not the right school?"

"Not the right environment." His napkin fell off his lap. When he bent over to retrieve the red and white checked cloth, spots danced across his vision. Bridger decided on the hot beef sandwich and gave the waitress his order.

"Excuse me," Bridger said. With all the excitement, he'd forgotten his insulin bag in the van. He stopped beside Griggs. "Is the van unlocked?"

Griggs nodded. "Something wrong?"

"No. I just forgot something." He'd never been embarrassed of his disease, but announcing it to a table full of strangers didn't make him comfortable either. He left the restaurant and opened the back of the van.

Luckily his duffle was on top of the pile so it didn't take him long to find the black leather bag inside. Insulin kit in hand, he walked back into the restaurant. "Excuse me, ma'am, can you tell me where the restroom is?"

"Sure, sweetie. Just go down that hall, second door on your right."

"Thanks." He entered the restroom and set the kit on the side of the sink as he began washing his hands. He should have known better than to go so long without eating. His levels weren't bad, he already knew that, but he was off his schedule by almost two hours, which wasn't healthy.

Bridger opened the kit and removed his glucose meter and lance. After a quick prick of his finger, he massaged a drop of blood onto the test strip.

As Bridger was digging in the bag for his insulin pen, the door opened. He put his back to the intruder and dialed up the needed dose.

"You okay?" a deep voice asked.

"Yeah." Bridger stood with the pen in his hand. His afternoon injection was always given in his right thigh and he doubted Griggs would appreciate the show. He held up the pen. "I'm overdue for my shot."

"Oh. I'll, uh, leave you to it."

Griggs disappeared and Bridger entered one of the two stalls. He pulled his jeans down and sat on the toilet as he administered the quick prick.

By the time he arrived back to the table, his food had already been delivered. He placed the leather bag under his chair and dug in, aware of Griggs' stare. Bridger wasn't sure if his uneasy feeling had more to do with his glucose level or the penetrating eyes that seemed to study him.

He did his best to concentrate on his lunch, finishing most of the sandwich and a few of the fries. Stares were pretty common in people who hadn't been around someone with type one diabetes. Bridger had gotten used to it, so he rolled with it, determined not to let Griggs' apparent concern go to his head.

The waitress delivered the bills and one by one the group got to their feet to line up at the cash register. In his excitement to get to the ranch, he forgot to grab his kit.

It wasn't until he was in the van and Griggs held it out, that he remembered. "Oh shit. Thanks. I'd have been screwed come supertime."

Griggs stared at Bridger for several moments, before clearing his throat to address the group. "Justice River Ranch is only two miles or so down the road."

The excitement in the van ratcheted up a notch as the men began to laugh and talk about how full they were.

"Will we get a chance to ride today?" Bridger asked.

Griggs drove under the ranch sign. "Some. Usually your first afternoon is spent getting settled in your rooms. There'll be a meeting in the cookhouse before supper. Then you'll all come out to the barn where I'll help match you up to a horse depending on your skill level."

"I've been riding since I was a kid, so that shouldn't be a problem."

Griggs snorted. "This ain't the fairgrounds, kid. We travel over some pretty rough terrain."

The kid comment stung, but Bridger tried not to let it dampen his enthusiasm. He could tell Griggs was the type of man who didn't take anyone on their word. That was fine with Bridger—he knew his own skills and didn't need to prove them to anyone. Well, except his father, but that issue was better left in Texas.

Bridger braced his hands on the roof of the van to keep from being tossed around like a ragdoll. The dirt and sparsely graveled ranch road was deeply rutted in places and Griggs drove faster than warranted. "Dang, you guys get a lot of run-off up here or what?"

"It's a ranch, not a suburb."

Hot or not, Griggs had a major attitude problem. Maybe the studly cowboy deserved to be taken down a notch or two.

* * * * *

Griggs pulled the van to a stop in front of the barn and jumped out. He walked over to his boss, Deacon. "You need to keep that kid away from me or his first day on the ranch is gonna be his last."

Deacon, the ranch manager and his lover, Ray, the ranch owner, looked around. Ray grinned, evidently spotting Bridger. "He's cute."

"He's a pain in my ass. All the way here he was asking one question after another. He fancies himself quite the horseman. It's been my experience that those who talk about it don't know shit. And that guy won't shut up."

Ray grinned and reached out to thump Griggs on the shoulder. "You've got your first guest crush. How cute."

Griggs made a disgusted sound and walked back toward the van. As long as he kept Bridger at arm's length, he knew he'd be fine. There was something about the young man that just rubbed him the wrong way.

"Wait, wait, wait," Griggs hollered. "We'll unload the luggage in front of your cabins."

The guests nodded and started to put their bags back into the van. Griggs rolled his eyes. He was well off his game. He knew he should have told the guests that very thing before he hastily exited the van.

"Just leave 'em, I'll take care of getting them back in," he told the group. "Why don't you go over and introduce yourselves to the staff?"

After the others had wandered off, Griggs began tossing the suitcases back inside. He heard the other van rumbling down the road as he shut the doors. Although the rest of the staff had witnessed his fuck up, at least Cody hadn't.

As the man in charge of guests, Cody would have given Griggs all kind of shit for his mistake. It wasn't that big of a deal, but Cody loved teasing people. Like a dog with a bone, he was relentless when it came to calling people out for screwing up.

Cody and the rest of the guests hopped out of the van and Griggs moved out of the way. If Griggs was lucky, the entire incident with the baggage wouldn't come up.

"Any trouble?" Cody asked.

Griggs shook his head. "Had one late arrival but nothing serious."

Cody nodded and continued to lead the guests over to Ray and Deacon.

Griggs leaned against the side of the van and waited, using the time to pull the leather thong out of his hair. In a well-practiced move, he smoothed the individual strands with his fingers before pulling it back once again. Once the thong was secured at the nape of his neck, he crossed his arms over his chest.

His gaze continually slid to the young, raven-haired beauty in skin-tight jeans. Griggs chuckled to himself at the expensive sneakers on the kid's feet. If Bridger continued to wear them, they'd be ready for the trash can before the end of the week.

Griggs groaned at the thought of spending an entire week trying to avoid the tempting little morsel. He caught a rather handsome man step up to Bridger and start a conversation. He was too far away to hear what they were talking about but Bridger smiled up at the guy and Griggs felt his stomach tighten.

Dammit! He pushed away from the van and walked across the road to the cookhouse. "Hey, Libby, you got some fresh coffee?"

Libby, the ranch's weekend cook, popped her head out of the kitchen. "Should be safe to drink. Made it about an hour ago."

Griggs grabbed his thermal cup from the top shelf and filled it to the brim. He screwed the cap back on and went to stand at the screen door. After taking a tentative sip, his gaze went back to Bridger.

Griggs unwanted attraction to Bridger probably stemmed from the kid's illness—at least that's what he kept telling himself. Griggs had grown up around diabetes, having a baby sister who had the disease.

How many times had he seen Rachel mess up and forget to check her levels until it was almost too late? Griggs shook his head. From the way Bridger had so carelessly left his leather bag behind at the restaurant, Griggs imagined the kid was no different.

The guests began to break away and filter toward the vans. With another sip of his coffee, Griggs pushed the screen door open and resumed his assigned duties. It felt odd seeing nothing but a sea of gay men. He'd gotten used to dealing with families.

Although it was nice not having to hide his sexuality in front of the guests, Griggs knew it was also dangerous.

Since hearing about the new direction the ranch was taking in dealing strictly with GLBT guests, Griggs had been counseling himself about getting involved with a guest. He knew it wasn't an option for him. He'd never been a one-night stand kind of guy. He preferred to take his time getting to know a potential lover. With only a week to maneuver, he knew "hands off" would have to become his motto.

As he climbed behind the wheel, Bridger reached out to take his cup.

"Here, let me hold that for you." Bridger grinned when their fingers brushed.

Griggs gave an inward groan. *Hands off*. He had to remember that.

Chapter Two

Although he had to share a room, Bridger was happy he'd been placed in what Griggs had called the summer cabin. He knew some guests had paid the premium for individual cabins, but the thought of spending the week alone in a cabin hadn't appealed to him.

He'd come to the Justice River Ranch for the chance to be himself for a change. Not only did he have to worry about his father's disapproving stares, but he could rope, ride and cuss at will.

"This okay with you?" Bridger asked his roommate, Steve, as he tossed his duffle onto one of the twin beds.

"Suits me," Steve answered.

Bridger unzipped his bag and began pulling out the small pile of clothes he'd brought. At the bottom of the duffle were his boots, wrapped in a plastic bag. He started to take them out of their container but stopped when he noticed all the dried mud at the bottom of the bag.

He set them aside and carried his clothes to the dresser. "I'll take the bottom drawer."

"Thanks." Steve, a financial planner, was probably in his mid to upper forties. Bridger didn't consider him heavy, but the older man did have a spare tire around his middle.

"Do you know if we're supposed to go ahead and change now, or are we doing that after supper?"

Steve stopped unloading his large suitcase, a huge pile of shirts in his hands. "I'm not sure. I know they said we'd be riding a bit after dinner though."

"Guess I'll go ahead then." Bridger took out a pair of his worn jeans and tossed them onto the bed. "Is it going to bother you if I change in here?"

"Not at all," Steve answered.

"Cool." Bridger unzipped his low-rise jeans and pushed them to the floor. He toed off his sneakers and stepped out of the jeans. When he reached for his riding jeans, he caught the open-jawed stare coming from his roommate.

Bridger shrugged as he pulled his pants on as quickly as possible. "Sorry."

Steve cleared his throat. "No. I'm sorry. Guess I've never seen a pair of underwear like that in real life."

Bridger chuckled as he stuffed his cock into his jeans and zipped up. Although technically a thong, Bridger's underwear was little more than a pouch for his cock with a couple of tiny strings attached. "Don't have much choice with the low-rise pants. It's either these or flash your underwear for everyone to see."

Steve shifted and turned back to his suitcase.

Bridger shrugged and retrieved his jeans from the floor. He smoothed out as many wrinkles as he could and put them in the drawer. After kicking his sneakers under the bed, he picked up the sack with his boots. "I'll be on the porch."

He remembered to grab his cigarettes and lighter from the top of the dresser before leaving the room. As he walked through the rustic living room, he glanced at the huge rock fireplace. Although it was probably too warm for a fire, maybe he'd try to talk his fellow houseguests into one later in the evening when the temperature cooled down.

Once on the porch, he lit up and took the boots out of their bag. Sock-footed, he stood at the end of the porch and banged the old boots together, knocking off even more dried mud and manure.

He took a seat in one of the freshly painted green Adirondack chairs and leaned back. As he looked out over the snowcapped mountains in the distance, he continued to enjoy his cigarette.

Who knew something as simple as being able to smoke without hiding it could be so incredibly satisfying?

The screen door opened and Rodney, he thought the guy's name was, came out to join him. "Glad to see I'm not the only one with this filthy habit."

Bridger chuckled and rested his head against the back of the chair. "I enjoy every moment of smoking."

"Yeah, me, too."

Rodney sat in a chair across from Bridger and lit a cigarette. "Think we'll be able to smoke while we ride?"

Bridger shook his head. "Too risky. Besides, I'm sure butts littering the ground isn't the look the ranch is going for. I think Deacon said something about smoking being relegated to our porches and behind the cookhouse."

"Oh well. Guess I'll have to get my fill in the mornings then."

"I brought a bunch of nicotine gum. I'll give you some. It's not as good as the real thing, but they should keep you from biting someone's head off as the day wears on."

"Thanks." Rodney took another drag of his cigarette. "So what was that good-looking guy from the other group talking to you about earlier?"

Bridger had to think back. The only man he could picture by Rodney's description wore a long black ponytail. "Griggs?"

Rodney chuckled. "No. The other one. The guy in the red sports shirt."

"Oh. James. Yeah, he wanted to know if I played."

"And?" Rodney prompted.

"I told him I wasn't really into random sex. But hey, if you're interested, go for it. Seemed like he was desperate to get a little action this week."

Rodney snorted. "Probably married."

"Probably."

After a few moments, Rodney continued. "Still, I might need to sit by him at supper."

Bridger shoved his cigarette butt into the bucket filled with sand and laughed. "I imagine there'll be a lot of hooking up this week."

"You think? I got the feeling from the brochure it was discouraged."

Bridger picked up one of his boots and eased his foot inside, holding it by the straps. "Well they can't very well encourage orgies now can they? We're grown men. They probably figure what they don't see isn't their business."

"You like Griggs, huh?"

Bridger shrugged, reaching for his other boot. "He's hot, but kind of an ass."

"Yeah, well, he was watching you pretty closely. I'd say you could get some of that if you played your cards right."

Geez. Did he come to a ranch or a gay spa? "I just want to spend my time doing what I love."

Rodney started to laugh. "That's just what I was talking about doing."

Bridger pulled his pants legs down over his boots and stood. "Think I'll head to the barn to check out the horses. Interested?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm interested, but not in horses at the moment."

Bridger chuckled and stepped off the porch. He knew Rodney's type, always interested in what he could get but Bridger didn't play those games.

The dirt-and-grass road that led to the barn was rutted, but at least it didn't look like it had rained recently. He dodged several of the deepest holes and soon cleared the trees.

From his vantage point, the ranch resembled the one he'd left earlier that morning. Although the buildings were older and smaller than the ones on Collinsford Downs, they served the same purposes.

Before reaching the barn, he passed a small field with a lone horse behind the fence. He detoured and crossed the grass to reach the wire fence. "Hey, boy."

Bridger reached out and began to pet the gorgeous bay mustang. The horse's nostrils flared momentarily as it jerked its head back.

"I'm not gonna hurt you, boy," Bridger spoke in a soothing tone. He could tell from the spooked behavior of the horse it wasn't used to being handled, but he'd always had a way with animals.

Before long, the stallion accepted Bridger's touch, even going as far as to nuzzle against his hand several times. "You like carrots? Nah, you seem more like an apple fella to me."

"Get away from him!"

Bridger glanced over his shoulder to see a red-faced Griggs striding toward him. He pulled his hand back. "Sorry. Didn't mean to overstep. Just getting friendly with the locals."

Griggs reached out and pulled Bridger by the arm until he was away from the fence. "Well, that old boy isn't friendly. He'd just as soon bite off your finger than look at you."

"We were fine. Despite what you think, I do know a little about horses."

Griggs snorted. "What, did Mummy and Daddy give you riding lessons before you came?"

How the hell did this asshole ever seem remotely attractive to me? Bridger jerked his arm out of Griggs' grasp and walked away. He took a left at the fork in the road, not ready to head to the barn.

Kicking the large chunks of gravel as he walked, Bridger didn't even realize where he was until he heard a voice. He looked up and came face to face with the two men who ran the place. "Hey."

"Going somewhere?" the smaller of the two asked.

Bridger shrugged. "Just needed to get away for a few minutes." It was then he noticed the large house tucked back into the trees. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to trespass."

The smaller man shielded his eyes from the sun and looked up at the bigger cowboy. "I forgot my sunglasses. Will you wait for me?"

"As long as it takes."

Laughing, the smaller man started jogging back towards the house.

Left alone with the big guy, Bridger held out his hand. "I'm sorry, but I don't remember your name. I'm Bridger."

"Deacon." The man gestured toward the running man. "The absent-minded fella is my partner, Ray."

Bridger smiled. "I promise to remember this time."

"So, how come you're already in need of time to yourself?"

Despite loathing the man who talked down to him, Bridger wasn't the kind to squeal on anyone. "Just did. Enjoying the scenery."

Deacon stuffed his hands in his back pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Don't let Griggs get to you. He can be a surly sonofabitch, but he's damn good at his job."

"Surly's an understatement," he mumbled.

Deacon was still chuckling when Ray rejoined them. "What'd I miss?"

Deacon nodded toward Bridger. "Griggs has been working his charms on Bridger."

Ray smiled and clapped his hands together. "I knew it!"

The two men started laughing, completely losing Bridger. He assumed it was some kind of inside joke and kept his mouth shut.

They walked toward the fork in the road, this time taking the branch that led to the cookhouse.

"Are you thirsty?" Ray asked.

"I could use something."

"I'm gonna check on Black Jack," Deacon said, bending to give Ray a quick kiss.

"If that cut isn't any better, you should probably call Doc Morgan," Ray hollered after Deacon.

Deacon threw up a hand in acknowledgment but didn't turn around.

Ray shook his head. "Men."

Bridger couldn't agree more. He followed Ray up the steps and into the cookhouse.

"Coffee? Tea?"

"Is there any diet soda by chance?" Bridger asked.

"In the fridge. Help yourself." Ray poured a cup of coffee and took a seat at one of the long tables.

Bridger wandered into the kitchen. "Excuse me, ma'am. Ray said it would be okay if I got a diet soda?"

"Sure. Bottom shelf. There are also some homemade chocolate chip cookies in that tin on the counter."

"Thanks." Bridger grabbed a can and a couple of cookies before heading back into the dining room. He placed one of the cookies in front of Ray. "She said they were homemade."

Ray picked up the cookie and ate it in three bites. "Libby makes the best cookies, but don't tell Mother that."

"Your mother works here?" Bridger nibbled on his cookie, trying to make it last. It was something he'd done since he was a kid. His mom used to tease him, saying he ate like a bunny.

Ray got up and snagged the tin of cookies from the counter. "Mother's real name is Martha. Since most of the hands who work here either live far away from home or just don't get along with their folks, they've come to think of her as Mother."

"That's nice." He watched as Ray ate two more cookies.

"So what seems to be the problem with Griggs?"

Bridger finished off his treat and washed it down with a drink. "I don't know. I guess because I'm younger than he is, he seems to think it's okay to treat me like I'm stupid or something." He shrugged. "I've had my fill of his snide comments about my horsemanship abilities."

"You ride?"

Bridger nodded. "Since I was big enough to sit in the saddle. My father owns a place down south, just east of Austin."

"Well don't let him get to you. He's pretty protective of his horses. Until you prove to him that you really do know what the hell you're doing, he'll take it out on you."

"Take what out on me? I still don't know why he hates me so much."

With a grin on his face, Ray put the lid back on the tin. "He's attracted to you. I could tell the first time I saw him look your way. Griggs prides himself on being in control. I imagine you're disrupting some of that control and he doesn't like it."

"Really? Is that the reason he nearly yanked my arm off when he caught me petting the mustang down the road?"

Ray seemed shocked. "Satan's Spawn let you pet him?"

"You named a horse Satan's Spawn?"

"Nah. His real name is Harry. We just call him by the other name because of his temperament. He's never been broke. Griggs bought him for a hundred and twenty-five bucks from the government after they rounded a bunch of 'em up out west of here."

"Huh. Well, it seemed nice enough to me."

Ray refilled his coffee cup. "It might be an interesting bet as to which one, Griggs or Harry, could be tamed first."

* * * * *

Griggs was sitting at the makeshift desk he'd set up in the corner of the tack room when he heard booted feet on the old wood plank floor.

"Griggs?" Deacon called.

"Back here."

Deacon appeared in the doorway and leaned a shoulder against the jamb. "What're you working on?"

Griggs held up the pad of paper. "Just trying to get an idea of what horses to have Neil pull out of the corral for later."

When Deacon continued to stand there, Griggs knew there was something else on his boss' mind. "What?"

"What's going on between you and Bridger?"

"Bridger? Nothing! Why? Did he say something?"

"Not exactly. Found him wandering the road. He looked like he'd lost his best friend."

Despite how bothersome he found the kid, he hated to hear about him being upset. Exactly why it bothered him, he refused to acknowledge. "I caught him petting Harry and yelled at him."

Deacon's brows shot up. "Seriously? Satan let him get that close?"

Griggs refused to remember his initial reaction when he'd first spotted Bridger that close to the feral Mustang. He turned back to his work, afraid of inadvertently broadcasting his emotions to Deacon.

"I'll try to go easier on him." The last thing he wanted was to get on Deacon's bad side because of his unwelcomed attraction to Bridger.

"Good. He seems like a nice guy. Maybe you should try to get to know him."

"Yeah, right. And just about the time I start to like him, he'll go back to his cushy life," Griggs mumbled.

"You'll have to let someone through that thick skin of yours eventually, Griggs. Take it from someone who knows. Life's a hell of a lot easier when there's someone standing beside you."

Griggs gripped the pencil in his hand as he heard Deacon walk away. He agreed with the ranch manager. The thought of a long-term partner appealed to him, maybe too much. A short-term fling would do nothing to get him to where he wanted to be.

Chapter Three

Bridger made a point to sit as far away from Griggs as possible during supper. He'd returned to the summer cabin long enough to give himself his shot, surprised to see most of the other guests sitting around the living room on their laptops, mumbling about their offices falling apart without them.

He still didn't understand why someone would pay a couple thousand dollars to take a vacation and then work, but to each his own, he reckoned.

The player from earlier took the chair across from him and Bridger almost groaned. Smarmy married men definitely weren't his style.

"Haven't changed your mind, have you?" James asked.

"Nope. Sorry." Bridger was relieved when Rodney took the seat beside Mr. Smarmy.

For the rest of the meal, he attempted to block out the sexual innuendos flying between the two men across the table from him. Instead, he concentrated on his supper. The chicken fried steak was some of the best he'd ever eaten and the mashed potatoes were, thankfully, not from a box.

After finishing what he could, he took his plate and scraped the few remaining scraps into the chicken feed bucket, set his plate in the provided bin and dropped his silverware into the plastic bucket of soapy dishwater.

Bridger made a point to pop his head into the kitchen. "Fantastic dinner, Libby. Thanks so much."

"You're welcome. I'm making up pies for after the evening ride if you're interested."

Bridger rubbed his flat, but full, stomach. "Depends on how much of this I can work off between now and then."

As he headed to the back porch, Bridger lit up a cigarette. He once again took in the breathtaking views. Collinsford Downs had green rolling hills, but it didn't hold a candle to the majestic mountains that seemed to surround Justice River.

The longer he stared at the scenery, the more he yearned to say to hell with his family and follow his dreams. The sound of the screen door banging shut startled him.

Bridger glanced over his shoulder before quickly resuming his original position. He heard the flick of Griggs' lighter. The distinct smell of a menthol cigarette seemed to envelop him in a cloud of gray smoke.

After several moments, Griggs spoke. "If you wanna show me how well you can ride, I'll go ahead and pull a horse for you."

Bridger was caught between doing just that and stomping his foot and retreating to the summer cabin. Why should he prove his abilities to...

His mouth went dry as Griggs bent over to put his half-smoked cigarette into the sand bucket. *Oh, shit.* Who was he kidding? He wanted that ass. He wanted to wrap his legs around that hard body and ride the man like a jockey.

"Well?" Griggs asked as he headed around the corner of the cookhouse toward the barn.

Maybe if he showed the head wrangler he knew what he was doing, the man would stop treating him like a city slicker. Bridger dropped his butt into the bucket and followed Griggs.

He reached the barn about ten paces behind Griggs. He saw a whiteboard with guests' names matched up with horses' names. According to the list, Bridger was supposed to ride Jigsaw.

"If you'll point him out to me, I can go out into the corral and get my horse."

"I'll do that. Wouldn't want you to ruin your fancy sneakers."

Bridger cleared his throat. Griggs eventually turned away from the board and looked at him. Bridger pointed down to his worn boots. For some reason it hurt that Griggs hadn't even paid enough attention to him to notice the boots he'd worn all afternoon and evening. "They've seen their share of muddy corrals. I'll be fine."

Griggs continued to stare at Bridger's boots for several moments before slowly working his gaze up.

Bridger felt the look like a physical touch. When Griggs' eyes zeroed in on Bridger's groin, he felt himself start to harden. The wicked grin of Griggs' sensual mouth told Bridger the wrangler had noticed his predicament.

"Black and white gelding." Griggs tossed Bridger a lead rope. "I've already haltered him."

Bridger caught the red and white nylon rope and nodded. He spun on his heels and walked down the steep ramp at one end of the barn into the corral. In a sea of dun and roan horseflesh, the black and white was easy to find.

"Hey, Jigsaw," Bridger cooed. He snapped the lead onto the horse's halter and immediately began to pet the gorgeous animal.

A large, steel gray horse caught his eye as it walked toward him. "Well aren't you a beauty." He reached out and stroked the big gray's forehead and neck.

"He's mine," Griggs said from behind Bridger.

"He's gorgeous. What's his name?" Bridger removed his hand, afraid of being yelled at.

"Mick," Griggs answered. Instead of attaching the lead, Griggs whistled and headed back toward the barn, Mick following the large man like a puppy.

Bridger smiled. He couldn't imagine anything, horse or man, being able to resist Griggs' deep voice and commanding attitude. Hell, he'd follow that ass himself if Griggs would let him.

He led Jigsaw out of the corral to the hitching post. After a quick tie down, Bridger wandered into the tack room. "Is there a specific saddle Jigsaw prefers?"

Griggs came out of a small room off to the side carrying a black saddle and blanket. "He doesn't like the weight of most saddles, so I usually use number six with the black and red checked blanket."

Bridger nodded. He walked down the aisle of sawhorses until he came to one marked with a big red six on the floor in front of it. Like Griggs had indicated, the saddle was extremely light. Bridger wondered how Jigsaw felt about having a hundred-and-fifty pound man on his back.

He carried the saddle over to the row of blankets draped over a pole running down the center of the room. He found the black and red and set the saddle on top before picking them both up as one unit.

Griggs was cinching his saddle when Bridger exited the barn.

"You got it?" Griggs asked.

"Yeah." Bridger wasted no time getting Jigsaw saddled. "Bridle?"

With his back leaning against Mick, Griggs had his arms crossed. "Number eleven."

Voices erupted from the cookhouse as the guests poured out onto the porch and down the steps.

"Would you like me to help them with their horses?" Bridger asked.

Griggs hadn't moved a muscle. He continued to study Bridger, but finally gave a slow nod. "Yeah. I'd appreciate that."

Before helping the other men, Bridger found the right bridle and finished off Jigsaw. He spent the next hour working beside Griggs and the other wranglers, teaching the guests how to saddle their horses.

Once he helped get the last guest mounted, Bridger untied Jigsaw's reins from the hitching post and swung himself into the saddle. He felt eyes on him and turned to find Griggs, once again, staring at him.

Bridger stared back this time. Although he knew Griggs would never say the words, he could tell the man was starting to regret some of his snide comments.

Griggs broke eye contact and addressed the group. "Nothing too strenuous this evening. We'll ride up the road about a mile before turning back. I'll use the time to judge your fit with the horse I've assigned. If you're having trouble with your mount, let me know and we'll try a different one next time."

Bridger hung back, content watching Griggs interact with the other guests. Despite the head wrangler's surly attitude towards him, the man was surprisingly patient with the inexperienced riders.

"You look good. I take it you've done this before," Cody said, riding up beside Bridger.

Bridger chuckled. "Yeah. I ride as often as I'm allowed. Usually when my father's out of town."

Bridger snapped his mouth shut. He'd almost told too much to a stranger. All he'd hoped for was a week of being Bridger Collins instead of his father's son. Instead of questioning him further, Cody got sidetracked by a yelp from one of the men whose horse wasn't cooperating.

"Sorry." Cody rode off toward the man.

Bridger's attention returned to the scenery, in particular the setting sun. The bright hues of red and orange painted not only the mountains, but the entire landscape. This was how he wanted to spend his days. Not trapped in a high-rise in Austin.

By the time they returned to the barn, Bridger was pissed. Not with Griggs. The anger fueling his blood was directed at two people, himself and his father. He unsaddled Jigsaw and brushed him down.

Once he finished, Bridger knew he should help the others, but he didn't feel like it. Instead of getting a lead rope, he hooked a finger through Jigsaw's halter and led his mount out toward the open field. Bridger gave the black-and-white paint one last nuzzle before releasing him. "You done good, boy."

He was surprised when Jigsaw didn't run for the hills. Instead the horse stood where he was, bumping his forehead against Bridger's shoulder. Bridger walked along the fence, leading the paint away from the gate.

In the clear, away from the other horses, Bridger climbed onto the slat-board fence and continued to pet and scratch Jigsaw behind the ears.

"Why can't I be man enough to defy him?" Bridger asked the animal.

He wasn't sure how long he sat there before Griggs' horse Mick trotted by.

"Everyone's in the cookhouse having pie. If you want some, you'd better get in there," Griggs said, closing the pasture gate.

Jigsaw started to wander off toward the big gray and Bridger climbed down from his perch. He watched as his horse met up with Mick before turning to reply to Griggs. "Not really in the mood for pie."

"Thanks for your help," Griggs mumbled.

Bridger wondered how much the gratitude had cost the wrangler. He waited until the horses had disappeared into the darkness before turning toward Griggs. "No problem."

He walked past Griggs and headed to the barn, halter in hand. After hanging the bright red halter with the others, he pulled the elastic ponytail holder out of his hair and shook his head.

"Listen. I'm sorry I was so hard on you earlier. There've been a lot of people come here that claim to know how to ride only to end up dumped on their ass the first time we go off road. I can tell by your seat you know what you're doing," Griggs acknowledged.

Bridger leaned against one of the barn support beams and crossed his arms. "I grew up on my father's ranch in Texas."

Griggs tilted his hat up with the tip of his finger. "Yeah?" He nodded. "Makes sense. You look right at home in a barn."

Bridger snorted. "Don't let my ease fool you. There's a reason why a man who grew up on a ranch would willingly pay to spend his vacation on someone else's."

Griggs took several steps toward Bridger. "Why are you here?"

Moving his hands to his hips, Bridger glanced around the dimly lit barn. "Because at home I have to hide who I am. I wanted the chance to feel free."

Griggs stepped even closer. "Your folks don't know you're gay?"

Bridger chuckled. "It's kind of obvious isn't it?" He shook his head. "No. I came out to them when I was fifteen."

Griggs reached out and ran a hand over Bridger's hair, slipping underneath to grasp the back of his neck. "Then what are you hiding?"

"My desire to work cattle, ride horses..." Bridger shrugged. "As the song goes, I wanna be a cowboy."

Griggs pressed his body against Bridger's. "Your dad owns a ranch. That should be a no-brainer."

Bridger couldn't help himself. Despite what had happened between them earlier in the day, he still wanted the six-foot-two wrangler. He stood on his tiptoes and tilted his chin up.

"No more talk about my father. Kiss me," he whispered against Griggs' lips.

The press of the cowboy's mouth against his was soft at first. Bridger felt the tip of Griggs' tongue and opened immediately, sucking the tender flesh inside.

Griggs groaned and tilted his head, taking the kiss even deeper. The gentle flicks and swirls of Griggs' tongue drove Bridger wild. He ground his hardened cock against the strong thigh nestled between his legs as he continued to fall deeper and deeper into the kiss. Bridger wanted it all. He wanted to be consumed by the man kissing him.

The hand on his neck disappeared and Griggs was soon lifting Bridger off his feet. Caught between the beam at his back and the muscled chest in front of him, Bridger wrapped his legs around Griggs' hips. The crush of Griggs' body against his hard cock

would be enough to make him come, but he wanted so much more. Bridger wiggled as much as the new position allowed, hoping like hell he could turn Griggs on as much as he was.

Griggs was the first to break the kiss. He stared into Bridger's eyes. "God help me, but I want you."

Bridger nodded his agreement, too turned on by Griggs apparent need to verbalize his desires. He felt large hands knead his butt as Griggs began to grind against him. He worked a hand between them and cupped the large cock that continued to torture him. Fat and long, Griggs' cock felt perfect in his hand. Bridger wondered if he could open his mouth wide enough to accommodate its incredible size. "Let me taste you."

Fire sparked in Griggs' eyes as he lowered Bridger to the floor.

With shaking hands, Bridger unfastened the top snap of Griggs' jeans before easing the zipper down. He wanted to please Griggs enough to have him begging for more. After separating the denim, he slipped his fingers under the elastic of Griggs' underwear. Goose flesh broke out on his skin as his anticipation increased. Sparse pubic hair tickled his palm moments before he wrapped his hand around his prize.

Griggs moaned. "Suck me."

Bridger removed his hand and sank to his knees, pulling Griggs' clothing down with him. The heavily veined cock that sprang free took his breath away. He was in no way a virgin, but his limited experience had him questioning his ability to please a man of Griggs' size.

Griggs grabbed his shaft by the base and rubbed it across Bridger's cheek, slapping the heavy erection against Bridger's flesh, painting Bridger's lips with drops of pre-cum. The gesture almost felt to Bridger like he was being marked, branded in some erotic show of dominance. Although he'd never had the desire to be dominated in sexual play, he quickly discovered just how much it turned him on.

Bridger looked up into Griggs' black eyes as he opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue. The feel of the bulbous head tapping against his tongue was hotter than hell.

As he closed his lips over the crown, he reached down and opened his own jeans. Bridger shoved his hand down his pants and gripped the base of his cock, afraid he'd show his inexperience and come prematurely. The first moment he tasted Griggs' precum, he knew he'd forever be addicted. The flavorful liquid coated his tongue as he took the cock as deep as he could.

Even though it was evident Griggs enjoyed being in charge, he didn't force more down Bridger's throat than he thought he could take. Bridger wished he'd learned to deep throat a lover, but Griggs didn't seem to mind. Instead, Bridger concentrated on jacking Griggs' cock with both hands while he sucked and slurped his way around the large head and a few inches of length.

With a deep groan, Griggs buried his fingers deeper in Bridger's hair and began a shallow thrust in and out of Bridger's mouth.

Bridger released the base of his cock and pushed the pouch of his underwear under his balls. For the first time, he indulged in the length of his own erection, sliding his hand up and down its length while he continued to pleasure Griggs with his mouth. The cavernous barn echoed with the sounds of their mutual lust. Griggs reached down and knocked Bridger's hand away from his cock in yet another display of dominance. Bridger settled on playing with the heavy sac that hung below Griggs' shaft.

"I'm gonna come. Pull off or prepare yourself," Griggs warned.

Bridger pulled his head back enough to taste and swallow. With a howl from Griggs, the first splash of seed landed on his taste buds. Before he could fully appreciate the rich flavor, his mouth was flooded by strings of cum. He felt a bit of overflow start to dribble down his chin, but he was too busy swallowing to do anything about it.

After nursing the cock clean, Bridger got to his feet and pressed his exposed dick against Griggs. The bigger man groaned and licked the errant cum from Bridger's chin as he took over the job of manipulating Bridger's erection.

"Will you come for me?"

At that moment, Bridger knew he'd do anything the man wanted. When Griggs' calloused thumb pressed against the sensitive underside of Bridger's cock, he lost every ounce of his control. He filled Griggs' hand with cum as he shook with desire.

If Griggs hadn't been holding him, Bridger knew he would've fallen to the ground. It had been one of the most trying days of his life, both emotionally and sexually and he wasn't ready for it to end.

He continued to cling to Griggs' chest, words of need on the tip of his tongue. He wondered how often the wrangler had seduced a guest of the ranch. Was he just one of many?

Bridger rubbed his cheek against Griggs' collarbone, content to stay in the man's arms for the rest of his vacation.

He heard the sounds of Griggs licking the cum from his hand. "I'll walk you back to your cabin."

Bridger stepped back and began the process of redressing himself. For some reason he couldn't look at the man he'd just had his most erotic experience with.

He was trying to adjust the pouch of his underwear when Griggs stopped him by tilting his chin up. "Thank you."

Bridger nodded, but kept his mouth shut, afraid he'd say something he'd later regret.

"It's too soon," was the only explanation Griggs gave him.

Bridger continued to dress as he tried to figure out what the statement meant. Was Griggs saying there was a possibility for more later? How much later?

Griggs hand landed on the small of Bridger's back. "Come on."

He made the tour of the barn as Griggs turned off the overhead lights. When they stepped out into the night, Bridger was surprised at how chilly it had become. Gooseflesh broke across his skin as he took a chance and huddled closer to Griggs' side.

"It'll be even colder in the morning, so make sure you wear a jacket or a sweatshirt. You'll want it to be something warm, but easy to tie around your waist as the day heats up."

After a few hundred yards, Griggs stopped and turned Bridger to face the east. "See the small house with the porch light on?"

"Yeah."

"That's mine."

Bridger gazed up into Griggs' perfectly chiseled face. "Is that an invitation?"

"Not yet, but soon." Griggs leaned down and pressed a kiss to Bridger's lips. "Real soon."

Chapter Four

With a coffee cup in one hand and a cigarette in the other, Griggs sat on his front porch and watched Neil and his Australian Shepherd, Georgia, run the horses over the hill and down into the corral.

It was his favorite part of the day. The reason he'd long ago decided to make the ranch his home. There was just something about the majestic seen of horse and rider working against the backdrop of the rising sun that never ceased to take his breath away.

He heard the scrape of boots on dirt and smiled as he got his first look of the day of another breathtaking sight. With his black curls tamed into a low-riding ponytail, Bridger stepped up onto the porch.

"Morning."

Griggs put his cigarette out and patted the swing beside him. "How'd you sleep?"

Bridger yawned as he settled against Griggs' side. "Shitty. You guys should put snorers in some kind of soundproof room."

"Your roommate?"

Bridger nodded. "I ended up crawling to the couch around three o'clock."

Griggs passed Bridger his coffee cup. "Maybe this'll wake you up."

Bridger took a sip. "Mmm."

Bridger's moan over the fresh brew reminded Griggs of the previous night. He'd also gotten very little sleep but it had nothing to do with a snoring man sleeping beside him.

With his lover's hands wrapped around the ceramic mug for warmth, Griggs leaned down and kissed him, thrusting his tongue in to taste coffee, cigarettes and Bridger.

He knew he needed to head to the barn to harness the horses, but he couldn't bring himself to remove his lips from Bridger's. A perfect morning had been made even more perfect with the addition of the sexy man beside him. What would it be like to share his normal sunrise ritual with Bridger every morning?

Griggs shook off the thought before he started building dreams that couldn't come true. "If we hurry, I bet we have time for a short ride before they ring the breakfast bell," he informed Bridger.

Bridger took another sip of coffee before passing the cup back to Griggs. "That sounds nice."

The cup was set on the small table beside the swing and Griggs stood. He pulled Bridger up and into his arms. "You know you never finished your story last night."

"I know. Maybe the ride will help loosen my tongue."

Griggs brushed his lips across Bridger's. "Or maybe I can do it some other way."

Just like every time he'd kissed the younger man, his passion threatened to overwhelm him. He broke away and shook his head. "You're trouble."

Bridger grinned, twin dimples looking as sexy as they ever had. "Me? Nah. I'm just a simple country boy."

* * * * *

Bridger couldn't keep his eyes off Griggs as they rode toward a bluff. Once again he was on Jigsaw. After that first ride, Bridger couldn't imagine being on any other horse.

"So, is your tongue loose enough yet?" Griggs asked, pulling Mick closer to Jigsaw.

"I told you my father owned a ranch, but he's not exactly what you'd call a rancher. He's strictly a businessman, a rich, self-centered, pompous ass who oversees the bottom line of the ranch. In his opinion, we're too good to actually do the manual work

involved. I was allowed to ride growing up, but it wasn't unless my father was on a business trip that I could sneak and actually work with the other hands."

"Well you're not a kid anymore. Have you told him what you want?"

Bridger snorted. "You don't *tell* Theodore Collinsford anything."

"Collinsford? You mean...?"

"Yeah. That Collinsford. I didn't put my real last name on the registration form. I just wanted to be Bridger Collins, even if for only a week."

Theodore Collinsford was one of the richest men in the country. The ranch Bridger had grown up on was the symbol of the Collinsford empire, but the heart of the company was the hundreds of Collinsford feed lots and farm stores sprinkled around the country. It seemed every decent-sized town had a Collinsford Farm Supply store where customers could buy everything from hardware items, tools and lumber to feed and seed.

Griggs rode closer, reaching out to brush a hand across Bridger's back. "I take it your dad wants you to work the business side of the company."

"Yeah. I'm forced to do the nine-to-five thing on school breaks. God, I hate it."

They reached the top of the bluff and Bridger walked Jigsaw as close to the edge as was prudent. He gazed out over the ranch buildings below. They reminded him of the toys he played with as a child.

"I feel like every day I spend inside that damn glass building, a small piece of my soul shrivels." He turned his head to look at Griggs. "I love my mom and if I were really pressed, I'd admit to loving my father as well, but I can't do what I want and not walk away from both of them. My father has made that much perfectly clear."

Bridger started to fold in on himself. "I just wish I was a stronger person."

In a matter of seconds, Griggs had dismounted and pulled Bridger off Jigsaw and into his arms. "No one should have to choose between their family and the life they want to lead."

Bridger held onto Griggs with all his might. He wished he could be as sure of himself as Griggs was. "It's not the money. I don't care anything about it. It's..."

"Shhh," Griggs soothed, burying his face in Bridger's hair. "I know you signed up for the full ranch experience. Why don't we make sure you get just that? At least it'll give you a better idea if this is what you want to do for the rest of your life."

Bridger nodded, willing himself not to cry. No way would a strong man like Griggs be impressed with a fucking crybaby. "Does that mean I can go out with Neil instead of hanging around with the other guests?"

Griggs' arms tightened. "As long as you come find me at the end of the day."

Bridger looked up and grinned. "I'll seek you out at every opportunity if you let me."

Griggs ran his hands over Bridger's ass, stopping to squeeze his cheeks. "Tonight's the big dinner in the Justice side of the summer cabin. I have to help grill, but I'd love to take you as my date."

"What time is that?"

"Seven."

"I'll make sure I'm done in time." Bridger pulled Griggs' head down for a kiss. He wished they could crawl into bed and forget about doing anything but making love the rest of the day.

He felt Griggs' hard cock rub against him and moaned, breaking the kiss. "You keep that up and I'll be following you around like a pet for the rest of the week."

Griggs ran his knuckle up and down Bridger's cheek. "Something tells me I might not mind."

* * * * *

After an entire day of rounding up stray cattle and fixing fences, Bridger was completely worn out, but it was a damn good feeling.

By the time he took care of Jigsaw and released him into the pasture, it was nearing seven. Drawing on the last of his energy, Bridger jogged back to the guests' side of the summer cabin. The rest of his housemates were already showered, dressed and sitting on the porch drinking beer.

"Where've you been?" Steve asked.

"Working with Neil. I'm just gonna jump in the shower real quick. If Griggs is looking for me, tell him I'll be right out."

"Griggs?" Rodney grinned. "You lucky sonofabitch."

Bridger grinned and ran into the house. He grabbed a clean pair of underwear, the jeans he'd worn to fly in and a red button-down shirt before entering the bathroom. He laid his clean clothes out on the vanity and dug underneath the sink for the shaving kit he'd stashed there earlier that morning.

As he brushed his teeth, he ran his electric razor over his cheeks and neck, killing two birds with one stone. The shower was just as quick, although he took special care in soaping all his nooks and crannies.

By the time he stepped out of the shower and dried off, he was hard, which wouldn't have been a problem except the underwear and the low-rise jeans didn't lend themselves to such a condition.

Instead of tucking in his shirt, he decided to leave the tails free to hide his obvious erection. Hopefully he'd get a chance to sneak away with Griggs and take care of it. He slapped on a little of his favorite aftershave and gathered his dirty clothes, dirty being a huge understatement.

Bridger tossed his clothes onto his bed, stuck his cigarettes and lighter into his shirt pocket and grabbed a beer out of the fridge. He arrived back on the porch with about three minutes to spare.

"Damn, that was fast," Rodney commented.

Bridger leaned against one of the porch supports and lit a cigarette. It was his first one since lunch and he'd forgotten to take his nicotine gum with him. He felt his head begin to swim as the nicotine hit his system.

The screen door of the Justice side of the summer cabin opened and Deacon and Ray appeared. "Anyone hungry?"

Not finished with his cigarette, Bridger held back as the fifteen other guests entered the house.

When the last of them were in, Bridger walked over to the butt bucket and sank his cigarette into the sand.

"There you are," a deep, sexy voice said from behind him.

When Bridger stood, spots peppered his vision. He rocked back slightly on his heels, trying to get his bearings.

"Hey." Griggs' strong arms wrapped around Bridger's waist and turned him around. "You okay?"

Bridger blinked several times before nodding. "I think it's the combination of going too long without a cigarette, bending over and being late for my shot."

Griggs' black eyes narrowed. "Do you always mess around with your diabetes this way?"

Bridger felt worse than he'd dare let on. "No, but then again, I usually live such a boring routine, it's hard to forget." He ran his hands over Griggs' western-style dress shirt. "You fill my head to the point I can't think of anything else."

Griggs led Bridger over to one of the Adirondack chairs. "Sit."

Bridger felt too shaky to argue. "My kit's on top of my dresser."

Griggs disappeared into the house, returning moments later with Bridger's black leather bag and a small plastic bottle of orange juice from the refrigerator.

Bridger was starting to sweat, despite the cool evening. He reached for the kit, but Griggs shook his head.

"This first." Griggs opened the juice and held it to Bridger's lips.

He drank about half of the bottle before nodding that he'd had enough. "Give me a second."

"I'll be right back." Griggs ran across the porch into the Justice side of the summer cabin.

While Bridger waited for the juice to raise his blood sugar levels, he started fumbling with the kit, trying to get out the needed supplies.

"I'll do it," Griggs said, handing Bridger a slice of American cheese.

Bridger was surprised but in no condition to argue. He knew it was a combination of a change in his daily activity level and not eating on time. Like a pro, Griggs pulled out the lancet and pricked Bridger's middle finger. After several firm squeezes, he dabbed the blood onto one of the test strips.

Bridger checked his blood sugar reading and adjusted his pen accordingly. He was fumbling with his zipper when Griggs took over the job of getting Bridger's pants down. "Is this set to the correct dose?"

Bridger nodded. He was so accustomed to the injections, he didn't even feel it.

Griggs began putting the supplies back into the kit bag. "Any better?"

Bridger nodded again, wiping the sweat from his forehead. He wasn't sure how long he sat there before he felt he was finally coherent enough to talk. Although he felt incredibly stupid, he was also curious. "How'd you know?"

"My sister Rachel." Griggs sat back on his ass and shook his head. "You've got to get a handle on this thing."

"I know. I think my body isn't used to the ass kicking Neil shelled out earlier. Like I told you, my life is incredibly routine at home. I just didn't take into account the change in my normal activity level."

"Do you need to go to a doctor?"

"No. I need to sit here for a few more minutes and then I need to eat." He reached out and tugged on Griggs' ponytail. "Thank you."

Griggs leaned forward and rested his forehead on Bridger's lap. "You scared me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't do it again, okay?"

Bridger released Griggs' hair from the leather tie and ran his fingers through it. "I'll be a good boy. I promise."

Griggs turned his head and kissed Bridger's inner thigh where he'd evidently given the injection. "Not too good, just good enough to keep yourself alive for all the bad things I want to do with you."

"Deal."

* * * * *

After getting Bridger's jeans pulled up and zipped, Griggs led him into the party. Most of the guests were seated at the extra long table enjoying red wine and appetizers. He pulled out a chair and made sure his lover was comfortable. He put a hand on Bridger's shoulder and whispered in his ear. "There's water on the table, or would you prefer something else?"

"Water's fine," Bridger said, reaching up to put his hand over Griggs'.

Griggs brought Bridger's water glass closer before retreating to the kitchen. He was tying his hair back as he caught up with the rest of the staff. "Sorry to run out on you like that."

"Bridger okay?" Ray asked.

"Yeah." Griggs looked at Neil. "Someone worked him too hard today and kept him out too long."

Neil chuckled. "Me? You've got that backwards. Bridger was the one who insisted on checking that last pasture, not me."

Griggs started to argue, but stopped himself. "Yeah. That sounds like him. Regardless, from now on, if he goes out to work with you, make sure he stops a couple of times and eats something. It might not be a bad idea to grab one of those saddle bags out of the tack room and make him take his insulin kit with him along with a couple of extra water bottles."

Neil nodded. "Not a problem. He's good help and damn, can he ride."

Griggs felt himself puff with a bit of pride at the compliment.

Deacon came in the back door. "Steaks are almost done. You might go ahead and serve the salads."

Griggs pulled out one of the large trays and started filling it with the already-made plates of salad. "Grab that pitcher of water, Cody."

Tray in hand, he pushed through the swinging door and almost dropped the entire load of food. His face pale, Bridger was shaking his head as James whispered in his ear. "What're you doing?"

James released Bridger's arm and smiled. "Just talking."

Griggs had to pull his temper back quickly before he exploded. "Take your seat. We're serving dinner."

With an overly confident smirk on his face, James settled into the chair beside Bridger.

"Griggs is sitting there," Bridger informed the older man.

"Looks to me like he's playing waiter," James answered.

With as much calm as he could muster, Griggs set the tray on the table and stalked toward James.

"Griggs. No." Bridger stood and put a hand on Griggs' chest. "He's not worth it."

Griggs stared over Bridger's shoulder at the man in question. "No, but you are."

"I'm fine. I just really, really need to eat something."

Griggs looked down at Bridger. "Follow me."

He reached out and took Bridger's hand and led him into the kitchen. "Cody, will you serve the salads? If I do it, one of our guests will probably not only end up wearing his but taking a trip to the emergency room in Red Lodge."

He pulled out one of the stools at the black granite island. "Have a seat."

Deciding it would be better if he kept out of the dining room, Griggs fixed another big glass of ice water and set it in front of Bridger. "I'll get your steak."

"You don't have to do this. I can handle guys like James."

Griggs leaned over and kissed him. "Sit tight."

Grabbing a plate from the cupboard, he went outside where Deacon was loading steaks onto a platter. "One please."

Deacon's brows shot up. "Hungry?"

"It's for Bridger. He's getting too much unwanted attention from one of the guests. I've got him in the kitchen."

Deacon used a pair of tongs to take a perfectly cooked steak off the grill and slide it onto the plate. "I understand that you like Bridger, but don't forget we're trying to run a business."

"I know. Which is why the guy's still breathing." He took the plate into the kitchen and set it in front of Bridger. He spooned some roasted potatoes and green beans onto the plate. "Anything else?"

Bridger shook his head and began cutting into the meat. "Don't get into trouble because of me."

Griggs buried his fingers in Bridger's curls and kissed the top of his head. "You concentrate on eating and I'll finish doing my job like a good wrangler."

As he helped Deacon, Cody and Ray get the plates filled, he couldn't keep from glancing at Bridger every few moments. The younger man's color was back to normal by the time he'd taken several bites of steak and potatoes.

"Do I need to eat in the dining room?" he asked Ray.

"No, that's okay. Just help us carry the plates out and you can come back in here." Ray leaned closer. "I've overheard James a time or two, so I don't blame you. If he'd fixed his sights on Deacon, he'd be walking his way back to Billings about now."

Griggs smiled. He'd only known Ray for about seven months, but he already thought of him as a good friend. "Thanks."

Ray slapped him on the back. "As a matter of fact, if you wanted to volunteer to wash that sink full of pots and pans, I might be persuaded to let you just stay in here."

"I can do that." Griggs started some hot, soapy water in the sink and filled his plate.

"Sorry I screwed up our date," Bridger mumbled around a bite of food.

"You haven't ruined anything. If you feel up to it, I thought maybe we could grab your duffle and head over to my place when we're finished."

Bridger's eyes rounded in apparent surprise. "My duffle?"

Griggs turned off the water and dried his hands. "You need your sleep and I think it's obvious after last night you're not going to get it sharing a room with Steve."

Bridger took another bite of his potatoes. Griggs couldn't tell what was going on in his lover's head, but he knew Bridger was thinking about something important.

"James isn't in the summer cabin, ya know."

Oh. So Bridger thought Griggs was asking out of jealousy instead of want. "I know that. I'd planned on asking you before any of this happened."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I mean, it makes sense and that way I can keep a better eye on you."

Bridger rolled his eyes. "Seriously, I'm not as lame as I may appear. I really can take care of my body."

“Really? So what about the smoking? Do you realize how bad that is for you?”

Bridger put down his fork and reached out his hand. “Hello, Mr. Pot, I’m Mr. Kettle.”

Griggs blew out a frustrated breath. “Number one, I’m not a diabetic. Number two, before you showed up, I really didn’t care if I died a couple years sooner and number three...”

Bridger shut Griggs up with a kiss. “I’ll quit if you will.”

“In the next week?”

Bridger shook his head and pushed his plate away. “I keep forgetting.”

So do I. Griggs swallowed around the lump in his throat.

Chapter Five

Griggs rubbed against the warm body spooned to his front. He opened his eyes and glanced at the clock on the bedside table before returning his attention to the naked man in his arms.

Events of the previous evening were still forefront in his mind. He'd dealt with Bridger's diabetic episode and his jealousy toward one of the guests, but those things weren't what bothered him the most.

By the time they'd returned to his house, Bridger barely had the strength to undress and crawl into bed. Griggs had given Bridger a few kisses before wrapping his lover in his arms and ordering him to sleep.

He'd spent the entire night with a man and hadn't done a damn thing. What bothered him the most was that he was okay with the outcome. It wasn't that he didn't want to make love with the gorgeous younger man, but he felt satisfied to simply hold him. The frightening part was he knew what it meant.

I'm falling for him. Even the idea scared the shit out of him. He'd tried so hard to convince himself it was a purely physical attraction that had drawn him to Bridger. The first time he'd laid eyes on the man, he'd wanted him. Now he knew it was more than that. He'd pushed Bridger away because something told him the younger man had the ability to burrow under his skin.

Griggs' thumb brushed across Bridger's nipple as he tried to figure out what to do. He'd only known Bridger for two days. He was standing at a crossroads. The decision was his. Should he back off and save what was left of his heart, or spend each day like it was their last?

Bridger's ass wiggled, pushing further back against Griggs' morning wood. The feel of his cock nestled against Bridger's warmth went a long way in helping him decide. Emotions aside, Bridger still was one of the sexiest men he'd ever known.

He ran his hand down Bridger's chest to the short nest of curls. Bridger's cock jumped at the subtle touch.

"You awake?" a sleepy voice mumbled.

"Yeah. I get up at this time every day. I didn't mean to wake you. I just couldn't help myself."

Bridger reached back and spread the cheeks of his ass, further enveloping Griggs' cock in the cleft. "You've got a nice bed."

"Seems a hell of a lot nicer with you in it." He removed his hand from Bridger's body and blindly reached behind him. Before getting into bed the previous evening, he'd set out condoms and lube. He grabbed both, nearly knocking the lamp over in his haste.

Bridger chuckled at Griggs' fumbling. "In a hurry?"

"Something like that." Griggs rolled to his back, pulling his other arm free. He popped the top on the small bottle of lube and slicked his fingers before resuming his original position. "Am I moving too fast?"

Bridger thrust his ass toward Griggs. "Touch me."

At the age of thirty-six, Griggs had fucked his share of men, but the first brush of his lubed finger against the tight pucker of Bridger's ass threatened his control. It wasn't that he'd never had feelings for another lover, but usually the physical side of the relationship developed before his emotions started to kick in.

He swirled the pad of his finger around the soft ridges, waiting for the muscles to relax. Griggs kissed the bare shoulder in front of him and slipped the tip of his finger inside Bridger's hole.

"Mmm." Bridger twisted his head to the side, making his lips accessible.

Griggs wasted no time. He sealed his mouth over Bridger's and plunged his finger inside the tight heat of his lover's body. As Bridger sucked on his tongue, Griggs continued to stretch the younger man's hole.

"Need you," Bridger whispered.

Griggs withdrew his fingers and rolled them until he was on top. He braced his hands against the bed and rose up to look down at his lover. As he stared into Bridger's dark grey eyes he smiled. "I knew they'd change colors."

"Huh?"

"Your eyes. They look like a stormy Montana sky."

"How poetic of you," Bridger said around a chuckle.

"Guess I'm feeling rather poetic at the moment." He leaned down and kissed the soft lips that continued to mesmerize him.

"I don't want to le—" Bridger cut himself off.

"You don't want to what?"

Several moments went by before Bridger answered. "I don't want to leave this bed."

Griggs stared into Bridger's eyes, trying to figure out if his lover was telling the truth. He'd hoped to hear something different, but he'd take what he could get. "I'm not shoving you out. That's for damn sure."

He reached for the condom package and ripped it open. Although their lust had cooled slightly, he knew it wouldn't take long to heat up again and this time he wanted to be ready.

After sheathing his cock, Griggs returned his attention to Bridger's mouth. Bridger truly was the best kisser he'd ever met. Just as he'd predicted, the passion between them began to build as Bridger sucked on his tongue.

Without breaking their kiss, Griggs squirted more lube onto his fingers and reached between their bodies. He eased three fingers into Bridger's hole and applied more slick. The last thing he wanted was to hurt his new lover.

"Fuck me," Bridger begged.

Griggs removed his fingers, wiping the excess lube onto the condom and directed the head of his cock to Bridger's stretched opening.

With a deep groan, Griggs slowly drove his cock inside. He felt Bridger's short nails scrape the skin of his back, which only heightened the experience.

"Oh, shit. Oh, shit," Bridger continued to chant as Griggs began to fuck him. Bridger hooked his legs over Griggs' shoulders and began to buck his body back and forth on Griggs' shaft.

His lover's enthusiasm was contagious and soon Griggs was pounding Bridger's tight ass with everything he had. Gooseflesh covered his body as he fought to stave off his climax.

Without even touching his cock, Bridger came, splashing warm seed over both of them.

"Fuck!" Griggs howled as his balls drew up and filled the condom with his cum. He dropped down on top of Bridger as the aftershocks continued to wrack his body with shudders.

He burrowed under his lover's hair and found Bridger's neck. He kissed the sweaty skin before latching on to bring up a dark bruise. He hoped every time James saw the bruise he'd be reminded that Bridger was already taken. Because in Griggs' mind, Bridger was most definitely his.

* * * * *

Plate in hand, Bridger sat in the chair Griggs had obviously saved for him. "Hey."

Griggs set down his glass of iced tea. "How's your day going?"

"Good. We checked the fencing in Abigail's Valley earlier. Neil decided we should replace one of the hinges on the gate, so we'll do that after lunch."

Bridger couldn't believe it was Thursday already. He was supposed to head back to Billings on Saturday afternoon, but he'd been doing some heavy thinking all day. Neil had mentioned while they were out that he should ask Ray and Deacon for a job.

He wanted to jump at the opportunity, but two very important things held him back. First and foremost, was his budding relationship with Griggs. Bridger knew he'd be devastated if he found out Griggs was only interested in a short-term fling. The other problem, of course, was telling his parents. Regardless, he knew it would be something he'd have to take care of in person.

"What's got you thinking so hard?" Griggs bumped Bridger with his shoulder.

Bridger shrugged and tore a chunk off his homemade roll. "Just thinking about what day it is."

Griggs paused in the act of lifting his fork to his mouth. "You wanna talk about it?"

Bridger shook his head. "What I *want* is a cigarette. I either need to buy some more nicotine gum when we're in town later or I'm going to have to bust open a pack."

"I hear ya. I jumped all over Jimmy earlier for something he didn't even do. I told him I'd buy him a six-pack to make up for it."

"Do you think you'll stick with it after I leave?"

Griggs set down his fork and pushed his plate toward the center of the table. "Honestly? Probably not."

"Then why do it?" Bridger put his hand on Griggs' thigh.

Griggs threaded his fingers through Bridger's. "Because I know how important it is for you to quit."

Bridger didn't know what to say. Smoking was another thing he'd refused to hide from his parents since he was old enough to buy cigarettes. Although they'd bitched and tried to educate him on exactly what he was doing to his body, Bridger had

continued to ignore them. It had taken one short conversation with Griggs to get him to at least attempt to quit.

Griggs released his hold on Bridger's hand. "You need to eat. We don't want a repeat performance of the other night."

"Hell, you've got Neil so freaked he makes me check my blood every two hours."

"He's a smart man."

Bridger forked another piece of meatloaf into his mouth. He knew they were supposed to have dinner in Red Lodge that evening at a later time than he was used to eating. He'd already decided to pack a small snack from the kitchen before he went back out with Neil.

"Is there anywhere on the ranch I can get cell phone reception?" he asked Griggs.

"Not reliably. Don't ask me why, but on a good day you can stand about forty paces from the northwest corner of the barn and get it. You might try, but I wouldn't count on it. Why? Someone you need to call?"

"My mom. Guess I can take my phone with me into Red Lodge later."

"She's probably missing you."

Bridger nodded. "Probably. What about your folks? Do you talk to them?"

"Sure. They still live in Seattle. I get out there from time to time, but I've been on my own for a while."

"And your sister, Rachel?"

"I've got two sisters. Rachel and Deanna. Rachel's a marketing rep for a pharmaceutical company and Deanna's married with four kids."

Bridger grinned. "Uncle Griggs."

Griggs shook his head. "Uncle Ethan. No one back home calls me by my last name, that'd be weird."

Ethan. Bridger rolled the name around in his head. "Ethan fits you. Why'd you start going by Griggs?"

"Wasn't really my choice. When I first started here there was another employee named Ethan, so they clarified things by calling me Griggs. Guess it stuck."

Bridger finished off his meatloaf and most of his green beans. "Would you rather I called you Ethan?"

Griggs smiled and leaned over to give Bridger a quick kiss. "No one would know who you were talking about."

"You and I would." Bridger followed Griggs' lips and kissed him, slipping his tongue inside for a brief taste. "You know, you taste a lot better since you quit smoking."

Griggs chuckled. "So do you. I guess that's another bonus."

The thought of stepping outside for a long drag on a cigarette made Bridger's mouth water. Damn, he'd loved to smoke. That he was attempting to quit because of the man at his side was proof of just how much Bridger liked him.

The other guests began to finish and filter out the door. Griggs nipped Bridger's ear lobe. "I'd better get going."

"The gate shouldn't take long to fix, so I should be back fairly early. Will you be around?"

"Yeah. We're done riding for the day. We have the meeting about the round-up at two, but other than that, we're letting them rest their sore asses in preparation for tomorrow."

Griggs stood and bent over for one more kiss. "I'll probably be in the barn when you get in. If you're a good boy, I'll let you shower with me before we go into town."

Bridger followed Griggs to the clean-up station and scraped his plate. Once they were outside, he pulled Griggs around to the side of the cookhouse and kissed his new lover properly.

"Bridger!" Neil called.

"We'll continue this later."

Griggs squeezed Bridger's ass. "You bet we will."

* * * * *

Bridger piled out of the van and waited with the others on the sidewalk. He couldn't get over the picturesque town of Red Lodge. The main street running down the center of town looked like something out of a movie with its quaint shops and restaurants.

Griggs came up behind him and turned him in the opposite direction. "There's the money shot."

"Damn." Snow covered mountains majestically stood guard over the town.

"Okay, everyone. Our reservations are in ninety minutes so just meet back here at seven," Griggs announced to the group.

Bridger fingered the phone in his jacket pocket. "Is there a quiet place I can check my emails and call home?"

Griggs glanced over his shoulder at Cody. "Are you going to check the reservations?"

Cody nodded. "On my way now."

"Thanks." Griggs took Bridger's hand and started walking down the sidewalk. "There's a great coffee shop down here."

"Starbucks?"

Griggs laughed. "Look around. There are no chain stores or restaurants of any kind in Red Lodge. The coffee shop is owned by a nice husband and wife."

Bridger was impressed by the warm, casual atmosphere of the coffee shop. He stepped up to the counter and ordered a simple black coffee and a honey nut muffin. "Do you have a favorite place to sit?"

Griggs picked up his coffee and led Bridger over to a deep chocolate brown sofa in front of the big windows. "I like to watch people coming and going."

Bridger set his coffee and muffin on the table and pulled out his cell phone. He wasn't surprised to see a large number of voicemails. He contemplated erasing them, but knew some of them were probably important. He held the phone up to Griggs. "Is this going to bother you?"

"Not at all."

The first thing he decided to do was call his mom. He wouldn't exactly categorize himself as a momma's boy, but he was closer to Beth Collinsford than he was to anyone else in his family.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Mom."

"Bridger! It's about time you called. I was starting to think they'd lost you on the trail somewhere."

Bridger smiled. His mom was the only one who knew where he'd really decided to vacation. His father thought he was in St. Thomas hanging with some of his college friends.

"They haven't abandoned me yet, Mom. This is the first chance I've had to come into town. The cell phone reception is pretty spotty on the ranch."

"Are you having fun?"

Bridger reached across the sofa and brushed Griggs' thigh. "I'm having the time of my life."

"Oh good. Are you getting this cowboy thing out of your system? Because you know how your father feels."

"I know perfectly well what Dad thinks of cowboys. And no, I'm not getting it out of my system." He didn't really want to get into the discussion with his mom over the phone and especially not in front of Griggs, but he needed to plant the seed. "I wish I could stay here forever, Mom."

"Well, we both know that's not possible. Maybe you can go back again?"

He felt Griggs squeeze his hand and looked up. Dark eyes of the man he was falling for stared back at him. Bridger was trying to figure out if it was a good stare or a bad stare when something his mother said caught his attention.

"What?"

"I said, your father told me to line up a decorator to redo the Junior Vice President's office for you."

Bridger closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the couch. "I don't want to work in an office. You could decorate it any way you wanted and it still wouldn't make me happy."

"Oh, sweetie, we've talked about this before. Your father really does have your best interests at heart. I know you enjoy working outdoors, but it'll pass in time, you'll see."

"I need to go, but I'll be home for Sunday dinner, like always."

"I love you."

"Love you, too, Mom." Bridger pressed the end button and dropped the phone onto the cushion beside him. Screw his messages.

"You okay?"

Bridger shook his head. "She doesn't listen. Neither of them do."

"Were you serious about wanting to stay here?"

Bridger sat up and opened his eyes. "Of course I was." He shrugged. "But I don't know how to break away from them."

Griggs lifted Bridger's hand to his mouth and kissed it. "We'll figure it out."

Chapter Six

Griggs was going over the plans for the mini-cattle drive with Neil when there was a tap on his shoulder. He turned and came face to face with James. "Yes?"

James glanced from Griggs to Neil and back to Griggs. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Griggs slapped Neil on the shoulder. "We should be ready to go in about five."

Neil nodded and walked off, his Australian Shepherd, Georgia, following close behind.

"What can I do for you?"

"I just want to apologize for stepping on your toes with Bridger. I don't get but one weekend a year to kick up my heels. I guess I pushed a little too hard."

Griggs put his hands on his hips. He didn't understand what kind of arrangement James might have with his wife, but he realized he wasn't in a position to judge. "I think Bridger's the one you should be apologizing to."

"Yeah, I know. I didn't want to approach him though until I'd talked to you."

Griggs couldn't keep the satisfied grin off his face. "Well we've talked."

"Right." James held out his hand and Griggs begrudgingly took it.

He watched the man walk off and shook his head. If there was even a small chance Bridger would be staying at the ranch, Griggs would have to make sure he let the guests know upfront that Bridger was his.

Griggs hoisted himself into the saddle and watched as James talked to his man. He noticed the distance Bridger kept from the married man. Hopefully Bridger wouldn't continue to have issues with the ranch guests, but if he did, Griggs wanted the younger man to know he always had his back.

"Mount up!" he yelled over the thrum of conversation.

Bridger shook James' hand and climbed on Jigsaw. Griggs absolutely loved the way Bridger looked in the saddle. Even the hard fucking Griggs had given the man earlier in the day didn't seem to change the way Bridger sat his horse.

Bridger smiled, flashing those tempting dimples. "I think James might be in love."

Griggs' good mood turned sour in an instant. "With you?"

"Hell no," Bridger said around a laugh. "With Rodney."

Surprised, Griggs scanned the gathered crowd until his gaze zeroed in on the two men. Yep. They certainly were making moon-eyes at each other. "As long as he stays the hell away from you, I don't care who he's fucking."

Bridger rolled his eyes and leaned across the distance for a quick kiss. "You're such a romantic."

Griggs shrugged. "I'm me, take me or leave me."

Bridger bit his bottom lip. "I'd like to take you, if you're offering."

At first Griggs thought Bridger meant the comment as a sexual innuendo, but the expression on Bridger's face told Griggs it was so much more than that. There was so much he wanted to say to the man he'd fallen in love with, but Neil and Cody were already heading the guests and other ranch hands toward the pasture.

He wanted to say something before the moment ended. "I'm definitely offering."

With the biggest, cheesiest smile he'd ever seen, Bridger rode off to catch up with the group, leaving Griggs with his own stupid grin plastered to his face.

* * * * *

Despite a few hiccups along the way, the guests managed to work with the regular ranch hands to get all the cattle into the grazing pasture. Griggs had made sure Bridger had been assigned to the group of guests he worked with.

As the last of the head were driven into the pasture, Griggs knew the real show was soon to begin. While rounding up the cattle, a few appeared lame for one reason or another. After the wet spring they'd had, Griggs wouldn't doubt a few of the cattle were showing early signs of foot rot.

The injured or sick cattle would need to be doctored in the field, which was common on a ranch the size of the Justice River. Griggs glanced at Bridger and gestured to Neil. "Why don't you go help Neil and show these folks how real cowboys do it."

With an enthusiastic nod, Bridger rode off toward the cowboss. Griggs steered Mick over to Deacon. "It went well."

"For the most part. We had riding issues with one group, but Ray babied them through it," Deacon said.

Neil and Bridger spoke for a few moments before cutting the first injured steer from the herd. Although the steer appeared lame earlier, it gave the men a run for their money. With their horses running at full speed, Bridger managed to get a rope around the steer's neck as Neil did the hardest part by roping the back legs.

Within moments they were both out of the saddle and running toward the steer, medicine pack draped over Neil's shoulder.

Beside him, Deacon whistled. "Neil wasn't joking when he said Bridger knew what the hell he was doing."

"Nope. He proved himself to me the first day," Griggs said with a great deal of pride in his voice.

"Grudgingly," Deacon added.

Griggs shrugged. "I resisted as long as I could." He took his eyes off Bridger long enough to realize Deacon was staring at him. "What?"

"You really like the kid, don't you?"

Griggs saw no reason to lie. "I think I've fallen in love with him."

"Ouch. So what're you going to do about it?"

"Beg you and Ray to give him a job and then beg him to take it."

"Well he's got a job if he wants it. That's pretty much a given. You should know that. The other half of the situation's in your hands."

After applying medicine and giving the steer an antibiotic injection, Neil and Bridger released the ropes. They mounted their horses and moved on to the next steer in need of attention.

Griggs caught sight of one of the guests with a small video camera, filming the skilled cowboys at work. He reminded himself to get a copy of the tape. Whether Bridger would stand up to his family or not, watching the man work was breathtaking.

"Does he feel the same about you?" Deacon asked, his eyes on the pair of cowboys.

"I don't know for sure, but I think so. I mean, I know he wants to stay, but I'm not sure if I mean enough to him to do so."

"What's the problem? College?" Deacon asked.

"His family." Griggs knew Bridger didn't want people to know who he really was, but if Deacon was planning to welcome him into the Justice River family, Griggs thought his boss had a right to know. "His dad's Theodore Collinsford."

"Damn." Deacon adjusted his hat further back on his head. "They're a big ranching family, though, so what's the problem?"

"According to Bridger, Theodore believes him to be above manual labor and has a cushy office in a high rise building all picked out for him," Griggs explained

"So the asshole's thumbing his nose at the very people who've made him a rich motherfucker?" Deacon shook his head. "I hate people like that."

"Yeah well, I think Bridger feels the same way as you, but he also loves his folks. He's stuck between what he wants to do and what he's supposed to do."

With the last of the cattle doctored, the gathered guests began clapping. Deacon started to ride off, but stopped and turned back toward Griggs. "Take it from someone who knows. Tell him how you feel before he leaves tomorrow."

Griggs had already figured that much out. He nodded his head at his boss and waited for Bridger to rejoin him. His thoughts went back to earlier that morning. After waking up, he'd pulled the blanket off the bed and dragged a still-sleepy Bridger out to the front porch. He'd settled them on the swing with Bridger in his lap and the blanket wrapped around them. As the horses were driven over the crest of the hill, he'd buried his cock deep into his lover's ass. It was the single finest morning of his life and he wanted more, a lot more.

* * * * *

"Thanks, Mother." Griggs took the big basket and gave the cook a kiss on the cheek.

He carried his aromatic bounty through the dining room and down to the small pasture. As he expected, he found Bridger sitting atop the fence with Harry's big head in his lap. "Thought I might find you out here."

Bridger glanced over his shoulder and smiled. "Just saying goodbye."

"You know, a few more months and Harry might actually let you put a saddle on him."

Bridger gasped. "Sacrilege. Harry should be ridden bareback or not at all."

Griggs set the basket down and leaned on the fence next to Bridger. "Think he'd really let you do it?"

Bridger continued to pet the wild mustang. "Yeah."

Bridger's eyes went to the basket at Griggs' feet. "Smells like chicken."

"That's because it is. I asked Mother to pack it up for me. I thought I'd take you on a picnic."

"I thought we were all supposed to eat the last meal together?"

Griggs ran his hand up Bridger's leg to cup his cock. He gave the tempting mound of flesh a gentle, but firm, squeeze. "Maybe I don't want to share our last evening with a bunch of guests."

Immediately, pain laced Bridger's expression. He bent and gave Harry a quick kiss on the forehead before spinning around and holding out his arms.

Griggs lifted his lover from the fence and lowered him to the ground. "Is that a yes?"

"That's a yes. I need to stop by your place to get my kit though."

"No need. I already picked it up." Griggs held up the basket.

"Are we riding?"

"Kind of. Come on." He led Bridger by the hand toward the north pasture.

"No way!" Bridger squealed when he first saw Mick harnessed to a small buggy.

"It was Ray's grandpa's. He said we could use it."

Bridger ran his hands over the red leather seat before climbing on. "Asses must've been a lot smaller in the old days."

Griggs chuckled. As small as Bridger was, the two of them barely fit in the seat. He tapped the reins lightly against Mick's back and they took off. Griggs followed one of the grass and dirt truck paths over the hill. "How does a picnic beside the river sound?"

"Like heaven." Bridger released his hair from its ponytail before reaching up to untie the leather thong from Griggs' hair. "This is the way I like you best. Out in the middle of nowhere with your hair blowing in the evening breeze."

"Now who's getting poetic?"

"Me!" Bridger declared with enthusiasm.

* * * * *

Griggs pulled the buggy to a stop and jumped down. He didn't bother tying Mick, instead allowing his trusted horse to graze. He reached up and pulled Bridger into his arms. With the setting sun at his back, Griggs stared into the orange-hued face of the man he loved. "Don't go."

Bridger's Adam's apple bobbed several times before he spoke. "What happens if I give up everything and you get tired of me?"

"I won't. But I worry you'll start to regret giving up all that money."

"I won't. Besides, I have a little of my own. I was talking about alienating myself from my parents."

"Do you really think it'll come to that?" Griggs still didn't understand parents who put conditions on their love.

"I hope not, but I think it's a gamble I'm willing to take. This has been the happiest, most fulfilling week of my life."

"You know the winters suck in Montana. Just remember when you're freezing your ass off and the snow's hitting you square in the face how much you wanted to be a cowboy."

Bridger chuckled and rubbed his body against Griggs. "Those are probably the times I'd have to remind myself just how much I love the man who's waiting at home for me."

Griggs cupped Bridger's face in his hands. "Do you mean that?"

Bridger nodded. "I do."

Griggs kissed him, putting all his pent up feelings into each swipe of his tongue. He pulled back and stared into the eyes of his future. "I love you, too. Don't know how it happened. I certainly wasn't prepared to even like you, let alone fall completely head over heels."

Bridger hoisted himself up against Griggs' chest, wrapping his legs around Griggs' hips. "I've wanted you since the moment you offered me a light."

"I know. You were pretty obvious about it." Griggs laughed and squeezed Bridger's ass.

"Conceited much?"

Griggs' shrugged. "I've never had trouble finding men who wanted me to fuck 'em. But I knew that first night it was about more than having my cock up your ass."

Bridger groaned. "There goes that über-romantic side of you again."

After another deep kiss, Griggs set Bridger on his feet. "Let's eat before the chicken gets cold."

* * * * *

Bridger laughed as Griggs swiped the drops of cum off his stomach with a chicken leg. "Uhhh, using me as your dipping sauce now?"

"Mmm. Just making a memory. From now on every time I eat fried chicken I'll think of your taste."

Laughing so hard his stomach hurt, Bridger rolled over. He spotted movement out of the corner of his eye. "Don't even think about getting that greasy thing anywhere near my ass."

Griggs dropped down beside him and finished his chicken leg. "Wanna stay up all night?"

Bridger brushed the errant curls out of his face and studied his lover. Griggs was truly a goofball disguised as an incredibly sexy Native American stud. Bridger had a strong suspicion it was the reason he enjoyed Griggs' company, both in bed and out, more than any other man he'd ever spent time with.

"How old are you?" he finally asked.

"Thirty-six. Why, how old are you?" Griggs tossed the chicken bone into the picnic basket and held out his greasy fingers.

"Twenty-two." He opened his mouth and let Griggs slide his fingers into his mouth one by one. Once his lover was clean, Bridger scooted closer to tuck himself against Griggs' side. "Do you think we'll always have this much fun together?"

Griggs seemed to think about it for a few moments. "To be honest? No. I think there'll be times, especially during the winter, when we'll feel like killing each other.

Luckily the ranch has a lot of room to roam and work out our problems. But you need to know going in that it won't always be easy. I can get grouchy. I don't like to change the sheets on the bed if I can get away with it. I usually open a new box of cereal before the old one's empty and if I get really drunk, I snore."

Bridger kissed Griggs' nipple. "Clean sheets are overrated. Who needs boxed cereal when I can get a hot breakfast in the cookhouse? And I pretty much pass out when I'm really drunk, so I won't hear you snore."

They settled into a companionable silence, holding each other and listening to the sounds of the bugs and frogs. Bridger knew they were both ignoring the biggest elephant in the room, but their evening had been so perfect, the thought of ruining it broke his heart.

"I'll talk to my parents at dinner on Sunday."

"You want me to go down there with you?"

Bridger rose up on one elbow. "You'd do that?"

"Of course I'd do that."

The offer warmed him. "Thanks, but I think it'll go better if I confront them on my own."

"You know, maybe that's part of the problem. Don't go in with a confrontation in mind. They're your parents. Just let them know what makes you happy."

"Sweet, naïve, Ethan. You know nothing about my father. He doesn't care what makes me happy. He cares about what makes him money."

"Then maybe you shouldn't care so much about what he thinks. You're not a commodity. You're his son."

Bridger didn't say it, but he wasn't so sure his father thought of him that way.

Chapter Seven

After taking care of the rest of the guests, Griggs pulled Bridger to the side, away from the security screeners. He tried to ignore the hum of the milling crowd of passengers coming and going from the airport. He pulled his lover against his chest and kissed him. "Letting you go is probably the hardest thing I've ever done in my life."

Bridger's eyes filled with tears. "Don't. I haven't cried yet in front of you and I don't want to start now."

"I've been thinking and maybe things would go over easier with your parents if you finished college first."

Bridger shook his head. "I have my bachelor's degree already. If I ever decide to go after my Masters in Business I can do it at MSU here in Billings." Bridger's head tilted to the side. "Or are you trying to tell me you've changed your mind?"

Griggs crushed Bridger even tighter against his chest despite a few dirty looks from people in the crowd. "No, I haven't changed my mind. I'm just afraid I'm being greedy. I want whatever's best for you."

"Then welcome me with open arms in a week or so."

Griggs nodded. "I can do that."

Bridger stepped back and slung his duffle bag over his shoulder. "I have one more favor to ask you."

"Anything."

"Good, because I want to bring my fifty-inch flat screen with me when I come back. I love you, honey, but you need to say goodbye to that nineteen-inch thing you watch."

Griggs chuckled. "You can bring anything you want back. Most of my things were in the house when I took the job."

"Cool." Bridger stood on his toes and kissed Griggs once more. "Love you. I'll call you when I get home."

"Love you, too." Griggs watched as the man he loved walked away. He knew in his heart Bridger would be back, but he wasn't sure how he was going to cope until he did.

Griggs waited until Bridger was through security and out of sight before walking out of the airport. The moment he was out the door, he reached into his pocket for a cigarette.

"Fuck!" Not only did he not have Bridger, now he didn't even have a vice to get him through until his lover came home.

* * * * *

The ringing phone woke Bridger the following morning. "Hello?"

"What time are you coming out to the ranch?" his mother asked.

Bridger stretched and glanced at the clock. He was surprised to see it was almost ten-thirty. He didn't bother telling his mom he'd stayed up until the wee hours of the morning talking to Griggs.

"Give me at least an hour. I didn't get to bed until late."

"Okay. Rosa's making pot roast because she knows it's your favorite."

"I'll be sure and thank her. What kind of mood is Dad in?"

"The usual. Why?"

"I just wondered. I'd better hop in the shower if I'm going to make it out there on time."

"I've missed you."

Bridger swallowed around the lump in his throat. "I've missed you, too, Mom."

* * * * *

After a quick shower, Bridger was on his way to the ranch. He'd always loved Collinsford Downs, but sadly the home he'd grown up in didn't hold the same appeal as it once did.

He stopped at the security gates and waited for the guards to let him inside. He definitely wouldn't miss that. Collinsford Downs was a combination working cattle ranch and media sideshow. Every time there was a story in one of the national magazines about Theodore Collinsford, it always included plenty of pictures of the distinguished grey-haired billionaire decked out in authentic-looking cowboy duds, riding one of his thoroughbreds.

Bridger parked his midnight blue sports car in front of the porch and got out. His nerves were on edge and he hoped he'd be able to get through dinner before blurting out his hopes for the future.

Upon entering the house, he was met by his mother who threw her arms around him. "You made it."

Bridger kissed his mother's youthful face. "Of course I made it, I told you I would." He glanced around the cavernous great room. "Where's Dad?"

Releasing her hold, Bridger's mother led him toward the dining room. "Would you like a drink before dinner?"

"Mom? Where's Dad?"

"He's in his office on an important conference call. He said he'd try to make it in time for dinner."

Bridger had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from saying something he knew he'd regret. Sunday dinner had always been his mother's favorite activity of the week. Thankfully the drive from his small apartment in Austin to Collinsford Downs only took forty minutes, so he'd always made it a point to come home no matter what else was going on. Unfortunately, his father had never seen the importance of a familial weekly meal.

Bridger accepted a glass of white wine. As he looked at the sad, but resigned expression on his mother's face, he realized he wouldn't live a life like hers. Beth Collinsford had once been full of spirit, but the years of disappointments and eating alone had left her drained.

Without being prompted, Bridger set his glass down and leaned in to give his mom a hug. "I hope you know how much I love you."

When he pulled away, his mom's eyes were filled with tears. "You're leaving me, aren't you?"

"Please don't think of it that way. I'm not leaving you, but I am moving to Montana."

"You can't. You're all I have."

Bridger knew a truer statement had never been spoken. "I'm sorry, Mom, but I'm not your husband. Kids are supposed to grow up and find their own way in the world. That's all I'm asking for."

Beth covered her mouth and shook her head. "I'm sorry, baby, but I can't deal with this right now." She left the room without another word.

Bridger was left to figure out his next move. He picked up his glass of wine and walked down the hall to his father's office. He leaned against the wall and stared at the highly polished solid wood door. He wasn't allowed in the room, never had been. As he finished off his wine, he realized the door was a metaphor for everything that was wrong with his family.

With a deep breath, he reached down and grasped the knob only to find it was locked. *Locked?* What kind of husband and father locks his family out of his life?

Bridger sat the wine glass on the antique table beside the door on his way out of his boyhood home.

* * * * *

Griggs was leading a group of guests up the ranch road on their first ride when a large cloud of dust caught his eye. He spotted the big truck round the bend and quickly informed the guests to move to the grass beside the road.

He nudged Mick into a canter and took off toward the speeding truck. The closer he got to Bridger, the more nervous he became. It had only been a week since he'd held his lover, but Griggs knew how hard the last eight days had been on the younger man.

Bridger stopped the truck and got out, waving like a crazy person as Mick closed the distance. Griggs reined Mick to a stop and jumped from his back. He ran the remaining ten yards and scooped Bridger off his feet and into his arms.

"God, I've missed you." He kissed Bridger before the man had a chance to say anything.

There was absolutely no finesse involved in the assault on his lover's mouth. Griggs alternated between dipping his tongue inside to taste the man he'd missed so much and nipping and scraping Bridger's lips with his teeth.

He broke the kiss and stared into the stormy eyes he'd been longing for. "You're early. I thought you said you'd be here tomorrow."

Bridger yawned. "I'd planned to stop somewhere along the way, but I just needed to get to you."

"You doing okay? Have you checked your blood sugar?"

Bridger smiled. "I'm fine. Just tired."

"Guess I'd better get you to bed then." Griggs grinned from ear to ear. He still couldn't believe Bridger had made the break from his old life in such a short time.

Bridger stared down the road. "New group?"

Griggs followed Bridger's gaze. The guests looked a little lost as they tried to keep their horses in line. "Yeah. Cody's not feeling well, so I told him I'd take them out by myself this evening."

"Why don't you finish up and I'll meet you back at the house?"

Something in Bridger's voice bothered Griggs. "Are you sure you're okay? Did you talk to your mom before you left?"

"A little. She still feels like I'm abandoning her." Bridger shook his head. "I don't feel like going into it now. I just want a hot shower and a warm bed."

Griggs gave Bridger another quick kiss. "Okay, baby. I should be there in about an hour."

Bridger nodded and pulled away.

"Let me get back to the guests before you drive by."

"I can do that." Bridger grinned as he got back into the truck. He rolled his window down as Griggs mounted up. "By the way, I missed you, too."

It was the first smile Griggs had seen from Bridger in a week and just the sight warmed his heart. "I love you," he mouthed.

"You, too," Bridger answered back.

* * * * *

Bridger was sound asleep when a cold, nude body pressed against him. "Damn. Is it really that cold out there?"

Griggs kissed Bridger's neck. "No. You're just incredibly warm. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Yeah you did."

Griggs chuckled. "Yeah. I did."

Bridger rolled over to face his lover. He threw his leg over Griggs' hip and scooted as close as he could. "I noticed you haven't changed the sheets since I left."

Griggs' licked at Bridger's lips. "I couldn't bring myself to do it. These smell like us. I like it."

"They're getting a little...crusty."

Griggs ran his hand down Bridger's back to his ass. "Promise that you'll be with me every night from here on out and I'll change 'em."

Bridger hiked his leg up higher on Griggs' torso and wiggled his butt until he felt Griggs' fingers find his already stretched and lubed hole.

Griggs' eyes widened. "You trying to tell me something?"

"No, but my ass is. It's been awfully lonely. I think it'd like some company." Bridger scraped Griggs' lower lip with his teeth. "When I went to the doctors last week to get my final checkup and paperwork transferred, I had him test me at the same time."

Griggs smiled as he sawed two fingers in and out of Bridger's ass. "Are you telling me you want to do away with condoms?"

Bridger nodded. "You've already shown me your most recent test results. And since I don't plan on being with another lover for the next fifty years or so, I think I'd like to feel nothing but you."

"Fifty years? You plan on skipping out on me when you're in your seventies?"

Bridger groaned as Griggs replaced his fingers with the head of his bare cock. "I don't plan on going anywhere, but you might find a sexy sixty-year-old you decide you like better."

Griggs eased his cock several inches. "Not possible."

Despite stretching himself earlier and Griggs' finger play, Bridger felt the burn of the thick cock as it slid in. He'd happily accept the pinch of pain if it meant becoming one with the man he loved.

Bridger tried to block out the anguish of the last few days as he gave himself over to the pleasures of being fucked by the strong wrangler. "Deeper."

Griggs buried his cock to the root and pulled Bridger on top of him. "Better?"

"It will be." Bridger braced his feet on either side of Grigg's hips and sat up. He gazed at Griggs, happier than he'd ever been. The new position plunged Griggs' cock even deeper. "Oh, shit."

Bridger swiveled his hips several times before leaning down for a kiss. He swirled his tongue around the interior of Griggs' mouth as his body accommodated the extra depth of his lover's shaft. Had he ever felt so completely filled? "You feel good."

"I can feel even better." Griggs grasped Bridger's ass in his hands and began to thrust in and out.

With his body tilted forward, Bridger felt his cock rub against the hard ridges of Griggs' abdomen. *Oh, yeah, right there.* With each thrust, Griggs managed to hit Bridger's prostate. Bridger gripped the sheets in his fist as he struggled to breathe through the onslaught of pleasure. It was too much and not enough at the same time. The slide of his cock against the lightly furred stomach of Griggs only added to the sweet torture.

As Griggs' pace increased, so did the decibel level in the room. The sounds of skin slapping against skin had always been one of his favorite melodies, even more so when added to the grunts and groans coming from Griggs. Bridger knew he could happily hear that tune for the rest of his life.

"I'm going to shoot," Bridger warned.

Griggs growled as he hammered Bridger's hole with his thick shaft. The assault on Bridger's prostate was too much to resist and he shot, calling out his lover's name.

"Ethan!" Bridger yelled.

Griggs' rhythm faltered as his chest and chin were painted by strings of Bridger's thick, white cum. Bridger began to wonder if he'd ever stop coming. Never had a lover fucked him to the point of passing out, but Griggs was well on his way of doing just that. Bridger gulped in air in an effort to stay coherent as the final jets of cum left his body.

"Bridger!" Griggs howled to the ceiling as he came.

Never in his life had Bridger had sex without a condom, but it seemed so incredibly right to feel his ass being filled with Griggs' warm seed.

Bridger collapsed on Griggs' chest, the sticky fluid bonding him further to his man. The smells in the small room were almost overwhelming. He grinned as he realized he wasn't the only one who'd come more than usual.

Griggs released his hold on Bridger's ass and wrapped his arms around him. "Love you."

"Love you." Bridger started to squirm as the cum began to leak out of his hole from around Griggs' softening cock. "Tickles."

Griggs reached down and rubbed the thick cream with his fingers, smearing it over both of them.

Bridger moaned. Being painted with Griggs' cum was the most erotic thing he'd ever had a lover do to him.

"I'll never be able to describe what that felt like," Griggs panted.

"What? Fucking without a condom?" Bridger asked.

"Yeah," Griggs answered.

Bridger bit his lower lip. He realized there was a very important part of their sex-life they'd never discussed. "Do you like to get fucked?"

"Me?" Griggs face pinched. "Not really, but I don't want to be selfish about always being on top either."

Bridger grinned and shook his head. "I knew there was a reason we were perfect for each other. I've only fucked one person and I didn't understand the appeal. Maybe I like being taken care of? I don't know."

"Well then it's a damn good thing I like taking care of you."

Bridger rested his cheek against Griggs' chest and yawned. "I think we could use another shower, but I'm too tired to get up."

"Was the drive bad?"

"I didn't mind the driving as much as the loneliness. It gave me way too much time to think."

"Well, you didn't turn around and head back to Austin, so I guess that's a good sign, right?"

Bridger kissed his lover's chest. "Not being with you was never an option. I just wish my parents didn't hate me because of the choices I've made."

"They don't hate you. They may not understand them and they're probably pretty angry about them, but I can guarantee they don't hate you for them."

"Easy for you to say, you didn't see the look my dad gave me the one and only time he talked to me about it." He shook his head. "He honestly doesn't understand why anyone would choose this life."

Griggs ran his hands over Bridger's back. "Give it time, babe."

It was the same advice he'd given himself at least once an hour since he'd left Austin. He knew it might very well be true, but there was a large part of him that felt adrift without an anchor.

With his arms wrapped around Bridger, Griggs rolled them until Bridger was on his back. "You stay here. I'll go get a nice warm washcloth to clean you up."

As Bridger watched Griggs' cute ass walk out of the bedroom, he realized he wasn't adrift at all. He had a man he loved and a job he'd been born to do.

"Hey, Griggs?"

The water shut off and Griggs came back into the room. "Yeah, babe?"

"You ever think of getting an anchor tattooed on your ass?"

Epilogue

Griggs was in the middle of helping their resident handyman replace a broken window in the Jackson's Ridge cabin when he spotted a big black limousine pull up in front of the cookhouse. "According to Jeff and Caleb that's exactly what happened. Caleb's just lucky he wasn't hurt worse than he was."

"Are we expecting the president?" Tyson chuckled, noticing the limousine.

Griggs knew immediately who sat behind the darkened windows. "Worse. That's Bridger's father, Theodore."

"Seriously? If Bridger comes from money like that, what the hell is he doing working as a hired hand?"

"Have you seen Bridger lately? The man hasn't stopped grinning since he moved here three weeks ago. He lives to get dirty."

Tyson chuckled again. "I can understand that. This place has been the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"I guess I'd better go talk to him. It doesn't appear that he's going to get out of the car on his own."

As he neared the car, the back window slid down and Griggs came face to face with the man who'd caused Bridger so much pain. "Mr. Collinsford."

The older man's silver eyebrows lifted. "You know who I am?"

"Of course. I'm Ethan Griggs, Bridger's partner."

"You're the one who sent the package."

"Yes, sir." Griggs took several steps back. "Are you getting out?"

Theodore seemed to study Griggs for several moments before alighting from the car. Griggs didn't know it for a fact, but he had a feeling it was the first time the man had opened his own door in years.

Once Theodore stood in front of him, Griggs reached out his hand, surprised when Theodore readily took it. "I'd like to thank you for sending me that video."

"I thought you had a right to see your son at work." The video one of the earlier guests had shot was even better than Griggs had hoped. It truly showed Bridger's superior roping and riding skills in action. More than the physical show on display, it was the expression on Bridger's face that had left Griggs mesmerized.

He knew as soon as he'd watched it he needed to send it to Bridger's parents. They deserved to see their son truly happy.

"Bridger's always been so small. I had no idea..." Theodore shook his head. He cleared his throat and glanced around the ranch. "Is he around?"

"Yep. I guess before I take you to him, I need to know what's going on. He's happy here and I won't have you upsetting him again."

Theodore's eyes narrowed for several moments as he seemed to size up Griggs. He finally nodded. "Fair enough. I wanted to let him know he was welcome back home anytime. There are a few other things I need to talk to him about, but I'll let *him* tell you if he wants to."

"He's been spending most of his off time working with a wild Mustang named Harry." Griggs started walking toward Harry's small pasture.

"How far is it?" Theodore asked.

"Not far." Griggs couldn't keep the grin off his face at the thought of the billionaire businessman ruining his thousand-dollar shoes in the dirt of the ranch road.

He rounded the small stand of trees and stopped. When Theodore started to walk by him, he reached out and grabbed the man's arm. "Hang on."

"Why?"

Griggs gestured to the pasture. "That horse has never been ridden before. Most of the hands can't get anywhere near the fence without Harry going crazy."

Theodore actually started to smile. "That boy always did have a way with animals. Guess I should've known he'd turn out the way he did."

Griggs looked back at the sight of his lover riding Harry, bareback, around the pasture, his black curls lifting in the breeze. He knew if Bridger could take on Satan's Spawn and win, he could take on anything.

* * * * *

Griggs collapsed beside Bridger, rubbing his chest as he tried to regulate his breathing. It didn't matter how many times he made love to Bridger, it only seemed to intensify.

"Mmm. That was nice," Bridger whispered.

"More than nice. I think you might've squeezed my dick off with that tight ass of yours," Griggs panted.

Bridger chuckled and reached down to grasp Griggs' now-flaccid cock. "Nope, still there."

Although Griggs wished his cock was up for another round, he knew it wasn't going to happen, at least for another hour at least. He rolled to his side and curled himself around Bridger. "I'm glad you were able to work things out with your dad."

Bridger snorted. "I wouldn't call it worked out. But at least he's tolerating my career choice. I think he still hopes I'll change my mind and join the corporate world, but we both know that won't happen."

Griggs placed a soft kiss on Bridger's neck. "They love you. Faced with the choice of losing you, I'm not surprised your dad amended his earlier position."

"Yeah," Bridger murmured. "I just can't believe how hard I tried over the years to get him to listen to me. It wasn't until I walked away that he finally heard me." Griggs knew Bridger and his dad had a long road ahead of them, but hopefully Bridger's

happiness would prove to his family he'd made the right career choice. Griggs also knew he would play a large part in helping to make Bridger happy. It was a job Griggs was more than eager to perform.

"I think your dad seeing you on Harry went a long way in convincing him," Griggs said.

Bridger rolled to face Griggs. "Really? Because I happen to think your protectiveness towards me helped the most. Dad even said if he had to let his son out into the world, he was happy I had a man like you by my side."

Griggs smiled. It was a nice thing to hear. He rubbed his hand over Bridger's back. *And an even better thing to feel. "Love you."*

"Forever," Bridger whispered as his eyes slowly closed.

Griggs knew he should get up and clean his lover before allowing him to fall asleep but for the moment, he couldn't imagine letting Bridger go long enough to do that. He held Bridger in his arms, promising to do whatever it took to help the man succeed in whatever life handed him.

About the Author

I've been a reading fanatic for years and finally at the age of 40 decided to try my hand at writing. I've always loved romance novels that are just a little bit naughty so naturally my books tend to go just a little further. It's my fantasy world after all.

When I'm not being a mother to a five-year-old and a six-year-old, you can usually find me in my deep leather chair with either a book in my hand or my laptop.

Carol welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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