

Cowboy
Crush

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CHAPTER ONE

Eli stared into the clear amber liquid one last time before tipping his head back and sloshing the burning alcohol into his mouth. He grimaced at the heat in his throat and wondered how many it would take to forget. With more force than necessary, he slammed the glass onto the bar, causing the other half dozen empties to rattle. The bartender threw him a warning glance, which he waved off. What did he care about a few cheap bar glasses anyway?

He wouldn't be here if it weren't for Kylie. Who did that damn woman think she was? He'd sent home money every week so she could keep up with the payments on the land they'd bought together. Hell, a few more years of this life on the road, busting his ass, and he'd make enough to build the house and start the ranch he'd always dreamed of.

In an instant, Kylie had robbed him of his only dream. She'd not kept up with the payments, and the property he'd coveted for half a decade had been foreclosed on—stolen right out from under his nose.

Eli unfolded the letter and read the final paragraph for the one-hundredth time.

You have no idea how much it hurts me to tell you this, but I've found someone else. Eli, I never meant this to happen; it just did. He loves me and I love him, and we've decided to get married. I thought I could wait for you, but I was wrong. I hope one day you'll understand that this is the best thing for both of us. The last thing either of us wants is for me to grow to resent you for leaving me alone so many months of the year. Take care, Eli.

He crumpled the paper in his fist and threw it to the ground. Everything he'd done and sacrificed had been for the both of them. For their future life—the one he'd thought they'd both been dreaming of.

"Bartender, I'll take another round."

"No, actually he won't."

Eli cringed at the sound of Vinn's voice. He didn't want to see him. Vinn would ask questions he wasn't ready to answer. "Go away, Vinn. I don't need a babysitter."

"Well, that's good, 'cause I sure as hell ain't volunteering to be one." Vinn settled onto the stool next to his.

Eli slumped his shoulders and picked up the glass he'd just drained. Vinn wouldn't leave him alone now. He'd stick to him like a burr under a saddle, aggravating him until he 'fessed up. *So much for drinking alone.*

"I really don't want to talk about it." Eli sighed.

"So shut up then. But we both know if we don't get on the road soon, we won't make it to the show on time tomorrow morning. And I don't know about you, but I could really use the money."

Naturally, Vinn was right. His cool, level head was what made him such an excellent bull rider. He never got nervous or stressed, and he rarely got mad. Although he did have an insidious way of getting even when someone gave him shit. Always took everyone by surprise.

As for the money... Eli's stomach churned at the thought of all his hard-earned winnings down the drain. Thanks to his now ex-girlfriend. The one good thing about earning more cash tomorrow—he could afford to buy more whiskey. Eli shoved the glass across the bar and pushed off the stool. Immediately, the room began to spin, and his body swayed in the opposite direction from the one he wanted to go. He reached for the edge of the bar, but his hands slipped across the wood, and he lost his balance. *Crap, this was going to be embarrassing.*

"Whoa there, Eli." Vinn grabbed his arm, steadying him on his feet. "Looks like I got here just in time."

"Whatever." What difference did it make? Everything had gone to shit and then some.

"Not sure what's gotten up your butt tonight, but we're gonna blow this town before you get any worse."

Vinn lifted Eli's arm across his shoulder and moved them in the direction of the door.

"Wait." He spun out from Vinn's hold and dropped to the cold floor covered with crushed peanut shells. He scooped up the crumpled letter he'd tossed aside earlier and shoved it into his pocket.

"What's that?" Vinn squatted next to him, concern in his gaze.

"It's nothing." With Vinn's help, he pushed to stand up and allowed his friend to steer him toward the exit. His desire to keep the crappy letter made no sense anyway. Maybe he'd burn it the first chance he got. Eli focused on putting one foot in front of the next, pushing thoughts of *her* out of his mind. Together, they pushed through the door and into the sultry summer night. The daytime heat in the Midwest could be a killer, but the night temps weren't too bad.

Eli spotted their trailer at the edge of the parking lot. "You weren't kidding about being ready to go. You got everythinggg loaded on yourrrr own." He winced at the sound of his own voice. Words were slurring and probably not making a lot of sense.

"You disappeared, and we had to clear out or pay for the campground space another night." Vinn gripped his waist tighter.

The warmth of his best friend's touch confused him. He may be drunk, but he remembered the heat. For months, the space between them had been rife with some kind of tension. He couldn't pinpoint when things had changed, but he'd found himself hiding a hard-on more often than not these days.

Vinn wrenched open the camper door and hauled Eli inside. "Man, have you put on a few pounds?"

"Fuck you."

"You wish," Vinn blasted back.

Images of Vinn naked flashed through his brain. Living in such close proximity twenty-four-seven, all physical modesty disappeared. But this was different. He groaned at the idea of catching Vinn jacking off.

"Head hurting already?"

"I'm fine." *At least as much as possible when you're daydreaming about the man next to you naked with his hand wrapped around his erection.* Eli's dick twitched in his jeans of its own volition.

"Looks like I'll be taking the first shift driving tonight. You can sleep it off, and then in the morning we can switch." Vinn dumped him on the couch and rifled through the cabinet next to him.

Eli took the opportunity to stare at his friend. Vinn's dark blond hair was tousled as usual. The ends jutted in all different directions, looking like he needed a haircut. This time of night, he'd gone a bit beyond a five o'clock shadow and straight to sexy stubble. The deep color of his skin spoke to a man who spent all of his days outdoors. He'd grown up on a working ranch, and his talent in the ring came from hard work and a helluva lot of muscle.

A pillow landed on Eli's face, interrupting his errant thoughts.

"Here's a blanket—might as well start sleeping it off."

Vinn's eyes, staring down at him, matched the exact color of the whiskey he'd downed earlier. Maybe it wasn't alcohol he needed to help him forget...

"Thanks for helping me."

"Yeah, try saying that in the morning when I wake your ass up to take your shift." Vinn reached close and lifted Eli's head to place the pillow behind him. At this proximity, Eli saw the pulse beating at his neck. The smooth skin beckoned him, and the urge to touch overwhelmed him. For so long, he'd been denying there was anything more than friendship brewing between them, but in this moment, with the heat of Vinn's body practically stroking his skin, Eli wanted more.

Throwing caution to the wind, Eli brushed his lips across Vinn's neck. His friend froze in place for a few seconds before turning to meet his gaze. Those amber eyes turned dark and hooded in an instant, and Eli instinctively knew they were both thinking the same thing.

"You're my best friend." His voice hoarse, Eli tried to swallow past the lump in his throat.

"Don't do this, Eli," he whispered.

Despite the objection, Vinn didn't move away. Eli tested the waters with a caress of fingers against warm skin. He'd never met anyone as strong as Vinn or a man who'd stirred him like this. While Vinn may have had experiences with both men and women, Eli's own experience around men was rather limited. He'd been involved with Kylie for so long that his very young and wild days felt like a distant memory. He'd gotten serious with her as soon as they met and stopped experimenting with anything outside what little went on between him and his girlfriend.

But when his brain had started feeding him with images of Vinn in various stages of undress, he'd begun to feel guilty. Why would he be attracted to him now?

Nevertheless, Eli licked his lips and edged slightly closer. The sudden urge to know what Vinn tasted like clawed at his insides.

"You're drunk."

"Yeah, so?"

"This isn't you. It's the alcohol." Vinn pulled away before Eli could get too close, even throwing out an arm to stop his roll from the couch before he hit the floor.

"I'm drunk, but I ain't that drunk."

"Yeah, right. You can't even lie on the couch without falling off. I don't need you waking up in the morning and everything being all awkward between us. We're not going there. We've got a dozen more stops on the circuit, and we need to keep ourselves focused. Besides, what about Kylie?"

Eli snorted. What about her? He desperately wanted to tell Vinn the truth, something he couldn't do with the bitterness still choking him. "Fine." He turned to the back of the couch and adjusted the pillow under his head. Morning would be here soon enough, and he hoped to God that in the light of day, he could think straight. Because right now, all he thought about was kissing Vinn.

CHAPTER TWO

Vinn eased into the driver's seat, a little frustrated and a whole lot pissed. What the hell had that been about? Eli wasn't gay. Hell, he was engaged.

To a woman.

Yet Eli's warm breath brushing his neck had felt incredible, he'd come to attention immediately. So much so that even now he couldn't get comfortable. He pressed down on the stiff dick wedged against the zipper of his jeans and willed it to go away. Once he was certain Eli was passed out, he'd pull off at a rest area and jack off.

Something was definitely going on. Normally, he'd been able to push away his feelings for his best friend, but lately he'd been entertaining himself in the bathroom a lot. At the next campground, he'd have to find a willing cowboy to blow off some steam with. A nice hard fuck ought to straighten him right out.

In the meantime, he had to learn what had happened to Eli. Other than working himself to the bone all the time, he'd been a pretty happy

guy. Sure, they'd partied in some of the local saloons, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his friend so shitfaced and sullen.

Whatever it was, he'd bet it had something to do with that crumpled paper Eli had shoved in his pants back at the bar. He'd practically broken his neck making sure he got to it before they left. A note from Kylie, maybe? He found it hard to resist the urge to sneak the note out of Eli's pocket and give a quick read. Eli would never know in his present state.

Vinn shook his head and pushed the thoughts away. If Eli needed him to know, he'd have to tell him himself. Lusting after your best friend was one thing. Invading his privacy was a whole other can of worms—one guaranteed to bring him trouble.

The dark night and lonely road loomed in front of him. Being away from home a good ten months out of the year, often made him think he needed his head examined. Rodeo life sounded glamorous in a kind of Toby Keith, should-have-been-a-cowboy way. But few saw behind the faded denim and cowboy hats to the aches and pains of a rough ride or the night after night living in a camper half in and half out of a battered suitcase.

His lips parted at the inevitable grin brought on by his own thoughts. The life had its hellish aspects, but there were perks, too. With every good ride came not only pride in his abilities, but a few minutes of fame that buoyed him through another season. Then there were the buckle bunnies. Hot and easy women—and sometimes men—dying to get into bed with a *real* cowboy.

Vinn snorted. Sex was definitely not an issue on the road. And it didn't stop the loneliness for something more. Must be his age talking. He'd been less interested in fucking anyone on two legs this past year and instead found himself yearning for something more. A connection. Or maybe just someone to hold on to through the highs and lows of his life.

God, what a sap.

Time to snap out of it. He reached for his thermos of coffee and drank the thick, dark brew until his insides warmed and the mere hope of the caffeine rushing toward his brain brought a smile to his face. He might not have someone to keep him warm at night, but he wasn't alone. The soft snores from Eli were proof of that. They'd seen each other through all kinds of craziness over the years, and that wouldn't change. They were best friends for life.



The sky on the horizon lightened to an interesting shade of smoke blue as the sun prepared to rise. Vinn rubbed at his face, hoping it would wake his ass up. Not likely with his eyes burning as if they'd been scrubbed with sandpaper, though. He'd driven through the night, and they still had a full day's drive in front of them.

He steered the camper smoothly into the lot of the closest truck stop and pulled into a parking spot.

Finally.

Exhaustion weighed on his shoulders, more so than usual. He'd had nothing to keep him company but bad late-night talk shows and lascivious thoughts of all the wicked things he wanted to do with Eli. One night of driving couldn't erase the tension seeping from every pore of his body, and now he'd layered on no sleep to leave him cranky as hell.

He stretched his long legs from the seat and stood, accompanied by more than a few pops and creaks from his bag of bones. Nothing like pulling an all-nighter to make him feel far older than his thirty-three years.

Vinn eased forward, careful to stretch his muscles slowly. Once he limbered up, the aches would dissipate, and he'd be fine. He kicked the couch. "Wake up, freeloader. It's your turn to drive."

Eli moaned and groaned into the pillow before settling back into a light sleep pattern. Followed by the familiar brush of heavy breathing that would soon turn to light snoring. Not that it bothered him at all. When Vinn slept, it was the sleep of the living dead. A bomb could go off in the trailer and if he hadn't had eight hours, he wouldn't even notice.

"Seriously, Eli. We're still behind schedule, and we gotta get back on the road." Vinn reached for the coffeemaker on the tiny counter and poured a fresh cup. Eli's grunts of complaint tugged the corners of his mouth. He snatched up the bottle of aspirin and wiped the humor from his face before he turned back to his friend.

All the smart-ass remarks he'd plan to make died on his lips at the sight of the gorgeous man sitting on the couch. Black hair waved around his head in a roughshod pattern, thick stubble covering the lower half of his face. But it was the ruby red lips that drew him like a moth to flame every damn time. The lips that had brushed his skin for a fleeting moment last night. Vinn's body tightened everywhere. They wouldn't make it the rest of the season if he didn't get this desire under control. One night he would have a few drinks too many and make a move they'd both regret.

"Where the hell is that fucking cat?"

Vinn jerked to attention at Eli's question. "What? What cat?" What had he missed while he'd been drooling?

"The damn cat that shit in my mouth," Eli grumbled.

Laughter rumbled in Vinn's chest. "Here, maybe this will help." He handed the mug of fresh brew over, ignoring the electric jolt in his stomach when their fingers grazed each other's.

Eli sipped greedily from the cup, and his eyes shuttered close in blatant ecstasy. "Oh yeah, that's what I'm talking about. Hot and black and ready to strip your insides. Thanks, man."

"Whatever it takes to get your ass in the driver's seat. I'm beat." *And still horny as hell.* His thoughts drifted to the warm bed in the back and the idea of morning sex. A slow, easy ride with his arms wrapped around a sleepy partner. When was the last time he'd enjoyed the morning after? He couldn't even remember. With a string of one-night stands under his belt, who had time or the desire to stay all night? For a long time that had been all he wanted, but things were unexpectedly changing, and he wasn't too sure he liked it.

"So, where are we anyways?" Eli set down the cup and stretched, his T-shirt lifting enough to bare a patch of skin. The sight of the light strip of hair leading into his jeans made Vinn swallow hard. Fuck, he had to stop this.

"Somewhere west of bum fuck, so far's I can tell. Check the GPS—the bitch probably knows more than I do."

"Damn. You do need some sleep. Why don't you go ahead and I'll take over from here. Another cup of coffee, and I'll be all set to go."

Eli said the right words, but Vinn wasn't feeling it. The smile touched his lips but didn't reach his eyes.

"What's going on, Eli?" Vinn took a seat next to him on the couch, being sure to leave some space between their bodies.

"What do you mean?"

Vinn cocked his brow, and Eli turned away.

"Nothing I wanna talk about." A muscle ticked a steady cadence in Eli's jaw as he ground his teeth together. "You get some sleep, and I'll get us the rest of the way."

He wanted to object, to make Eli confess what had him in such obvious knots, but he had to wait and let him make the first move. "Wake me up if you need anything, then." He pushed to his feet and reluctantly moved toward the back of the camper. The sort of bedroom consisted of two twin beds, one on each side, with about six inches of space between them.

If they needed a bigger bed for guests, it was easy enough to push them together. As one big bed, he knew for a fact you could easily fit up to four people. His heart rate kicked up a notch at the memories of more sex back here than he could count. Not that any of that did him a damn bit of good now. Vinn pulled off his boots and tossed them to the side. There wasn't much space to move, so he shucked his jeans and T-shirt just as quick and flopped onto his mattress. He hadn't bothered with underwear earlier, and now the cool breeze from the AC fan blew across his cock. The kiss of air felt good on his heated skin but did little to dissuade his blood-engorged shaft.

Against his better judgment, he wrapped his hand around his dick one finger at a time before giving it a firm, steady squeeze. Jacking off wasn't going to help him sleep any better than it had allowed him to drive. Still, he tuned into Eli's movements up front. First, the sound of coffee pouring into his cup, and then the soft sigh he made when he drank it.

Vinn gave himself one hard pull for that. He hadn't closed over the partition, so if Eli took about three steps and poked his head into the room, he'd find him lying naked and sporting the hard-on of all hard-ons. Maybe that was what he wanted. To put Eli on the spot and see how he reacted. As much as he needed to get over this crazy attraction, it seemed to be getting worse instead of better.

He held onto his prick but focused on trying to relax the rest of his body, one muscle group at a time. They had a long day and night in front of them, and Eli would be counting on him to be rested. Somehow, he managed to relax into his pillow, thoughts of his friend still settling in his mind.

A feather-light touch brushed against his leg and his body jerked, although not enough to make him open his eyes. If he fell asleep dreaming about Eli touching him, there were worse ways to go. Another caress—this time to the inside of his thigh—caught Vinn's breath for a split second.

More...please...

He loved this dream as much as he hated it, but he'd die if it stopped. The strokes continued with Eli's hand rubbing him from hip to knee and back again. A moan slid from his throat, and his balls tightened in ecstasy. He was so starved for attention; he considered the very real possibility of coming simply from a few light touches nowhere near his dick.

"I don't understand this. Nor do I know how to stop it," Eli whispered.

A faint warning bell sounded in Vinn's head, but he couldn't drag himself from the stupor created by Eli fondling him. Fingers worked their way between his thighs, and Vinn spread his legs for easier access.

"Tell me what you like."

"Just what you're doing. I'm easy."

Eli laughed throatily at Vinn's response while he edged a few inches closer to his sac. Vinn canted his hips and thrust upward until rough skin met sensitive skin, and he groaned in pure bliss. Heat rushed through his veins, and currents of pleasure ripped through his balls to the crown of his cock. Unbidden, he moved in tandem with Eli's now firm handling of first one ball and then the other. He rolled them in his hand, squeezed and released, applying the perfect amount of pressure.

"Oh fuck, you're making me come." Vinn bucked helplessly on the bed as the mind-blowing release took over. His eyes blinked open, and spurt after spurt of thick cum splattered his stomach and chest, even coating his hand as he fist-pumped his way through the biggest orgasm in a very long time. On the last stroke, he glanced up to find Eli leaning over the edge of his bed, eyes wide in amazement, and his hand still between Vinn's legs.

"Wow."

Fear and surprise gripped Vinn by the throat. Instinctively, he jerked away from Eli. "Eli, what the hell are you doing?" *Oh fuck.*

His best friend's face fell, and he pulled back from the bed. "Getting you off, apparently."

"But—but..." This was so not happening.

"Apparently, I've made a huge mistake." Eli stood and rushed from the room, the door of the camper crashing open and closing a split second later.

CHAPTER THREE

Fuck, what had he been thinking? Eli surveyed the rest area and its sparse resources. He had nowhere to go and no time to take back what he'd done. On the backside of a tree, out of view of the camper, he shoved his hands through his hair and let loose with a stream of curses that would put hair on a man's chest. He resisted the urge to hit something, to rage at his own stupidity. Losing some of the fight, he kicked at the tree, the toe of his boots dislodging a hunk of bark.

How had things gotten out of control? He'd heard Vinn whisper his name, and he'd gone to see what he wanted. It didn't take a rocket scientist to see he was in the midst of some sort of fantasy while jacking off. Maybe he should have been offended...but he wasn't. Everything he'd fought against for the last several weeks had come to a head, and he'd automatically reacted without thinking it through.

And it had been more incredible than he'd ever imagined.

Vinn's responses had fueled his movements, and they'd both been carried away, even if only one of them had been truly awake.

Fuck.

The last thing he wanted was weirdness between him and Vinn. The one constant he'd reminded himself of over and over, week in and week out, was the importance of the friendship. Nothing meant more.

"There you are."

Vinn rounded the tree and halted in front of him. He'd obviously rushed from the camper, only taking time to put on a pair of jeans. Unbuttoned, they rode low on his hips and even now, after the embarrassing moment in the camper, Eli found his gaze wandering to the trail that disappeared beneath the waistband of the worn denim. What the hell was wrong with him?

"I think we need to talk."

For once in his life, Eli was at a loss for words. There were no rules for this kind of thing, other than don't do it. So, he remained silent.

"Eli, look at me."

Helpless to resist, he canted his head until their gazes met. His friend's sorrow-filled gaze tore at his gut while something akin to guilt crept into his mind.

"It's not a big deal. We're on the road. We're alone a lot. We all have needs, and sometimes they overwhelm us. You have nothing to feel guilty about, and you certainly don't need to worry about telling your fiancée about this. We can make sure it never happens again."

"You think I'm worried about her?"

Vinn recoiled at Eli's outburst.

"I don't give a shit about her anymore. Hell, I'm not sure I have in a good long while." Eli dug out the paper he'd wadded up in the pocket of his jeans the night before and tossed it to Vinn. "This is how important *she* is."

He shoved his hands in his pockets and shifted from foot to foot while Vinn unfolded the paper and read its contents. Eli had reread the note so many times he knew it word for word. The impact of the betrayal remained as strong as the first time. Funny, though... In the light of day, and sober, it wasn't the loss of the woman he mourned. Only the land. It was the land he'd loved all along. The fantasy of the little boy who'd said he would grow up and be a rodeo star, and then buy a big ole horse ranch in the mountains. He wasn't much of a star, but he'd done well enough, and the dream of the ranch had nearly been in his grasp.

"Well, fuck me sideways. That bitch."

Vinn took the words right out of his mouth.

"Why didn't you tell me about this sooner? Hell, we can't let her get away with this. What did she do with all the money you sent her?"

Eli pushed off the tree and moved away from Vinn. He needed a little more distance between him and his friend. Despite everything, his dick was still hard as steel, and the pure male scent of Vinn drove him crazy. Whatever this was, it didn't seem to be going away.

"I gave her power of attorney a while back, and I sent her the money of my own free will. I'm pretty sure she can get away with it."

"Still, I've got an attorney friend I can talk to. We have to do something about this."

Eli turned on Vinn, not realizing the man followed him so closely. Only inches apart, the tension between them vibrated. "Is this really what you came out here to talk to me about?"

Vinn blinked, and the surprise in his gaze faded away. "I s'pose not." He leaned forward. "You walked in on me obviously fantasizing about you, yet you didn't walk away until after I came. What's up with that?"

Eli gulped, wishing the lump in his throat would clear. Leave it to Vinn to put it all out on the table when backed into a corner.

"I was curious." Eli tried to move away, but his back hit the side of the camper.

"Just curious?" The question rolled sensuously from Vinn's tongue and somehow sparked a current straight to Eli's prick.

"Fuck, man, what do you want me to say?" *That his cock throbbed with every word out of Vinn's mouth?*

"The truth." Vinn slapped his hands against the metal of the camper next to Eli's head, trapping him. "For weeks now, something's been going on, and I thought it was just me. I've been going crazy with it. Worrying about it. Why all of a sudden am I insanely craving my best friend who is not gay, and who is engaged to be married to a woman?"

"Craving?" The word came out on a harsh whisper. Blood roared in his ears.

"Yeah, craving." Vinn's head dipped closer. "And now you're not engaged. But you're still not gay."

"I'm not gay..."

The whispered words died on his lips when Vinn swooped forward and fastened his mouth onto Eli's. Mouths parted and tongues and teeth clashed in a desperate and hungry kiss. Heat flared inside him fast, out of control. Vinn bit at his lower lip, and Eli kissed him back with rival need. In the heat of the moment, he forgot all of his objections and focused solely on the give and take of pleasure.

The press of soft lips, the slide of wet tongues, the moan he could have sworn came from his own throat. Instinctively, he reached for Vinn, his fingers curling into the denim at his waist, tugging. Until the hard steel of the man's erection pressed against his own. Pure unbridled passion exploded in Eli's head, and their bodies jerked and slammed together again. This was exactly what he'd needed all along.

"Holy fuck, Eli," Vinn whispered against his mouth.

The exclamation burned through him like fine liquor as he pushed for a deeper kiss. Slow and exploratory this time. Eli's tongue delved into the warm recess of Vinn's mouth, seeking to touch everywhere he could. More, he had to have more. The faded scent of Vinn's after-shave mingled with the musky smell of the man, raising his arousal another notch higher. At this rate, he'd be bursting through his jeans and begging to fuck.

Eli's movements stilled for a fraction of a second as reality pricked at his senses. Luckily for him, Vinn would have none of it as he wrapped his arms around Eli's shoulders and pulled him closer. "No, not yet." He nipped at Eli's jaw and moved his way back to the kiss. The rough scratch of whiskers rubbed across his skin, and a soft sigh escaped his lips, followed by a groan. Everything about Vinn felt so incredible.

The hard ridge of Vinn's erection heated through his pants, driving Eli mad.

"Do you want me to stop now?"

Eli swallowed past the lump in his throat. "No."

"You have no idea how bad I've ached to touch you." Vinn's hand pushed between their bodies and across Eli's hard cock. Blood raced through his veins, beating a rhythm of undeniable desire. Everything he'd wanted and everything he'd been afraid of was about to happen. It had to.

"But—"

"No buts. We'll work it out. We've been best friends for a long time, and this doesn't have to change that."

Eli nodded as Vinn mouthed his way back down his neck, nipping and suckling as he went. Fingers tugged at the bottom of Eli's shirt until the heat of skin on skin swept across his taut abs. His eyes slid closed, and he gasped for air. Control had slipped from his grasp so easily, replaced with the greedy arousal straining his jeans.

"Excuse me." At the intrusion of the gruff, unfamiliar voice, they sprang apart.

Both he and Vinn turned in the direction of the person approaching.

"You do realize this is a public rest area, don't you?" The red and mottled face of the stranger didn't bode well.

"Sorry, sir. We we're just pulling out," Vinn responded.

"That's not what it looked like." The man gestured to Vinn. "You're half dressed"—and then to Eli—"and you practically had your hand down his pants."

"Like he said. We're leaving right now."

The man moved closer, his face contorting even more in anger. "My kids had to walk by here and see two guys trying to fuck." He practically spat the last two words.

Embarrassment flooded through Eli at being caught. They didn't exactly frequent the most progressive parts of the country, and while many on the circuit had seen their fair share of various sexual deviances, it didn't mean they needed to flaunt it across the countryside. They did have appearances to keep up. And assholes like this were trouble in the making, and the last thing they needed right now was trouble.

"Come on, Vinn. Let's go." He could see the muscle ticking in Vinn's jaw and the angry set of his face. "He's not worth it." Fishing the keys out of his pocket, Eli moved to the camper door and pulled it open. "If we don't leave now, we might not make it to registration, and we both know we can't afford to miss a night."

Thankfully, that reminder seemed to get through to Vinn as he edged slowly to the vehicle and ducked inside. For a second, Eli worried the stranger wasn't going to let this go when he opened his mouth to say something. Timing was everything, and lucky for them, two little girls came running over to their dad, begging for sodas and candy.

Eli watched him go and gave himself a few extra seconds to regain his composure. He'd let things get out of control, which was very unlike him. He preferred to keep the upper hand at all times, in all things. Yet, Vinn had turned him inside out with a simple kiss.

Fuck that. Nothing about that kiss had been simple, and the memory of Vinn's touch would keep his dick hard all day long.

CHAPTER FOUR

The golden glow of the waning sun seeped through the trees like the fanning flames of a campfire. The land here reminded him of home—lots of mountains and dense forest with winding roads that had kept his foot on the brake for about the last half a mile or so.

“Where are we?” Vinn wedged into the passenger seat and handed him a cup of steaming fresh coffee.

“According to the bitch, about five miles from our destination.” Eli smiled at the familiar reference to the GPS his mother had insisted on buying him the last time he’d visited.

“You should have woken me up—I could have taken over and given you a break.” Vinn sipped at his mug.

“Nah, you drove all night and let me sleep off my drunk. It’s the least I could do.” Besides, it wasn’t the desire for sleep that had kept him company for the last eleven hours. He longed to turn and look at Vinn, but the stretching silence worried him. He sensed his friend was studying him, searching for something...an indication of his mood, maybe.

"The land here is beautiful. I had no idea it would be so forested."

"Yeah, I was just thinking the same thing myself. Reminds me of home." Not that he had much of a home to go back to anymore.

"Speaking of..."

"Yeah, let's not. I need to think about something other than the ranch that almost was." Now the coffee sat in his stomach like a lead weight.

"We need to talk about it at some point. I'd like to help."

Did he want Vinn's help? He wanted something, but for now it wasn't land, it wasn't a ranch, and it damn sure wasn't to talk about his ex-fiancée.

"Wow!" They'd rounded the final bend, and the forest had opened to the wide open space of the just added to the national schedule Hayden Rodeo. The mountain view in the background took his breath away.

"Now that's what I'm talking about. Hot damn." Vinn gulped down his coffee and shoved the cup into a holder as they drove through the stately, if slightly worn down, wrought-iron gates.

"Well, I'll be damned. This place is for sale. Guess that explains how it got added to the circuit at such a late date. Someone's doing their damndest to draw a crowd and improve their chances of selling."

"Look at all the room back there." Eli pointed behind the arenas to the many buildings and pens. They jostled roughly in the camper when they hit a couple of potholes, and he reduced his speed to a crawl. "Road in needs some work, though."

"Doesn't look like the only thing that needs some work." Vinn motioned to the side buildings they'd approached.

"Yeah, they certainly need a fresh coat of paint and some TLC, but this place looks like a diamond in the rough."

"Or at least that's what they want potential buyers to see." Vinn pivoted in his seat, his hundred-watt smile turned on high.

"What?" He always got anxious when Vinn got that look in his eye.

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"Yeah." Eli shook his head. "That's what I'm worried about."

He pulled them around to the building marked "registration" and parked off to the side. He took in the plethora of four by fours, haulers and campers filling up the backside of the pens. "Looks like we're the last to arrive."

"Well, we did get off to a late start." Vinn winked and hopped out the passenger side, his boots hitting the ground before Eli could even get the engine turned off.

Never one to pass up the chance to enjoy a good view, Eli watched Vinn amble toward the building. The man had an ass like nobody's business with the ability to mesmerize him in a simple pair of Levis. The slight bow of his long, muscular legs gave him a sexy swagger that said rugged and sexy.

Eli shook his head and squeezed his eyes closed. This did not seem like the road he should be taking right now. They had a job to do here, and getting wrapped up in anything beyond the superficial could mean trouble. He paused on that thought. Until he'd gotten engaged, he'd pretty much considered sex superficial, and he was pretty sure Vinn did too. So why was this different? Why shouldn't they go for it, get it out of their system and then move past it?

Because he's your best friend, and what you feel might be more than simple lust, you idiot.

What he wouldn't give for a cold shower right about now. Although he doubted much would cool his desire other than the man disappearing inside the registration building. Instead, he grabbed a pair of sunglasses from the visor clip and pushed them onto his face. Before he got too obsessed about what might never happen, he needed to focus on getting through the rest of the day. One foot in front of the other, one step at a time.

He jumped from the camper and into the scorching heat of a cloudless day. He glanced around the property, still impressed by the size. Off the top of his head, he'd guess the main arena seated four to five thousand people. Wanting a closer look at the facility, he wandered off in that direction. Vinn could handle registration on his own.

Besides a few people wandering around here and there, the seats were empty, and he had the place to himself. Truth be told, this was exactly the kind of place he could sink his teeth into. Good bones, but in need of serious improvement. Just the kind of hard work to keep a wandering mind busy. Plus, he had a lot of business ideas about growing a rodeo both with local and national events. Nearly every event he rode in, he concocted ways he would make it bigger and better. All these desires he'd never shared with anyone.

He sat back on his haunches and sifted his hand through the dirt. He'd been born to horse ranching, but his life's blood had grown too attached to this. At least in that respect, his break-up had given him

the opportunity to change his future. It might be a damn long time before he had enough money to buy his own place, but being involved in any capacity was better than none.

"Penny for your thoughts." Vinn approached in front of him.

Eli stood, slightly embarrassed to be caught in a foolish dream. "Nothing important. Just thinking about the rides we have coming up."

"Are you sure? You looked pretty intense."

Eli shrugged. "You know how I am. I love the rodeo, and I've always taken it too damn seriously."

Vinn moved next to him and surveyed the arena. "This place does have a good feel to it, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"You ever thought about owning your own someday? I know you had your heart set on settling down on a ranch, but the rodeo..."

He snorted. "I love the rodeo, and in a way, I'm damn glad I'm not leaving it anytime soon, but owning one? Get real, Vinn. Kylie left me flat broke. All I have left is the camper, a couple of trailers, and a few horses." The toe of his boot kicked up some sand, a clear sign of his frustration.

"Well, it's not like you're an old man looking to retire. You've got time to figure it out." Vinn held up the manila folder he'd carried in. "Since we were practically the last to arrive, they don't have much space left. They've managed to fill the board and pack the bunks, but we've got one of the last remaining campground spaces. So it looks like it's just you and me."

For a second their gazes locked, and Eli didn't know whether the situation was a good one or not. In one of the bunkhouses, it would've been easy to keep their distance and keep their hands off each other. Sleeping alone in the camper would be an entirely different story. The desire might have simmered down, but it had hardly disappeared. At least not for him.

"Then I reckon we'd better get set up and get comfortable." Eli led the way back to the truck and hopped into the driver's seat. "You know where we're going?"

Vinn held up a small layout map of the facility.

"Cool, then lead the way." He started the engine and pulled from the parking lot in the direction Vinn pointed. They passed by a couple of the smaller rings where a few horses were being worked out. He recognized several friendly faces from the circuit and saw a lot of un-

familiar ones he assumed were locals. Not all the regulars from the pro series would make it out to a smaller venue like this, but he and Vinn liked filling up as many of their days off as possible with more opportunities to increase their winnings.

"I wouldn't mind getting a closer look at the entire layout of the place. I'm real curious about it."

Eli's gaze shot to Vinn, and he wondered why the sudden interest in this place. "Oh yeah, why's that?"

"Oh, it never hurts to get a gander on the competition," he teased.

"Uh huh." Eli had a hunch his friend had more on his mind than the competition, but he'd wait and grill him on it later. They'd arrived at the campground, and after navigating past the crowd, he pulled into their reserved spot.

"Not a lot of space, but I imagine its cost efficient," Vinn mumbled.

"Cost-efficient? Who are you? And what have you done with my friend, Vinn?"

His friend turned those liquid amber eyes on him and licked his lips. "Oh, don't you worry. I'm still here, and don't think I've forgotten for a minute where we left off."

Eli swallowed thickly at the heat in Vinn's words. His dick twitched mercilessly against his thigh, and his hands tightened on the steering wheel until his knuckles turned white. It had been a long, lonely day, and nothing about Vinn had managed to get far from his mind no matter how hard he tried. Now they were mere minutes from being alone with nothing left to do but set up camp and make some dinner. They had the rest of the night free to do whatever their hearts or any other parts of their bodies desired.

The memory of their kiss from the morning burned into his brain. Eli ached to taste Vinn's mouth again. Without interruption. What would it feel like to kiss him while they rubbed against each other skin to skin? It had been a long damn time since the prospect of spending time in the bedroom excited him beyond a simple release. When he was home, his fiancée never seemed eager to get him horizontal. In contrast, the primal passion that had zinged between him and Vinn at first touch threatened to make him explode.

"You coming or what?"

Eli shook his thoughts and tried to focus on what Vinn had said. His lips were moving, but he couldn't hear the words over the blood roaring in his ears. The rhythm of his pulse in his cock had stripped

his control in a heartbeat, and the press of hard flesh digging into sharp metal teeth became a constant reminder of what they had in store.

"Or what?"

Vinn paused in the doorway and stared back at him. Eli didn't know if his need was stamped across his face or if Vinn simply had desires of his own, but whatever the reason, he got the message and he climbed back into the truck.

"Maybe setting up camp can wait a little bit," he whispered.

They simultaneously moved for the rear of the camper, shoulders and thighs brushing together. Eli sucked in air gone thick from arousal and held his breath. Nerves twitched in his gut, not because he had doubts but simply because he didn't have a lot of experience with men. Hell, he wasn't even sure one ménage experiment with a woman involved counted in this situation.

As soon as they cleared the seats and maneuvered into the open space in front of the couch, Vinn wrapped his arms around Eli's waist. "I've been waiting to do this all day." His mouth descended on Eli's, a fast press of lips that made his head swim. He parted his lips and Vinn's tongue slipped between them, eliciting a long, low groan from Eli's throat. God, yes. He too had concentrated on nothing else all day long. Nothing but the moment when he'd be in Vinn's embrace once again, and they'd be free to explore this crazy attraction.

Eli worked his way underneath the edge of Vinn's T-shirt and slowly stroked the smooth, warm skin of waist and back. His arms wrapped around Vinn's middle, and he pulled him tight against his body. The heat of Vinn's cock poked him through their clothing like a hot stick, searing an imprint into his memory. He twisted and turned his hips, creating a delicious friction that fried his thought patterns.

Why had he denied himself this pleasure for so long?

Vinn pulled back from the kiss. "Are you sure about this? We can wait if you need to. Talk it over. Give you some time to work past the break-up..."

"Talking is overrated. Wanna fuck." Eli forced words past his lips when all he really wanted was Vinn's mouth back on his. Screw the emotional baggage. They could talk later. His dick was now hard enough to drive nails, and if he didn't get relief soon, he'd go insane. Instead, he reached for the button of Vinn's jeans and unfastened it, quickly followed by the lowering of his zipper. When that big, beautiful cock sprang free, he couldn't contain the satisfied smile crossing his face.

“Whoa, slow down.” Vinn pushed back a few steps. “We don’t have to rush.”

“Jesus, Vinn. You’re killing me here. Ever since you had me pinned against the side of the camper this morning, I’ve become obsessed. I don’t want to wait anymore. I don’t want to talk about my feelings. And I don’t want to talk about how we’re gonna feel tomorrow.”

For a few tense seconds after his outburst, Vinn remained silent. Eli feared he’d just blown his chance and he’d be outside setting up camp in mere moments when Vinn finally spoke up.

“Have you ever let anyone fuck your ass?”

CHAPTER FIVE

Eli's mouth dropped open, and Vinn smiled in smug satisfaction. He'd wanted to shock some sense into his friend. It was easy enough to get carried away, but he still felt a certain sense of responsibility with Eli and his first solo experience with a man.

"Once," Eli mumbled.

"Did you enjoy it?"

Vinn enjoyed the look of embarrassment that crossed his face. Nobody liked being put on the spot, especially Eli. The slight nod that followed was all he needed for encouragement as he grabbed Eli's hand and led him to the bedroom. The least he could do was get this right.

At the foot of the bed, he toed off his boots and pulled his T-shirt over his head. Eli followed suit, and in under a minute, they both stood there staring at each other buck-naked. They'd seen each other nude more times than he could count, but somehow tonight it seemed so different. Drawn to the tawny skin that covered corded muscles,

Vinn followed the ridges and valleys of Eli's arms and torso to the lean, narrow hips that beckoned him to grip. When his gaze landed on the long cock jutting from Eli's body, it leapt in eager response.

"I know you don't want to talk about this, but I need to know you're sure. If you have doubts, now's the time to say so, before we reach the point of no return." Vinn rubbed a finger across Eli's ridged abdomen, tracing the swells of the well-defined muscles.

"No doubts."

Thank God.

Vinn leaned in for another kiss, eager for more of Eli's mouth. He couldn't seem to get enough. Warm heat and eager male greeted him, his favorite combinations. Blood rushed to his groin, pulling the skin of his dick taut in strained need. He longed to be buried inside Eli's tight ass. He imagined the tight muscles strangling his cock to near death in a duel for pain and pleasure. For tonight, however, he'd settle for this lush mouth sucking him dry. He'd need to take some time to prepare Eli before he shoved his dick into the gorgeous, near virgin ass.

Forcing himself to break the kiss, Vinn crawled onto the bed and lay out on his back. He relaxed against one of the pillows and made himself comfortable. "Suck me, Eli."

Brief hesitation flashed across Eli's face, and Vinn had a moment to reconsider making demands. Fuck it. His balls ached, and the man he wanted more than anything else in the world now stared down at him with violent hunger storming in his eyes.

The bed dipped, and Eli edged across the mattress and in between Vinn's legs. He willed himself to stay calm and let Eli set his own pace. As much as he wanted to rush things, he knew he couldn't. Still, one look into Eli's gaze and he wanted to melt. Beautiful, brown eyes filled with lust stared back at him, teasing him further.

Rough hands edged up his thighs and stopped when Eli's thumbs rubbed across his balls. A jolt of electricity from the touch tore through his limbs, and his back arched off the bed. Sweet Jesus, he'd never last. Vinn squeezed his eyes shut and held his breath, waiting for the next move. He didn't wait long. Seconds later, Eli pressed his open mouth to the root of Vinn's cock and licked from the base to the weeping slit of his crown.

"Oohh," Vinn moaned loudly, unable to hold it in. So fucking good.

"I take it you like that?" Eli didn't wait for an answer before he went to work on his dick again. Soft strokes alternated with hard,

some along the sensitive vein on the underside. Vinn's hips bucked involuntarily. More. More.

"Dammit, Eli." Vinn grabbed one of Eli's hands, wrapped it around his cock and squeezed impossibly tight. The pressure caused his eyes to roll back in his head, and white-hot pleasure sizzled up his spine. After a few deep, calming breaths, he guided Eli up and down his cock in a show of long, leisurely strokes that would tease and tempt but not drive him wildly over the edge.

Eli picked up the natural rhythm and moved his mouth closer to Vinn's heated flesh. A puff of hot air blew across the head, nearly blowing Vinn's mind.

"You're trying to torture me, aren't you?"

Eli chuckled and stuck out his tongue. He licked his way around the crown and lapped up the pre-cum that had leaked from the tip. When the rough texture of his tongue probed at his slit, Vinn's erection swelled. As much as he'd imagined what their first time would be like, reality had set in and his balls ached for release. He had to come.

"In your mouth...Please...When I come..."

Eli flashed a quick smug smile before his mouth engulfed the tip of his cock. A shock of hot, wet heat flashed through Vinn, rendering him breathless. The tongue bath that followed only heightened the pleasure until it felt like the cum boiled in his balls.

"Oh shit..." Vinn moaned as the inevitable climax came closer.

Eli sucked him deep to the back of his throat, still laving the sensitive skin. Vinn's control slipped free, and he fisted his hands in the sheets. With more skill than he expected, Eli pressed his thumb against Vinn's perineum, igniting the final fuse.

"Oh God...Yes!" Vinn thrust hard into his throat, but the clamp of Eli's hand around the base of his cock prevented his orgasm. Barely.

Releasing him with an audible pop, Eli sheepishly glanced at him from underneath half-hooded eyes. The man looked as if he had a question on the tip of his tongue, but didn't want to say it.

Worry settled over Vinn. Had he pushed Eli too soon? "What is it?" Hell, he would die if they stopped now, but he'd do anything for Eli. Even sport blue, fucking balls.

"I want to watch you come with my dick buried in your ass."

Whoa. Where the hell did that come from?

Too stunned to speak, Vinn pointed to the bottle of lube and condoms on the table and laid back on the bed to watch Eli retrieve them. He wasn't sure how he'd expected things to go, but this easy transition

from friends to lovers wasn't it. Already his cock missed Eli's touch, and it took all of his willpower not to rush him along.

After retrieving the supplies, Eli moved back into place between his thighs and tore into the condom with his teeth. The motions drew Vinn's gaze to the large swollen length of the other man's cock, and his asshole twitched in anticipation.

"So—uh—how does this usually work for you? Do you usually do the fucking or get fucked?"

Vinn winced slightly at Eli's crude question. "I prefer the top, but there's plenty to enjoy on the bottom as well. And if this wasn't our first time together, I'd be pounding your ass right about now." It was kind of hard to have this conversation while Eli slathered lube across his shaft. Vinn's entire body had grown tight with anticipation, and he now served as a slave to that need.

"I need you so bad." The want and desire in Eli's voice broke down the last of any barriers that might have remained between the two.

Vinn pulled back his legs and opened his body in the most flagrant show of submission he'd ever displayed. "Take me, Eli. Please."

Eli leaned in and stroked the cleft of his bottom with lube-laden fingers until they prodded and pushed beyond the tight ring of resistance. Vinn gasped at the sensation of cool gel which was quickly forgotten when Eli brushed across his prostate. Instantly, the ecstasy of the head job Eli had performed before came rushing back, and the need to orgasm along with it.

"You keep that up and you won't even get inside before I come," Vinn gasped.

Eli quickly withdrew his fingers and pressed his body closer until the head of his cock nestled at the tight opening. So focused on getting Eli's dick inside him, he was taken by surprise when instead Eli bent forward and pressed his mouth to Vinn's for a soft, sweet kiss. His mouth parted and Eli's tongue slipped inside, and instead of the frantic kiss he'd expected, a sudden outpouring of emotion went into this connection. Every moment of friendship over the years, all the trust they'd given each other and everything they'd been through, melded together into this moment.

In one crystal-clear moment, Vinn realized like never before that this was not just a confused crush on just another cowboy. For a very long time, he'd been falling in love. The kiss deepened with every passing minute, until eventually the reawakened arousal dominated once again.

Vinn broke free from Eli's lips. "Dammit. Take. Me. Now."

Eli gripped Vinn's arm with his free hand and pushed. Vinn breathed slow and easy at the burning penetration as Eli's cock impaled him one inch at a time.

"Fuck. You are so tight." Eli spoke through gritted teeth. His eyes closed, and sweat beaded across his forehead.

Vinn wanted to lick him, but he dared not move until Eli was ready. Hard breaths shuddered through him as he fought not to come yet. Already the slight pain had given way to extreme pleasure, and the slightest movement from Eli would likely set him off.

Eli dug his hips a fraction and Vinn moaned long and loud, ecstasy rolling through him. A slow stroke out and a slow push in led to a steady rhythm of friction across his prostate that he couldn't resist. Vinn grabbed his own cock and gave it a single hard pull before Eli knocked his hand out of the way and took over.

His head buzzed with the intensity of the fucking as Eli's balls slapped against his ass on every downward push. Vinn's eyes rolled back in his head, and he roared in pure molten pleasure as cum splattered his chest, stomach, and Eli's hand. The fist pumping on his dick continued through his orgasm, and Eli's final hard stroke and shudder of release followed closely behind.

The sounds of their harsh breathing filled the room, and Vinn could not resist biting at one of Eli's nipples. His lover jerked and sucked in a breath but made no move to get away. Even Eli's full weight pressing down on him felt good now.

As much as Vinn wanted to stay in bed with him, the waning light inside the camper said sundown was upon them, and they needed some light to set things up. "Guess we need to make camp."

Eli groaned but slid from Vinn's body and headed for the tiny bathroom to clean up. That had been the singular most amazing experience of his life, and now he had no idea what the hell to say or do next. He'd just fucked his best friend. And even more interesting...he wanted to do it again as soon as possible.

He removed the condom, threw it in the trash, and leaned on the sink. The fact his heart still raced and his body ached for more of Vinn left him more than a little confused. Now didn't seem like the opportune time to get attached. He needed to get his head on straight for the rodeo tomorrow. The higher he placed, the more money he put in his pocket, and boy, did his pocket need the money.

A soft knock sounded on the door. "You okay?"

Eli jerked his thoughts back to the here and now. "Yeah." He turned on the tap and shoved his hands under the cool water.

"I'm heading outside to start setup. Sun's going down soon."

"I'm right behind you." He finished washing his hands and dried them on the lone towel hanging on the rack. When he exited the bathroom, he heard the front door close, and he heaved a sigh of relief. He didn't want to face any potential awkward moments with Vinn quite yet. Neither one of them was going anywhere, so there was no need to rush anything.

Two steps into the bedroom, he scooped up his jeans and shoved his legs into them. Staring down at the bed, all he could see was Vinn lying there demanding to be sucked. His stomach flipped at the memory, and his breath caught in his throat. It took all of his restraint to hold back the groan as well. It had been so long since he'd felt this kind of intensity, if ever. After a slow, deep inhale, he blew out the air and bent to shove his feet in his boots.

Outside, Vinn's legs stuck out from under the camper where he'd already crawled to check for level and set the wheel blocks. Eli ambled over to the camp power box and did a quick check to ensure everything looked safe before they hooked in. Next, he went to hook up the water and sewer, since the travel tanks were close to empty anyways.

When he returned to the front of the campsite, Vinn had pulled out the awning and placed the camp chairs around the small fire ring.

"Guess I should get the grill out so we can start some dinner—it's getting late."

Vinn looked up from his task, his whiskey eyes glowing in the last of the setting sun. "Actually, Clay and Buck came by a few minutes ago and invited us over to their site. They've been set up a while, and I guess they've been barbequing most of the day. I told 'em we'd bring over some beer."

Vinn nodded. Just then, a loud crowd cheered in the distance.

"Sounds like it's turning out to be quite a party." Eli did his best to hide the wistful note in his voice.

"We don't have to go if you don't want to."

Vinn's whispered voice at his ear startled him. How the hell had he moved so quick and so close without him even knowing it? The low hum of constant desire he seemed to harbor for Vinn sizzled bright, the front of his jeans growing tight.

"It's fine. We both need to eat."

Vinn inched closer, and Eli shut his eyes, willing his racing heart to slow. When it came to this man, he seemed to have no self-control.

"You'll need your strength for what I have in mind later." Vinn spoke low, a sexy rumble in his voice.

"What's that?" He knew better than to ask. The answer was guaranteed to make his dick ache all night long, but he couldn't resist.

"I intend to ride you like only a good bronc rider would. Hard... fast...rough."

"Jesus, Vinn." The image that flashed in his brain—Vinn plowing into his backside, wild, yet in control in the same way he handled his horses—blew his mind and made his dick hard enough to drive nails. Hell, the mere thought nearly drove him to his knees, ready to beg for it now.

Vinn slapped him on the back and said, "I thought that might have an effect. But dinner first, then play. Grab the cooler there"—he tilted his head to the red Coleman sitting in one of the chairs—"and let's go join the party. I'm starved."

CHAPTER SIX

Need simmered low in Eli's belly as he watched the scene in front of him from a few feet away. They'd joined the other rodeo guys for steaks and beer a couple of hours ago, and after lots of food and mutual trash talk, some of the excitement of the night had settled down and the crowd had tapered off.

Vinn stood twenty feet in front of him in a quiet conversation with Buck, and from the worry lines crinkled into Buck's forehead, he'd say it was a pretty serious talk. He'd have to ask Vinn what that was about later, but for now he sat back and sipped at his beer and took in more of the atmosphere he'd come to love. The night before a ride always buzzed with pent-up energy and excitement, not to mention a heaping helping of healthy competition amongst these cowboys. Although some of that had faded, he was now content to sit and stare into the blazing orange flames in the fire pit.

Things were different tonight. Tomorrow's ride took a distant backseat to the emotions and needs Vinn brought out in him. But

what would a relationship mean for them? A gay relationship out on the road would be hard on them both. They'd have to be more careful, make sure they only shared how they felt about each other with friends who would be comfortable with such a relationship. Not all were.

There were a lot of rumors and talk about cowboys fucking cowboys when there weren't enough women around or when they got drunk enough, but a long-term relationship, well, that was a whole 'nother game.

Eli glanced around the packed campground. If he and Vinn settled down, things could be different. They'd have a chance to get to know their neighbors, their friends; their life could be their own. Maybe they wouldn't always have to hide and could be happy. Yeah, who was he kidding? It'd be a long time coming before he'd have the resources to do any such thing, unless he wanted to leave the life he loved and get a nine-to-five working for somebody else. That in of itself was the most ridiculous thing he'd come up with all night long. He needed the freedom and fresh air that this life afforded him. Especially now.

"What's wrong?"

Damn, Vinn had snuck up on him again. "Nothing much. Just thinking about stuff."

Vinn brushed his hand along Eli's arm and then plopped into the chair next to him. "Stuff, huh. Like what? I mean for a minute there you looked so unhappy I had to come over and see what was up."

Eli took a deep breath and decided to be honest. Might as well get it out in the open. "I was thinking about us."

"I was afraid of that. You're already regretting..."

"What?" Eli sat up in alarm. "No. Are you?" Fuck, this was so not what he'd expected.

"Hell no, I've been dreaming up different ways to fuck you all night long. There's the bed, the sofa, the wall, hell, maybe even the tiny bathroom."

Eli heaved a sigh of relief and relaxed into his chair. He lifted the long-necked bottle of beer to his lips and tipped it back for a long pull of the ice-cold brew. After he swallowed, he offered the bottle to Vinn.

"Don't go freaking me out like that." Eli offered Vinn a sly smile.

"I'm not the one sitting over here by himself looking like he lost his best friend."

"It's nothing like that, Vinn. I got lost in my thoughts of the future. Of what I had planned."

"You mean her?"

"Fuck no. I was serious when I said I didn't miss her a bit."

"The land then?"

"Sort of. The more I think about it, I'm pretty sure I just wanted to settle down. Set roots. But I have no idea if I'd like ranching all that much in the long term. Not as much as I love the rodeo. But how do you do the rodeo and lay down roots?"

"Maybe it's just all about who you do whatever you do with."

A quiet pause stretched out between them as Eli let Vinn's statement sink in.

"Makes sense." Eli leaned in close to be sure only Vinn heard his next words. "But what happens when more and more people on the circuit find out I like fucking your ass?"

Vinn's eyes darkened in the firelight. "Probably the same thing as when they find out I like making you scream with my dick buried inside you."

Desire jolted in Eli's stomach as he laughed in an attempt to cover his attraction. Although how he'd hide the growing ridge in his jeans was beyond him. He and Vinn sat off to the side alone, but any one of the other guys could approach in a matter of seconds. And none of that mattered.

Not when he spied the huge bulge at Vinn's crotch. Only a few feet away and at eye level, Eli had to bite his tongue to keep from licking his lips.

Vinn leaned closer. "You'd like me sliding between your lips right now, wouldn't you? The taste of my cum on your tongue as I shove to the back of your throat."

Oh hell. He would like that, and the mere thought of the hard flesh in his mouth made his dick so hard he wanted to rip out of his pants. Vinn had gone from temptation to wicked tease in a matter of seconds, and now the need to be alone with him threatened his ability to think straight.

"You think here is the best place to get into this?" Eli whispered, unable to hide the arousal-roughened tone of his voice. His control was slipping fast; one word from Vinn and he'd do anything he wanted. He needed Vinn that bad.

"I can already imagine the heat of your mouth wrapped around me, sucking me deep. Would you do that for me?"

Eli fought to breathe. To drag air in and out of his lungs while his pulse beat out of control. Lust wrapped around him like a thick fog, and Eli wanted to give in to it.

"I can hardly wait to watch you suck me again."

Eli tore his gaze from Vinn's crotch and tilted his head back so his gaze traveled upwards. The clothes covered the man, but Eli already knew what lay underneath, waiting for him. Flat, hard and oh-so-lickable abs, smooth tanned flesh that covered an incredible chest, chiseled from hard work and good genes, and a strong neck that would look great covered in love bites. His mouth watered at the thought of marking Vinn as his own. Making a claim.

"If you keep staring at me like you're going to eat me, I might embarrass myself in front of all these people and come in my jeans." Vinn smiled, so wicked, so erotic, as he inched closer to Eli's face.

The temptation in front of him was too great. Eli stood abruptly, knocking over his chair. He nearly lost his balance until Vinn grabbed his arm and steadied him.

"Looks like Eli's had one too many beers tonight," Buck called from the other side of the fire.

"Yeah, I'm gonna get him back to our camp so he can sober up and sleep it off before morning." Vinn tightened his grip on Eli's arm. Eli didn't need verbal directions to know enough to play along. If all that the guys thought was he'd had too much to drink, then they'd be getting off light.

Vinn led them toward their camper, being sure to avoid other campers who might still be lingering outside. The cool air against Eli's heated skin did little to cool the arousal simmering inside him. That little exchange back there had started them on a set path for the rest of the night, and Eli couldn't imagine anything stopping them. Tonight, Vinn would claim him as much as he'd laid his own claim—and who knew where that would lead.

His dick ached for freedom. A heavy sigh of relief escaped his lips when their camper came into view. Less than five minutes had gone by since they'd bid their friends good night, yet that was five minutes of torturous waiting that he didn't want to go through again. Vinn reached for the door and wrenched it open. He didn't bother with the lights, only pulled Eli in behind him. Inside the dark living area, Vinn shoved Eli against the wall.

"Goddamn, I need you."

One second they were rushing through the door, and the next Vinn's mouth was sealed to his. With no preamble, his tongue thrust past Eli's lips and swept through him. So grateful to finally be alone with Vinn, Eli ate at him, kissing him back for all he was worth.

The dark, musky taste of Vinn overwhelmed Eli's senses as they wrestled for control. He yanked Vinn's shirt from the waistband of his jeans before pushing his way underneath it. Warm, muscle-corded skin met his touch, and he sighed into Vinn's mouth. The kiss deepened, and Eli gave in to Vinn's dominance. The strong fingers at his throat gripped him snugly before sliding into the thick strands of his too-long hair. Vinn tugged a handful, pulling him closer, their hips writhing in tandem. Eli savored the sensation of their cocks rubbing together even through the thick material of denim.

Their tongues tangled, and Eli started thinking again about having Vinn's dick in his mouth. Forced to break the kiss to catch their breath, Vinn rested his forehead against Eli's as puffs of hard-won air blew across his skin.

"Fuck, Eli. I had no idea things would be like this between us. So intense." Vinn's tongue swiped across his lower lip, a sweet, teasing gesture.

"I need more. Have to taste you, Vinn." Eli's hands moved to Vinn's belt, where he unfastened it and lowered the zipper. He parted the material and shoved it out of the way. Nothing could stop him from what he wanted. One more quick push and he released Vinn's cock. His mouth watered as he wrapped his hand around it. Squeezing. Sliding his thumb along the underside from root to tip. The engorged flesh throbbing in his hand undid him. Eli dropped to his knees and let any hesitation or reservations he had fall with him. Nothing mattered now except getting as much of Vinn as he could.

With his lips poised at the moist tip of Vinn's crown, Eli lifted his lashes and looked up at his lover. The man he craved more than anything else. The intensity he found, the clenched jaw, the shuttered eyes, all drove him wild. He leaned forward and engulfed the swollen head.

"Oh hell, Eli."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The sight of Eli on his knees, sucking his dick, threatened every ounce of control Vinn had left. He'd dreamt about his best friend for so long, even punished himself for wishing for this very thing. And now he was seeing it. Feeling it.

Vinn's hips bucked sharply at the intense pleasure ripping through him when Eli's mouth formed a seal around him and sucked hard. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve this man and his touch, but he wasn't giving him back. Eli's urgent hunger rushed them to this point, but that only made Vinn hotter. Desperate need met desperate need, and to hell with anything else.

Another inch of his cock disappeared into Eli's mouth, and Vinn groaned. His balls drew tight, and the instinct to thrust washed over him. Much more of this and they might be waiting a while before he could take what he'd planned.

Fingers roughened from all their outdoor work rubbed over his ball sac, rolling first one then the other as Eli tormented him with more pleasure than one man deserved.

Eli sucked him inside until the tip bumped his throat. Instead of pulling back like Vinn expected, he swallowed against him, allowing an inch more inside. Fuck. Anymore like this and he'd milk him dry. With one hand digging into Vinn's hip, Eli wrapped his free hand around the base of his shaft and squeezed him harder than before. Black spots wavered in Vinn's vision, and he hissed in extreme pleasure.

He buried his fingers in Eli's hair and then pushed and pulled roughly from his mouth. If Eli wanted to play dirty, he could play dirty. He forgot about finesse and tugged tight on Eli's head. The resulting moan around his cock drove Vinn's hips forward to the back of Eli's throat, testing the limit of what he could take.

"See what you've done? You've made me insane. Take me, Eli. I know you can." And he did. Deeper yet, on a long, low moan that vibrated through his shaft and up his spine. He definitely wouldn't last like this. Already the cum moved in his balls, tormenting him.

"That's it, baby. Suck me harder. Make me shoot my cum down your throat." His teeth clenched against the pleasure as Eli worked his shaft. Tongue and teeth worked in tandem to force the inevitable.

"Ahhhhh." The ability to fight it off, to somehow slow things down and subdue the need, disappeared as spurt after spurt of pure ecstasy shot from the end of his dick.

Eli didn't stop; instead he swallowed him down and picked up the pace, working his mouth over the sensitive flesh shoved between his lips. A hard shudder worked its way through Vinn's body as the release pulled at him over and over until, spent, he slumped forward against the wall.

"This wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind." He lifted his arm and rested it under his head so he could look down at Eli. The man grunted and slowly slid off his dick, and damned if the sight of his drained flesh easing from between those plump lips didn't quicken his blood.

"I'm not going anywhere, Vinn. We've got all the time in the world to explore." The rough, husky tone of Eli's voice gave away the extent of need still inside him, and something inside Vinn's chest shifted. He was never going to get enough of this man. Ever.

If he couldn't be balls deep inside Eli for a minute or two, he sure as hell could have the next best thing. He dropped his arms and grabbed Eli at the shoulders, hauling him up the wall but not giving him an inch of his own space. The drag of warm skin against his softened cock sent shivers racing down his spine.

With Eli standing so close, their mouths mere inches apart, Vinn smiled and said, "Kiss me, Eli."

Nice and slow, they moved together. An easy slide of lips across lips before they both opened. Vinn waited, wanting Eli to show him what he needed and he didn't disappoint. Seconds later, Eli's tongue speared into his mouth and swept through the space on a commanding hunt. The taste of his own cum from Eli sparked a possessive streak Vinn didn't know he had. He'd marked Eli as his own, and dammit, he wanted to keep him...forever.

Disbelief shattered the moment between them. Vinn tore his mouth from Eli and stumbled several steps back. Unable to catch his breath, he focused on the familiar pattern of air going in and out of his lungs.

"What's wrong?"

Vinn didn't want to look, knew that if he did, he'd be lost. But he couldn't resist. Eli's simple question had been filled with the most erotic need he'd ever heard in his life. Spoken with a voice that sounded like it had been roughened by sandpaper. He couldn't have been more wicked if he'd tried.

Eli's hair stood out in a tangled mess from Vinn's fingers, and somehow that only accentuated the rough features of his face. A day-old beard that always gave him that bad-boy look women and probably men alike loved. He sure as hell liked it scratching across his skin.

Everyone noticed Eli. Handsome, but not perfect. Dark, but like an old bottle of scotch you've been aching to savor. Even the beads of sweat at his temple made him all the more lickable.

"Want you too much," Vinn panted from lack of oxygen, "Need to slow down."

"Slow is overrated. Need is more exciting. I need this, Vinn. I need you." Eli reached for him, his hand brushing against Vinn's arm.

For Eli's sake, he'd thought to take it easy tonight. Not push him too hard, but every touch, every look, only enflamed everything that had been simmering inside of him for weeks, maybe even months. And just the thought of losing control with Eli made his dick twitch with renewed interest.

He lifted his head and met his gaze directly. "Take off your clothes."

Eli's mouth quirked a fraction, but he either bit back the smile or realized his opportunity to change his mind had just ended. The slight grin he'd almost given gave way to something more heated—sensu-

ous. Luckily, he wasted no time, worked the few buttons of his shirt loose and whisked the offending material from his torso.

More smooth skin, more lean muscle rippled across his shoulders as he pulled the pants from his legs and threw them out of the way. Now naked, he stood proud and let Vinn devour him with a hungry gaze. Without taking his eyes off Eli, Vinn too removed the rest of his clothes and skimmed his hands down his thighs. Almost fully erect once again, he led the way to the back bedroom, stepping aside so Eli could enter first. He pushed Eli forward so he had to catch himself with his hands. Vinn moved in behind him, effectively pinning him in place with his ass at the perfect angle for his perusal. Vinn slid one hand down the sloping curve of Eli's butt, admiring the view. With the lightest touch he could manage, he slid his fingers between Eli's legs and caressed his balls with a soft, feather-like stroke.

"Ohh," Eli whispered, moving his hips to force a stronger connection.

Vinn squeezed his balls shockingly tight until Eli gasped from what Vinn knew all too well were equal parts pleasure and pain. "Tell me, Eli. What would you like me to do?"

Eli's body stilled for a few seconds, and then he smashed his ass against Vinn's erection. "Everything."

That one word slammed into Vinn's consciousness with the force of a two-ton blow. He sure as hell hoped Eli knew what he was getting into. Without giving his friend a chance to change his mind, Vinn grabbed Eli's cheeks and spread them apart. The small puckered hole beckoned, and Vinn blew a puff of air across the heated skin. The shiver that worked up Eli's spine brought a satisfied smile to his face.

But that was definitely not enough. He wanted to watch Eli come completely undone. He licked from Eli's balls to the top of his crease, paying special attention to the sensitive ring of muscles that clenched when he got near.

"Holy hell!" Eli shouted.

That was all the encouragement Vinn needed. He knew that rimming was likely an all-new experience for Eli, and he wanted to make it good. Plus the better he felt, the more likely he'd relax and later open for his cock. Vinn stabbed his tongue into the tiny hole, and Eli's hips jerked in his hands. He pulled back and waited for Eli to ask him to stop. When that didn't happen, he applied more pressure to the area with his lips and tongue in a sucking and fucking motion guaranteed to make him feel good.

Eli pushed his hips back against the thrust, seeking more, and Vinn stilled for a moment for a secret smile. With the opening relaxed, he reached around and fisted Eli's cock. He used a nice firm squeeze meant to stimulate and control at the same time. The sensation of touching velvet skin over hard steel never failed to excite him, and the pre-cum he found at the tip pleased him immensely.

With every new groan and moan from Eli, Vinn worked his shaft harder. The friction he created with his hand and his mouth drove Eli to a near frenzy. Legs shook, hips jerked, and deep-throated cries filled the air. It wouldn't take much more to get Eli off, but Vinn wasn't quite ready for that yet. With the moisture from his mouth glistening at Eli's opening, Vinn eased a single finger past the clenching muscles.

Vinn worked the tight channel with slow and steady movements until Eli started to relax. Ready to prepare him further, he started to work a second finger along the first, and Eli tensed all over again.

"Easy. Try to relax and trust me. I have nothing but pleasure in store for you." Vinn pumped Eli's stiff dick a few more times until Eli began to relax again, and his ass opened like a dream. To enhance his lover's pleasure, Vinn sought Eli's prostate and stroked over the sensitive spot. A guttural groan rumbled from Eli, and Vinn quickened his pace. Eli teetered on the verge of a climax, and Vinn wanted to blow his mind. Wanted to give him so much pleasure, express how much he meant—and hopefully he'd be bound to him forever.

"Oh, fuck. Gonna come," Eli ground out as his hips slammed onto Vinn's fingers fucking his ass.

The eager response from Eli tightened every muscle in Vinn's body, and his head and cock ached with the need to be sheathed inside Eli's clenching hole. Now. He ground his teeth against the urge to remove his fingers and thrust into Eli as is. No lube, no condom, just desperate desire driving them both to climax.

Vinn dragged across Eli's prostate one last time, and the warm fluid of Eli's release splashed onto his hand with each rough jerk of his hips. Eli's ass clenched his fingers with a powerful force that made Vinn a little lightheaded just thinking about his cock being wedged inside him.

When he quit jerking, Vinn leaned across his back and licked his spine from neck to ass. Finding each other like this was the best gift he'd ever received. He shifted to reach for the bottle of lube and condom sitting on the nightstand. Without removing his fingers, he uncapped the bottle and drizzled it along Eli's crease until the thick

liquid coated the area, and he used his established momentum for the last of the preparation. Vinn dropped the bottle and placed the edge of the condom wrapper in his mouth, ripped with an impatient jerk and rolled the freed rubber down his now-straining shaft.

He placed the flared crown against Eli's relaxed backside and pushed his way inside with one smooth, steady stroke. Buried balls deep, he curled around Eli and placed his forehead on the man's spine.

"Jesus, Eli. So tight and warm. Never felt so good." He gulped for air but couldn't find enough breath to say more.

Eli's soft moans and eager movements urged Vinn into a maelstrom of short, fast digs alternated with deep, slow strokes. The pattern worked his gland like a musical instrument. Vinn's spine tingled at the base as his own climax became imminent.

"Are you ready? I can't hold back much longer." Vinn grabbed around Eli's waist and paused with just the tip remaining in Eli's channel.

"Oh, God no. Don't hold back. I'm beyond ready." Eli's head dropped forward, and Vinn rammed inside him, balls deep.

Stroke after stroke, the thrusts built. He buried his dick inside him with wild and furious thrusts as Eli begged for more. Deep wracking shudders raced over him as he lost it completely. The tightening of Eli around his cock milked him not just of his climax, but his emotions of well. "Ahhh!" he shouted, the sound billowing around them.

Spurt after spurt, he filled the condom and rode Eli harder. One day soon, there would be no barrier, and Eli would feel the hard pulses of his release as he made a permanent claim over him. With his soul reaching out for Eli, he realized the man already belonged to him.

With the last of his release spent, he sank slowly against Eli's chest. They both fought to breathe, but more importantly, Vinn fought to make sense of how quickly things had changed between them. Being with Eli made him want to become a better man. To stop running from anything beyond one or two nights and settle down. Together they could do anything. Eli had always made him hopeful for the forbidden, and now he'd crashed through the door, and one way or another, he couldn't take it back.

"I love you, Eli." The words slipped out before he could stop himself, and Eli stiffened underneath him. Too exhausted to deal with his mistake, Vinn slipped from Eli's body and moved to the bathroom. Quickly he discarded the used condom and cleaned up at the sink. With the warm water running, he soaked a cloth for Eli and made the two steps back to the bed where Eli still lay face down, not moving.

His throat thick with emotion, Vinn didn't even bother trying to talk. He did his best to clean Eli up and slid into the bed next to him. In the dark, he listened to Eli's breathing return to normal and ease into the easy cadence of a man nearly asleep. Tomorrow after the events would be soon enough to discuss his mistake.

Vinn burrowed into the pillow with Eli's warmth radiating through him. The night settled and the campground grew quiet as he eased toward sleep. Darkness crept over him, and he hovered on the edge of succumbing to the pull on his body.

Eli shifted next to him, rolling closer. "You only surprised me. I didn't expect to feel this way, but even I can't deny the connection between us."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sometime in the darkness of the night, Eli had come to accept the feelings that Vinn expressed as well as the burgeoning emotions of his own he'd tried to deny. Maybe he was out of his mind and needed counseling, but loving someone, even if he was your best friend and the same sex, couldn't be wrong.

He'd known for years of Vinn's orientation, and not once had it bothered him. So why should his own transition be any different? Hadn't he always believed you loved who you loved no matter what? He pushed his fingers through his hair and turned around.

The horizon drew his gaze as he stared at the mountains in the distance. After the rodeo events of the day got postponed until tomorrow, Vinn had disappeared with a couple of the locals to do who knows what. Apparently, the property auction was to take place today, and once that was complete, they could get on with the scheduled bull riding. And not soon enough for him. Left alone with his thoughts most of the day, he was full of pent-up energy and emotions he was dying to burn.

Vinn's declaration haunted him through the day as those three tiny words threw him for a loop, again and again. Somewhere along the way, he'd jumped onto the carousel, and he needed the hell off. Hopefully stepping into the arena would help. Even if the ride had to wait, the familiarity of it all always had a way of soothing his soul.

He ducked through the main barn and followed the concrete walk into the big ring. Simply standing on the sidelines with no one around, Eli could picture everything as it would happen. The girls on horseback presenting colors in front of a packed crowd, kids munching on popcorn and peanuts as they waited for the good stuff to start, and the anxious movements of a bull tired of standing in the chute.

Rodeo life was simple. Sure, there were schedules and competition with other cowboys and even a lot of aches, bruises, and injuries, but it was still simple. Show up, ride the bull, nurse your wounds, count your winnings, and then show up at the next event to do it all over again. Relationships, on the other hand...

Maybe he had made a mistake.

"There you are. I've been looking everywhere for you." Vinn's voice in the silence caught him by surprise.

He felt like he'd just been busted for having second thoughts. Not that Vinn had any idea what he'd been thinking moments ago.

"I was feeling restless, so I'd thought I'd come in here again and think about things." He sucked at hiding anything from Vinn, but why burden him with this now? They had plenty of time to get used to this relationship or whatever you called it. He sure as hell didn't know.

"That sounds kind of ominous." He said it with a smile on his face; although the lines around his eyes made it clear he worried too.

"Nah, nothing so dramatic. It's just been a long day, and I'm disappointed we didn't get to ride. I'm suddenly feeling kind of anxious to get back on the road and keep things moving." He lifted his hat and pushed the hair out of his eyes before slamming it back down. He didn't like this uncertainty about his future. The lack of money, the mixed emotions, and no clear goal to work for anymore.

"I thought you liked it here. I didn't think you'd mind hanging out here awhile and enjoy the laidback atmosphere."

Eli shrugged. "I don't know. It's a cool enough place, but I need to keep busy. To not worry."

"Eli." Vinn's arm came around his waist and tugged him closer. "Don't try to second-guess what's going on."

"I'm hungry. Are you hungry?" Eli pulled away from him. "I can cook tonight. Some burgers or maybe some chili."

"Eli, stop. Relax. You're wound too tight. Let's go back to camp and sit down. We'll grab some beers and fix up some dinner. Besides, I have some news to share." The smug grin on his face made Eli's throat tighten. He wasn't sure he wanted to know. That look scared the shit out of him.

"What news?" He held his breath.

"I met with the owners of this place and then went to the auction today. Despite the crowd they managed to pull in for the weekend, not too many people seemed interested in the property. A couple of locals and that's about it." Vinn scuffed his boot in the dirt. "There was a lot of discussion about the fix-up needed around here, but I think the place has a lot of potential."

Eli couldn't hide his confusion. "Well, yeah, but I don't get it. Why are you so interested in whoever's going to buy the place? By midnight tomorrow, we'll be pulling out and heading for the next arena. The next winning ride."

"Well, that has to do with the news I was referring to." Vinn's eyes flashed with humor and hope before he cracked a huge grin. "Okay, okay, I can't hold it another second longer. I just bought this place," he blurted. "I put a bid in at the auction, and it was accepted. I've already been to the bank, made my down payment, and the closing is in about thirty days."

Eli stared back at Vinn while he tried to comprehend what he'd said. How? What? When? Why? The pit in his stomach grew. He tried not to jump to conclusions, but what the fuck?

"Come again?" He didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah, I know. It's a bit shocking, but I did it. I saw how much you admired the place, thought about what the future could hold, how I feel about you. Shit, how we feel about each other, and I decided what the hell. This is the perfect place for us."

For us. Eli heard nothing after that. Vinn's mouth still moved, but he didn't have a clue what he said. Blood rushed to his head, and the angry roar in his ears drowned out all sound. He stumbled a few steps away from Vinn.

"Wait." Vinn tried to grab his arm, but Eli jerked out of his reach.

"Don't." He didn't want to hear anymore. A sudden sense of weird déjà vu smacked him upside the head. Like his ex-fiancée, Vinn had taken it upon himself to make a decision that affected his whole

life without even bothering to inform him until after he'd made a deal. She'd waited until the property was gone, cleaned out their joint account and run off with another man, effectively crushing his dream of settling down anytime soon.

Vinn wasn't her, but the results felt eerily close. He'd pulled the rug out from under him when he wasn't looking and seemed to expect him to go along with it. He'd bought a fucking rodeo and decided they would stay here. Without a goddamn word in advance.

Eli forced himself to put one foot in front of the other in the direction of camp. He had to get away; he didn't need this kind of bullshit.

"Eli, wait. Where are you going? You haven't let me finish. There's a helluva lot more to say."

"Save it. I'm not interested in hearing about the decisions you made without me." He whirled back around. "This is my life too, you know, and I've had it up to here with people making decisions for me." He raised his hand over his head to indicate just how far he'd had it with this crap.

He stalked out of the arena and through the parking lot in a direct beeline for the campground and his meager belongings. If Vinn wanted to stay here, he could do it on his own. He'd grab his gear and be out of town before nightfall. There were plenty of other rodeos he could ride in, and then, once he got back on his feet financially, he'd come up with a plan of his own for his future.

At the camper, he jerked the door open and hurried inside before Vinn caught up to him. Eli grabbed for his duffel behind the passenger seat. He wouldn't need much for now, and what he didn't have he'd buy soon enough. There were people on the circuit he knew well enough who'd spare him a place to lay a sleeping bag or give him a hitch to the next event. Reaching into the lone cabinet containing his belongings, he grabbed a handful of jeans, shirts, socks and underwear, stuffing them in the bag.

Less than a minute later, he found himself sweeping the area for anything he'd left behind. He'd never been one for collecting crap on the road he didn't need. The less you carried with you, the less to worry about, and that motto meant more now than ever.

The door crashed open, and Vinn barreled in. The harsh planes of his jaw twisted in anger. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Vinn snarled.

They stared at each other for a long moment, rage seething from both of them. Unsure of where he'd gone wrong, Eli wanted nothing

more than to escape. Maybe he hadn't taken the time to get over one betrayal before jumping into the sizzling frying pan of fucking your best friend.

"I'm getting the hell out of here," he finally grated out. He moved to the door, and Vinn blocked him. "Now is not the time for this, Vinn. Get the hell out of my way before things get worse."

"Worse. They get worse?" He paused for an answer, but Eli wasn't answering. "Where are you going?"

"I'll figure it out on the way. The next event, maybe. So just move, and maybe I won't have to kick your ass."

So much anger rumbled in his stomach at the moment, he wasn't sure what he would do if he didn't get away. He couldn't even look at Vinn right now. Silence surrounded them. He knew Vinn fought with the urge to stop him, to force him to talk, just as he knew it wouldn't work. They'd been friends too long not to understand when the other had reached a limit. And his limit was fried.

Finally, Vinn moved to the side, and Eli tore through the door. The sun had slipped behind the mountains on its nightly descent, but there was enough light left for him to see a couple of trucks heading toward the exit. The cool air of another summer night had begun to settle around the grounds, but Eli felt none of it. All he focused on was the sick chill of betrayal in his gut.

With that weighing down his mind, he ran several yards and waved down one of the vehicles heading out. When the cowboy agreed to give him a ride, Eli threw his duffel in the rear truck bed and hopped into the passenger seat. He stared down the front gate despite the sensation of being watched. He wouldn't turn around. He couldn't face Vinn again.

CHAPTER NINE

A short twenty minutes later, his ride pulled into a diner. As much as he wanted to put distance between him and the rodeo behind him, he couldn't argue with someone giving him free transportation. Reluctantly, he unstrapped his seatbelt and hopped out of the truck himself.

As best as he could tell they'd stopped in the nearest town and what was probably the only place to eat around. No fast food restaurants or truck stops here. He surveyed the area around the diner and found only a closed-for-the-day auto mechanic, a florist, a mom-and-pop hardware store and the tiniest post office he'd ever seen. Despite the lack of amenities in the small town center, it wasn't rundown. The diner and the florist had window boxes full of flowers in bloom and cascading vines. All of the buildings sported fresh coats of paint, and all in all, it looked charming.

He pushed his way through the restaurant door and tiny chimes announced his arrival. The waitress popped up from the table she was sitting at.

"Have a seat wherever you'd like, and I'll be with you in a minute." The petite redhead scurried behind the counter and grabbed a coffee cup and the pot of steaming dark brew. Needing a moment to himself, Eli slid into the nearest booth and let the guy giving him a ride join some friends he seemed to know. Before his ass hit the seat, the waitress appeared behind him.

"Coffee?"

"Yes, that'd be great."

She poured out a cup and slid it in front of him. "Would you like a menu?"

"Can you make a BLT? I could really go for one of those." He smiled at her, hoping to get what he wanted.

"Sure, sugar, I'll go place that order for you now." She moved behind the counter, scribbled a note on her pad and stuck it on the spindle in the window.

That settled, his attention wandered around the room. Only a handful of the booths were occupied, including the one right behind him. He'd noticed the old-timers when he came in, and now they were so engaged in their conversation he doubted they even noticed him.

Eli lifted the coffee cup to his lips and sipped at the heavenly dark liquid guaranteed to make him feel better. Now that he'd settled down, the anger he'd felt earlier sat on the back of his tongue like a bitter pill. His behavior may have been extreme, but damn, he didn't enjoy feeling like he'd been manipulated.

"Did you hear about the rodeo being sold?" The waitress had delivered the food to the table behind him, and her question to the gentlemen in the booth perked Eli up.

"Yeah, heard a couple of cowboys from the national circuit are going to be taking it over. Hope they haven't bitten off more than they can chew. That place needs a lot of work. Not to mention they probably have no idea how much the town depends on the rodeo being a success."

"Yeah," the waitress agreed. "I'm just relieved that someone wanted to buy it. For a while there, I was worried. Business has slacked off around here, and before long I'd have been without a job."

Eli felt a little guilty for listening in to their conversation, but who could resist? Vinn had decided to buy a small-town rodeo, and apparently, this place relied on the success of what was likely a big source of revenue for many of the businesses.

"Aww, Melissa, you don't have to worry about your job. You know how everyone is around here. We're here to take care of each other."

"That's really sweet of you to say that, Bill, but I'd much rather have a job and pay my own way. But the idea of moving away from here to make a living is not a good thought."

Overhearing the conversation behind him reminded Eli a lot of the community on the rodeo circuit. Sure, the cowboys were pretty damn competitive, but they were also a nice, close-knit group willing to throw in a helping hand whenever it was needed. That sense of closeness was what it was all about.

The kind of thing he had with Vinn...

Eli placed his cup on the table and scrubbed his hands across his face.

Fuck.

What now? Just throw away years of friendship and possibly more over this? There wasn't a person alive he knew better than Vinn, and no matter what he'd done on his own, Eli knew Vinn hadn't meant to be sneaky or manipulative. Vinn had listened to him over the years, constantly bemoaning the fact that he wanted to settle down. To lay down roots somewhere special and make the kind of home he'd always dreamed of.

He glanced around the diner again, taking in the clean and quaint interior. The flowers on the tables, the few patrons laughing and smiling as they ate, and even the waitress who worried about her job, but going out of her way to make sure everyone around her was well taken care of. If this was typical of the rest of the town, then it truly would be an excellent place to call home.

Eli fished his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans and threw a ten-dollar bill on the table. It was more than enough to cover the sandwich and coffee, and he sprang from the booth. Now that he realized what an idiot he'd been, he had to get back. *Now.*

Lost in his thoughts of how to work things out with Vinn, he didn't pay much attention to where he was going. Getting out the door and finding a way back out to the Hayden rodeo became his priority, and nothing else mattered. First, he needed to retrieve his bag before he could start looking for a ride, but one way or another, he was going back tonight if he had to hoof it. Wouldn't be the first time.

Outside he jammed his hat onto his head, looked to the left in the direction of the truck he'd arrived in, and crashed face first into

a hard, muscular chest. Stunned, he tumbled back and headed south until strong hands gripped his arms and caught him from falling. Jesus, he'd become a klutz.

"Whoa there, cowboy. What's your rush?"

What the—? Even without looking, he knew that voice. With the assistance of the grip on his bicep, Eli righted himself, stood to his full height, and stared square into the sizzling amber gaze of Vinn.

"What are you doing here?" Eli breathed deep, trying to recover from the sucker punch of running into his lover.

Vinn's expression clenched, and Eli regretted the harsh tone of his words. He didn't mean to sound pissed off, but apparently some of the anger from earlier still lingered despite the decision he'd come to.

"I came to find you. You don't get to run away that easy. At least not until we talk about what happened. We've been friends too long to act like this. If you have an issue being my lover that's one thing, but we aren't fucking up this friendship because of it. So, I came to haul your ass back if that's what I have to do. If you still want to leave after that then you can take your camper. I'm not going to be needing it since the property came with a small farmhouse and plenty of bunks in the barn." Power and determination vibrated from Vinn when he finally stopped talking and took a breath. Tall and broad had nothing on him. The man oozed sex, and anyone who knew him didn't think gay meant weak by any means.

"Just that simple, huh?" He'd already made up his mind, but that didn't mean they didn't need to talk about it.

"Well, hell, Eli what do you want?" Vinn shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans and blew out a harsh breath. "It is fucking simple. I want it all. The relationship, the rodeo, the house, all of it. With you. But if you aren't ready for all that, it's fine. We'll slow things down and see how it goes. We can still work the rodeo together. I put your name on everything as a partner so that after the initial investment is recouped, we split everything 50/50. I knew you'd accept nothing less and —"

"—and I owe you an apology. And this." Eli moved a step closer to Vinn and pressed his lips to the stunned man in front of him. The wild heat of Vinn's mouth threatened to make him crazy, but somehow he managed to control himself and pulled away after a chaste kiss. Still, inside his body, lust raged and need demanded so much more. Public be damned.

"I don't know how to make sense of this, Vinn. Being with you has been insane and wonderful and out of control. I got scared." Ad-

mitting that pained him, but there was no better moment than now for the truth.

"You know, I think that's the sexiest thing you've ever said. Now my dick's hard."

Eli's mouth dropped open before he slammed it back shut. "I cannot believe you just said that when I'm trying to be serious here and make up for running out on you like a jackass."

"Look, Eli. I appreciate the apology, but I'm not blameless here. I should have talked to you about this crazy idea first. Although you gotta admit it's a damn fine plan. And as far as us goes, I'm willing to let that play out at its own pace. If you need time or space, take it. If you just wanna get used to fucking a man, I'm good with that too."

Eli resisted the childish urge to stick his tongue out at Vinn. Didn't matter if he was right or not. "Anyone ever tell you how incorrigible you are?"

"Every damn day." That irresistible wicked smile flashed across Vinn's face, and Eli's stomach clenched.

Even as friends, he'd never been able to say no to him for long, and now as lovers, he suspected Vinn would lead him around by his dick, and he'd fucking let him. You don't resist what you love for long.

"Then let's go home. But I'm driving. I aim to pretend I'm in control of something round here. Where'd you get this truck anyhow?" The big black monster looked like the perfect work truck to him.

"Hey, cowboy!"

Eli turned at the feminine voice calling behind him to find the waitress headed his way with a to go box.

"You forgot your dinner." She held out a box to him, and he stared at her dumbfounded, wondering how long she'd been standing there listening to their conversation.

As if reading his mind, she placed the food in his outstretched hand and winked. "Welcome to Chicory." Before he could say a word, she rotated on those pristine white tennis shoes of hers and disappeared back inside the diner.

"What was that all about?" Vinn asked while he climbed into the passenger side of the truck. "Twenty minutes alone and you've already got a townie sweet on you?"

He knew Vinn was yanking his chain, but the knowing wink and welcome stunned him. Maybe, just maybe this place would accept them as the new owners, and if things worked out like he hoped, they'd accept them as more than just friends. He didn't mind being discreet, but secrets never lasted forever.

"The only thing sweet about me is..." Eli tried to think of something. "Hell, there ain't nothing sweet about me. I'm just a stubborn old cowboy looking to get lucky tonight and tomorrow and the next day after that." He turned the key and started the engine, pausing before putting it in gear when Vinn touched his leg.

"Well then you'd better get us home quick, 'cause I got a need to break a stubborn cowboy until he begs for more." The suggestive leer on Vinn's face sent a hard shudder down Eli's spine.

Eli pulled the truck onto the road and reveled in the quickening of his pulse and the thickening of his cock. One little town in the Tennessee mountains, and his best friend rocked his world.

And to think it all started with a Dear John letter...

Biography

Eve Cassidy was born and raised in the South, but her adventurous spirit has led her to various places around the world thanks to her time in the military. That experience has given her an eye-opening education about a variety of cultures and the people within them, and as a result, she's discovered an interest in the dark and erotic that now weaves its way into her stories.

Now a full-time writer, she has returned to her small hometown in the South, where she spends her days in front of a computer writing steamy and often kinky adventures she hopes readers will enjoy as much as she does.

Other Books by Eve Cassidy

Kissing Cowboys
Cowboy Crush