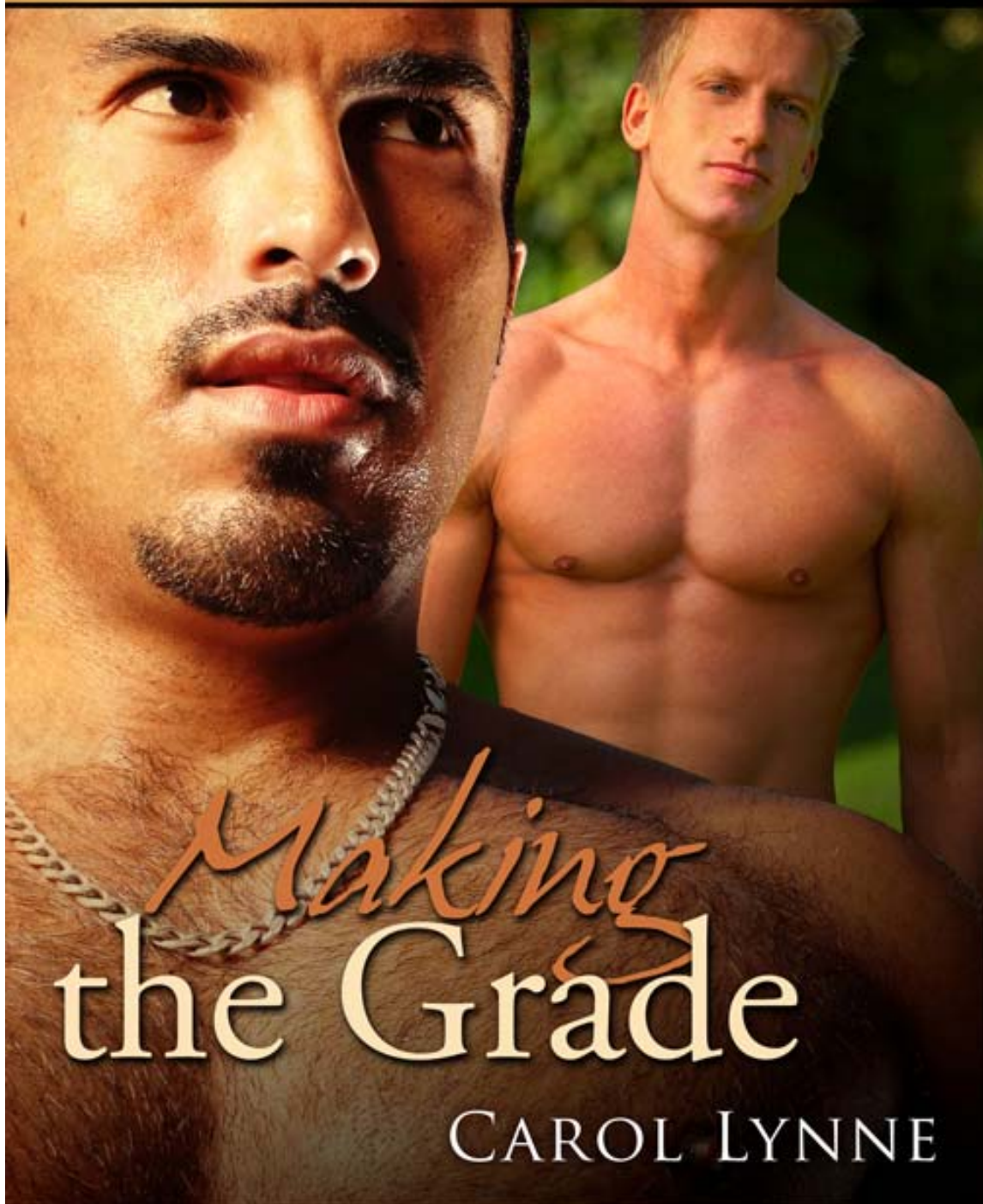




CATTLE VALLEY



Making the Grade

CAROL LYNNE

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Making the Grade

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Cattle Valley

MAKING THE GRADE

Carol Lynne

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Chapter One

Eli Sanchez smoothed the wrinkles from his morning newspaper and took a sip of coffee. He still didn't understand why the paperboy insisted on smashing the papers down after he rolled them. How many times had Eli discussed the matter with him? He shook his head. Once again he was letting his idiosyncrasies get the better of him.

Sure he was a man who liked everything done just so, but that was his early military training kicking in. Allowing the training he'd hated to ruin his mood over stupid creases in his newspaper was just plain ridiculous.

Shoving the paper aside, Eli took a bite of the bagel with low fat cream cheese he'd prepared earlier and thought about the day ahead. Recently, Eli had found himself having to think about the upcoming weekend in order to get through each day in the classroom. It wasn't that he had anything to do on the weekend, hell, he usually sat home grading papers, but at least he didn't have to share space with Kenny Trenton.

With any luck, the school's reconstruction would finally be complete by the end of the year and he'd be back in his old classroom after the Christmas break. Eli sighed. The day couldn't come soon enough. If he had to yell at Kenny one more time for hovering over him like he was some old man who needed looked after, he'd scream.

Sure he was seventeen years older than the handsome sonofabitch, but he sure as hell wasn't an old man. Eli stood and carried his coffee cup and half-eaten bagel to the trash. After scrubbing his dishes clean and placing them into the dishwasher, he retrieved his insulated mug from the cupboard and poured the remainder of the coffee into it. *Perfect*. He always managed to make just the right amount of coffee. No sense wasting it and he didn't care for reheated coffee.

Before leaving the kitchen, Eli ran a fresh dishcloth over the countertops and table before rinsing the cloth and hanging it to dry in the laundry room. After a quick glance around, he turned out the light and grabbed his travel mug.

Perhaps he'd get lucky and Kenny would be busy watching football films in his office in preparation for the big game on Friday night. Mentally crossing his fingers, Eli shouldered his well-worn messenger bag and headed out the door.

* * * *

"Hey, you playing hookie today?"

Kenny opened his eyes and glanced at the clock. "Shit."

Throwing back the covers, Kenny jumped out of bed and headed to the bathroom. "I must've hit the off button instead of the snooze. Throw me a pair of underwear and some sweats out that drawer, will ya?"

Kenny assessed his appearance in the mirror. Other than a slight case of bedhead his hair looked clean enough. He loaded his toothbrush and stuck it in his mouth before grabbing for the deodorant. Going without a shower was one thing, but he doubted Eli would appreciate him stinking up the health room.

Luke appeared in the doorway with a crooked grin on his face. He tossed Kenny's clean clothes to the counter before holding up the pair of black mesh underwear he'd been saving for a special occasion.

"Nice underwear, dude."

Kenny spat the toothpaste into the sink and turned on the faucet. "I asked you to grab a pair of underwear not paw through my stuff. I happen to know for a fact those were in the back of the drawer underneath everything else."

Shaking his head, Luke laughed. "Sorry. They just surprised me is all. You get those for Eli?"

"Fuck off," Kenny said, reaching for his clothes. He started to pull down his underwear but stopped and stared at his long-time friend. "You mind?"

"No, not at all. Go ahead," Luke answered.

"Get out. Go make yourself useful and grab me a bottle of orange juice and a couple of pieces of toast."

With a roll of his eyes, Luke turned and headed out of the room. "A please would be nice."

"Please?" Kenny asked with a growl in his voice. He loved Luke like a brother, but it was too damn early in the morning to deal with a smartass. After adjusting himself to ride comfortably inside his briefs, Kenny pulled on his sweats and reached for his cordless electric razor.

As he shaved, he took a few moments to inspect his upper body. He'd been working out a lot more lately trying to get rid of the sexual energy caused by his constant proximity to Eli. Every time the two of them were left alone in the dual-purpose classroom, Eli acted like he was about to jump out of his skin. In an effort to smooth the situation, Kenny had started disappearing to the weight room during his planning periods.

The few times he'd stuck around, Eli would jump up and start cleaning like his damn pants were on fire. Although he wouldn't admit it, Kenny knew Eli still had trouble with his lungs. He'd caught him on more than one occasion pale and puffing on his little breather thingy. The fire, it seemed, had done more permanent damage to Eli than the school. Of course Eli refused Kenny's help at every turn. Damn that man. Eli was as stubborn now as he'd been when Kenny had been in his class years earlier.

Kenny wasn't even sure the man slept. Eli was always the first teacher at school and the last to leave. How many times had Kenny arrived back at the school after an away game to find the lights in the health room still on and Eli inside working away? It was one thing when he tutored Logan, but as far as Kenny knew, Eli hadn't worked with anyone since.

With the razor back on its charger, Kenny grabbed a faded red Cattle Valley Phys. Ed Dept. T-shirt out of the drawer and walked towards the kitchen. He groaned as he stepped into the living room. "We've gotta clean house soon or we're going to run out of glasses."

Chuckling, Luke handed Kenny a bottle of orange juice and two slices of toast. "I'll try to do some of it before my shift starts. Although I'm not picking up your dirty clothes."

Kenny stuck the bottle into the side pocket of his gym bag. "Just kick them towards my bedroom if you want." He walked out of the house before Luke could give him shit. He'd never been big on cleaning but with two people in the house, the piles seemed to add up faster than he could get to them.

By the time he climbed into his white Jeep Wrangler, Kenny was whistling a song one of his dads used to sing to him every morning. It was the only time of day Kenny had Jefferson Trenton's full attention and he used to soak it up like a sponge.

He waved to Leo as he drove by the fire station and headed towards the small school. With only three hundred and six kids in Cattle Valley and the surrounding countryside, the one building managed to teach kindergarten through twelfth grade. The small numbers meant he had to use freshman players on the varsity team and they had no junior varsity football team. Their winning record despite their size was only one of the reasons they were

considered every other town's biggest rival. Of course the other had to do with the parents of the players instead of the young men themselves, but his guys had heart and it showed in the way they held their heads high.

Kenny pulled into the parking lot and drove around back to his spot behind the gym. A quick glance at his watch told him he was exactly twenty-seven minutes late. "Not bad."

Shouldering his gym bag, he used his key to get in through the back door. Although he was supposed to be at the school at seven-forty-five, his first class didn't start until second period. Kenny grinned. It hadn't always been that way, but Principal Marcia Quigley liked him, she always had. It was probably all that time he'd spent in her office as a kid. Regardless, after being late almost daily, Principal Quigley had eventually decided perhaps first period should be an hour set aside for Kenny to get the gymnasium in order.

He unlocked the equipment room and tossed his bag inside, remembering at the last second to grab his bottle of juice. Strolling through the gym he spotted a candy bar wrapper and stopped to pick it up. If he were a hardass he would pin it to the bulletin board like his coach had done when he was in school, but Kenny couldn't bring himself to embarrass someone like that, especially because that someone was him. Yeah, he had a sweet tooth. He just needed to remember to pick up after himself.

Leaving the gym, he dropped the wrapper and his empty bottle of juice in the trash before peeking through the window on the classroom door. He stood there for several moments watching the one man he'd always wanted. Eli was an incredible teacher and his students loved him. The amount of time he spent on his lesson plans was obvious by the way he taught. It was always new, God forbid Eli use the same lesson plans from the previous year.

Even as he watched, Eli clapped his hands and pointed towards another student who seemed happy to give the answer to whatever question Eli had asked. Shifting his attention to the students, Kenny saw dreamy-eyed faces that were all too familiar. Kids had been having crushes on Mr. Sanchez since Kenny was in school. Kenny had definitely been one of them. His inappropriate feelings for his sexy teacher went a long way in convincing him he was gay.

As if he felt Kenny watching, Eli stopped talking and turned. Those dark brown eyes met Kenny's and suddenly he found it hard to breathe. *Fuck*. It happened every time. One

moment he was the macho football coach then Eli would look at him and he'd turn into a pile of goo.

Eli said something to his students, who laughed, and walked to the door. "Do you need something?"

Quick, think, asshole. "Uhhh, yeah, I was wondering if you wanted me to save you a ticket for homecoming."

Eli reached up to scratch at his goatee. The action drew a soft sigh from Kenny but not for the reason Eli thought. He quickly jerked his scarred hand down and stuffed it in his pocket. "I thought homecoming wasn't for two weeks."

"Right." *Shit.* "Uhhh, yeah but the tickets are already on sale and going fast."

"Oh, okay, sure." Eli looked at Kenny like he was crazy. "Is that all?"

"Yeah." Kenny took a step back. "Sorry to have interrupted."

"No problem. I'll, uh, catch you later to give you money for the ticket."

"No need. It's on me," Kenny answered before walking away as fast as his sneakered feet would take him.

"Jesus Christ, Kenny. When're you gonna grow up and just ask the man out?" Kenny mumbled to himself as he entered the gym.

Homecoming? Seriously? Sure he'd never been the sharpest tack in the box, but man!

Shuffling into the equipment room, Kenny's attention was averted by his ringing gym bag. He grabbed up the bag and pulled out his phone. "Hello?"

"Hey," Luke answered. "Your mom wants you to drop by the house before practice today."

"So why'd she call you?"

"I don't know. Sorry, but your mom's always been a flake. She said she didn't want to disturb you at work."

Yeah, that sounded like his mom. "Of course she didn't mind having *you* bother me at work."

Luke laughed. "Hey, she's your mother."

"Yeah. I really won the lottery with that one. Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow when you get off shift."

"Later, dude."

Kenny tossed the phone back into his bag. He only had ten minutes before second period. It was time to prepare himself for twenty screaming elementary students. He grabbed the canvas bag full of rubber balls, deciding it was going to be a dodgeball kind of day.

* * * *

Kenny pulled into his parents' driveway and shut off the engine. He was glad he only had thirty minutes before practice. Hopefully whatever chore his mom had for him wouldn't take long.

Lisa Trenton met him at the front door. Kenny had learned at a very young age to never walk into the house without ringing the bell. "Hi, dear," Lisa greeted.

"Hey, mom." He stepped inside and waited. "I see Dad's car outside. Where's Da?"

"Martin's fishing and Jefferson is in his woodshop." Lisa led Kenny into the kitchen. "I hope you don't mind but my disposal is acting up so I bought a new one. Would you mind installing it?"

"No, but I have to be at practice by four," Kenny said as his mom breezed back out of the kitchen.

What was the use of having two husbands if his mother couldn't get one of them to help her with simple chores? It had always been the same, the three of them sailed through life doing what they wanted without a care as to anyone around them.

He sat on the floor and started cleaning out the junk from under the sink. Would it have been a big deal for someone to at least have the area prepared for him? Yeah. Wouldn't want to cut into Da's fishing or Dad's damn birdhouses.

"Hey, Mom, can you at least get me the toolbox from the garage?" he shouted.

Lisa came back into the room. "It's heavy."

With a groan, Kenny stood. "Fine, but if I don't have time to finish the job, your sink will be out of commission until Saturday when I can get back over here."

"Are you snapping at me?" his mom asked, hand on her hip.

Kenny rubbed his forehead. The last thing he needed was a lecture from one of his fathers about the proper way to treat his mother. "No. Sorry. It's been a bad day."

"Well don't take it out on me. We rarely even see you around here anymore. The least you can do is help me out when I ask, without bitching about it."

"Yes, Mother." Kenny walked outside to the detached garage. Why didn't his parents stop to wonder why he didn't come around much? Hell, it was a shame to say but he didn't really like them enough to sit and visit and the only reason they asked him over was because they needed something done.

"Hey, Dad," he greeted Jefferson Trenton.

"Son," Jefferson acknowledged without looking up from his current project.

"Just came in to get the toolbox."

"It's over there where it's always been."

Kenny spotted the box and picked it up. Before he could make it out of the garage, his dad finally glanced up. "What's your mom doing?"

Kenny shrugged. "I don't know."

Jefferson's eyes narrowed. "Any sign of dinner?"

"Nope, not that I could see." Kenny walked out of the garage without waiting for further questions. A *how're you doing* would have been nice, but it was typical. The only reason he came over at all was in the hopes that maybe someday they would take an interest in him and his life. Jefferson, Lisa and Martin weren't bad people. They just should've never had a child.

By the time he got the old disposal off he had less than five minutes until the start of practice. Shit. If he left now he'd be forced to return to his parents' house on Saturday, further subjecting himself to their rejection.

He pulled his phone out of his pocket and called the one person he could count on to still be at the school.

"Hello?" Eli answered.

"Hi, it's Kenny. I was wondering if you would do me a huge favour? I'm over at my folks' place installing a new disposal and it looks like I'm going to be about fifteen minutes late for practice. Would you mind running over to the locker room and telling the guys to just go on out to the field and toss the ball around until I get there?"

"Uhhh, okay. Do I need to watch them or anything?" Eli asked.

"Well, technically, they're supposed to have an adult on the field with them at all times, but if you're busy..."

"No, that's okay. I'll just take my papers out there with me."

"Thanks. I'll get there as soon as I can."

"No problem."

Eli hung up and Kenny stared at the phone for several moments before putting it back in his pocket. After the fool he'd made of himself earlier in the day, it was a wonder Eli was willing to talk to him, let alone do him a favour.

"Are you done yet?" Lisa asked from the adjoining living room.

"Almost," he answered picking up the new disposal.

"I need to start dinner for your fathers."

"I know. I'm going as fast as I can." Kenny blinked away the tears before they had a chance to fall. No. He would not cry over a relationship that had never been there in the first place.

* * * *

With his back against the one and only shade tree close to the football field, Eli ignored the essays in his lap and watched the kids practice. There was a time when he would've enjoyed being right out there with them. He'd played quite a bit of football in his younger days, but not much since he hit thirty.

He stared down at his fucked up hand. The grandstand collapse had taken more than two of his fingers. It had taken some of his self-confidence as well.

Movement off to his left caught his attention. He turned his head and watched as Kenny ran towards the field. It was an unusually warm day for the first of October, and Kenny was dressed appropriately in a pair of shorts and a muscle shirt. Eli managed to keep his groan silent, but he felt it all the way to his bones. Unlike most people, Kenny seemed to get better looking every year. Damn. He quickly swallowed the spit that threatened to escape as he shyly drooled over the flexing muscles.

Kenny stopped and talked to Chase Hughs, his quarterback and the team's captain. Chase nodded and soon had the rest of the players split into groups, going over basic drills. Eli couldn't get over how much Chase reminded him of Kenny in high school; born leaders, both of them.

"Hey," Kenny said running towards Eli.

Eli glanced up from his position on the grass. "All finished?"

"Yep. I really appreciate your help."

"No help, really. As soon as I told the guys you would be late, Chase took over."

"Yeah, he's a good kid," Kenny said, looking towards the quarterback. "Still, I know you have better things to do than babysit."

Not really. "Like I said, no problem." Eli wanted to get up but not in front of Kenny. "Well, you can go on back to your players. I'll just head inside where it's cooler."

Kenny held out his hand in an effort to help Eli to his feet. Eli shook his head, mortified at the thought of the younger man holding Eli's mutilated hand. He thought about extending his left hand but Kenny was on the wrong side for that.

"That's okay," Eli finally said. "I'll make it up on my own."

Kenny eventually dropped his hand. "You know it doesn't bother me, right?"

"What?"

Kenny gestured to the hand hidden under the papers in Eli's lap. "I know you think it does, but it doesn't."

For some reason being called out on his insecurities pissed Eli off. "Really? Is that why you were staring at it earlier today?"

A flush immediately appeared on Kenny's sun-bronzed face. He bent over and rested his hands on his knees, putting his face right in Eli's. "For your information, I was staring at your face, your goatee to be exact, not your fucking hand."

"Great. Now're you going to tell me what's wrong with my face? What's the matter, seeing a few wrinkles that didn't use to be there?"

Kenny snapped up like he'd been slapped. He shook his head and moved away. After walking several strides, he turned back. "You're still as handsome today as you were twelve years ago, jackass. I don't know why I keep trying with you. You'd think by now I'd get it through my head that you want nothing to do with me. Just stupid, I guess."

Eli watched, stunned, as Kenny took off at a jog back to the field. *"That went well."*

Chapter Two

Eli took his hamburger off the gas grill and carried it into the house. He decided to go all out for a change and added a slice of cheese to the patty while it was still warm. As the cheese slowly melted, he carried the salad he'd prepared to the table along with a large bowl of fresh steamed vegetables.

After pouring a large glass of skimmed milk, he sat down and rested his hands on the table. The hamburger he'd been so hungry for grew cold as he continued to stare at his plate. The overwhelming loneliness hit him like a ton of bricks. *What the hell's wrong with me?*

Eli filled his plate and went through the motions of seasoning his food with the no-salt substitute he'd been using for the last six years. *Come on. Just eat your food and maybe this feeling will pass.*

The first bite tasted like shit, as well as the two subsequent bites. With a sigh, Eli pushed his plate away and put his elbows on the table, something he never did. Burying his face in his hands, he closed his eyes and tried to think of something else.

Tomorrow's lesson plan was already finished, but maybe he could start on Monday's? At least that would free up some of his weekend. *For what? What the fuck do you have to do that you need free time for?*

"Shit!" Eli pushed away from the table and carried his plate to the sink. He started to shove it down the garbage disposal but changed his mind and covered it with foil. If his mood changed maybe he'd get hungry later.

After putting the plate in the refrigerator, he started to put the kitchen in order. He'd found quite a few ways to distract himself over the years, but cleaning was the best. Maybe because no matter how many times he did it, there was always more. A few of his acquaintances, he couldn't really call them friends, accused him of being compulsive about his cleaning, but Eli knew the truth. If he focused on the physical, he didn't have time to think about anything else.

While sweeping, Eli noticed a black scuff mark from his dress shoes. Instead of getting upset, he grinned and went to the laundry room to retrieve his bucket and sponge. As the bucket filled with water, he grabbed the Pine Sol from under the sink. *Might as well do the whole floor while I'm at it.*

Bucket in hand, Eli moved to the far corner of the room and knelt on the floor. He knew he should replace the floor with something like wood or ceramic tile, but why, when the vinyl already in place was still perfectly serviceable? Taking care of what you had was probably the only thing he'd learned from his parents that had stuck with him through the years.

As he scrubbed, Eli let the work take him back to a childhood spent on his hands and knees in the small kitchen in San Diego where he'd grown up. Most people were familiar with the affluent sections of San Diego, but few had ventured into Barrio Logan.

With four children to take care of, Eli's parents worked long hours in low paying jobs just to put a roof over their head and food on the table. Since he'd been the oldest and the only boy, it was left up to him to keep his sisters occupied. Going out and playing in the yard, like children did in Cattle Valley, wasn't an option in the Barrio. In order to keep his sisters and himself occupied, Eli had put them to work keeping the house clean. He felt it was the least he could do for his parents.

Little did he know, almost thirty-five years later, he'd still be on his hands and knees scrubbing an already spotless floor. Eli shook his head. The mindless work helped, just like it had when he was a kid. Friends outside of school weren't allowed when he was growing up, so it had just become easier not to make them at all.

Eli dropped the sponge into the bucket, splashing pine-scented water onto the floor, and rolled over to sit with his back against the cabinet. He stared out over the spotless floor as his breathing hitched.

There had been a genuine need for the rules put into place when he was a kid in Barrio Logan, but he was no longer that boy. Or was he? He thought he'd escaped when he joined the Marines right after high school. It was a way to see life outside of San Diego as well as earn money for college, but before he'd even finished his first year of service things begun to go wrong at home.

Rita, his youngest sister, wrote to tell him that without his guidance at home, Maria, the oldest of the girls, had fallen in with a bad crowd. Eli tried to ignore it, telling himself that Maria was simply rebelling. It wasn't a new personality trait for Maria. She had often tried to challenge Eli after their father's unexpected death two years earlier. He had written Rita back and told her not to worry. Maria would eventually find her way.

What Eli hadn't said was that he'd done his time raising children, and he was only interested in his new life. Despite what the military would have you believe, it wasn't hard to find other like-minded men when it came to blowing off steam. They would often meet as a small group of four or five at an off-base, tiny apartment a group of them chipped in to rent. It was their sanctuary, the one place they could be themselves, and Eli was himself as often and with as many people as possible.

He was starting his third and final year in the Marines when he received an emergency phone call from home. Although Maria had been lost to his family for almost a year due to drugs, it was his middle sister, Angel, who had lost her life. Hit by a stray bullet while she stood outside the school with a group of her friends, Angel had died almost immediately. The news that his straight-A sister had been killed so senselessly only furthered to harden Eli against the outside world.

After receiving permission to fly back to San Diego for the funeral, Eli had pulled his baby sister aside and, once again, made her promise she would keep herself safe by staying inside the house. He'd spent the rest of the weekend trying to comfort a mother beside herself with grief and guilt. Eli knew a little something about both of them. After receiving a letter a year earlier that Maria had run away, Eli spent every free moment either drunk or fucking just to ease the pain.

Eli's proudest moment had come when Rita graduated high school with honours, safe and sound. She'd ended up marrying a good man, a career Air Force officer, and lived with him and their four children in Guam. They'd recently moved their mother Elena in with them and Eli was no longer needed in their lives. He still spoke to Rita at least once a month by phone. She loved their island home and often spoke of how free she felt simply by being outside in the sunshine. According to his sister, his mother was also blossoming. Elena had joined a senior citizen group and was enjoying her remaining years in paradise.

Eli's attention turned to the four walls and ceiling that surrounded him. Here he sat, in a safe community, still hiding from the outside world. He glanced at the bucket of water in disgust. *No wonder you're lonely, you stupid fucker. You're still so afraid of getting hurt you've continued to seal yourself off from the outside world.*

He wiped away a few tears he wasn't even aware he'd shed. He needed a plan. Everything positive that had happened to him had been planned out thoroughly first, Military, college, his teaching career, all carefully planned and executed.

After cleaning up the mess he'd made, Eli pulled a pad of paper and pen out of his messenger bag and sat down at his desk. Tapping the pen against the tablet, he thought of everything he'd always wanted but was afraid to hope for.

Number one. Friends. Eli had plenty of acquaintances, people he'd talk to if they initiated conversation, but he'd never had a person he would call an actual friend. What would it be like to just pick up the phone if he was bored or lonely and ask a friend to go to dinner or a movie?

Number two. Cleaning. Although he had no plans of turning into a slob, he knew the manic way in which he cleaned wasn't healthy for him mentally. Maybe if he set up some kind of schedule and tried to stick to it. Of course the kitchen would still need to be cleaned daily, but perhaps he could switch to vacuuming only every third or fourth day instead of every day. The tub and toilet could probably also go a few days between scrubbing. Eli smiled, beginning to feel the changes already.

Number three. Involvement. He lived in one of the finest communities in America. It was about time he did his part to keep it that way, but what was he qualified to do? His thoughts turned to the new teen centre. Would he even be welcomed there, or did the kids in town see enough of him already? He made himself a note to call Ben Waters.

Number four. Love. Eli quickly shook his head and scratched the word out and replaced it with Boyfriend. Love wasn't something you could plan. Even someone as socially inept as he was knew that, but maybe if he dropped his defences enough to allow someone in...

Kenny's handsome face came to mind, but Eli quickly rejected that idea. Kenny was off-limits, always had been. There were just certain lines a teacher shouldn't cross no matter what Kenny tried to tell him. The one-time student was way too handsome, way too young and way too popular for someone like him. He'd end up being the joke of the school in a couple of months, and he'd worked too damn hard to let that happen. Besides, since Luke had moved back to town, Kenny spent every spare moment with him. Hell, the two of them even lived together. Who knew what was really going on behind closed doors? Not that Eli could blame either of them. They were both in the same social class, hot, young and open to fun.

Okay, forget Kenny as an option. Surely there were other men in Cattle Valley that wouldn't mind dating Eli. With a resolute nod, Eli put the tablet back into his messenger bag.

He'd start his new life in the morning. There was an away game tomorrow evening. Perhaps he'd break his normal routine and go, maybe stop in at O'Brien's for a beer afterwards?

Feeling better than he had in years, Eli closed up the house and turned off the lights. He even stopped himself from shoving in his desk chair. It was a little thing, but the first step in his new attitude.

* * * *

Kenny was cooling down after a hard workout when Eli walked into the room. "Hey," he greeted.

Eli smiled. "I was wondering if you had any of those Longhorn shirts left?"

Wiping his face and neck with a towel, Kenny nodded. "Sure. The Booster Club always over-orders. Who's it for?"

"Me," Eli answered, suddenly looking uncomfortable.

It couldn't be the room Eli was uncomfortable in. Before his hand injury, Eli used to use the weight room several times a week. That led Kenny to believe it was him Eli was uncomfortable around. *What else is new?*

"What size are you looking for?" Kenny stood and walked out of the room, leading Eli to the equipment room.

"Large, I imagine."

Kenny started digging through the box of brown long-sleeved T-shirts. "Does this mean you're gonna become a fan?"

"I've, um, decided to get out more. Figured going to tonight's game would be a good start."

The answer surprised Kenny. Sure Eli attended an occasional home game, but as far as he knew, Eli had never gone to an away game. He found what he'd been looking for and turned to hand the shirt to Eli. Once again he was struck by just how handsome the man was. "You carpooling with someone to Crescent Ridge?"

Eli shook his head. "It's only ninety minutes. Not bad."

"We've got extra seats on the bus for faculty if you're interested?" Kenny asked.

Eli rubbed the back of his neck. "I'll think about."

"Okay. Just let me know by the end of the day. We'll leave around four-thirty."

Shirt in hand, Eli nodded. "How much do I owe you for the shirt?"

Kenny grinned. "Don't worry about. It's worth a couple bucks to see a friendly face in the stands. The folks in Crescent Ridge aren't fans of ours."

Eli grinned in return. "Are you saying I shouldn't wear this shirt?"

"I'm saying you'd better wear that shirt so we know who our friends are."

Chuckling, Eli walked out of the small room, leaving Kenny to wonder what the hell had gotten into the man. There was something, Kenny was sure of it. If Eli hadn't said he was driving alone to the game, Kenny would've thought Eli was seeing someone. Of course going solo to a game didn't mean anything. Maybe Eli's secret boyfriend worked evenings or something?

Shit. Kenny wouldn't be able to think of anything else the rest of the day. He'd waited years for Eli to come out of his shell. Maybe he was reading too much into Eli's actions, but the man definitely seemed more at ease about something.

Luke was going to the game; maybe he'd ask his best friend to keep an eye on Eli. No, he couldn't do that without listening to Luke's relentless teasing for the next month. When the lunch bell rang, Kenny shook his head and pushed away all thoughts of asking Luke to do anything for him. He'd keep his own eyes and ears open. Surely if Eli was seeing someone, Kenny would hear about it eventually.

* * * *

In the end, Eli had decided to drive himself to Crescent Ridge. On his way, he stopped at Booklover's Bookstore and picked up an audio book boxed set titled *Breaking Out of the Box*. He'd sworn the owner, Naomi Rivers, to secrecy and she'd promised to never tell a soul.

By the time Eli reached the high school in Crescent Ridge, he'd only managed to get through one of the CDs. He was on the fence as to whether or not he liked it. A lot of it sounded like a load of bullshit, but Eli had promised himself that he'd give it a shot, so that's what he'd do.

Once inside the small stadium, Eli was surprised to see the near-empty visitor bleachers. *Crap.* Although he didn't mind sitting by himself, he was incredibly outnumbered, something that put him on edge almost immediately. Resigned to make the best of it, he climbed to the top so he could lean against the safety rail.

The Cattle Valley Longhorns took the field thirty minutes before the start of the game. Eli stood and clapped along with nine other supporters he knew as parents of a few of the players.

"Hey, Mr. S!" a loud voice shouted from the bottom of the bleachers.

Eli inwardly groaned as Luke made his way up the steps straight towards him. "Hey, Luke."

Luke sat down right next to Eli. Seriously? There were about a hundred other spots to choose from, why'd Luke have to sit practically in his lap?

"Where is everyone?" Eli asked, searching for something to say.

Luke gestured to the parking lot behind them. "The Booster Bus just got here. They'll be filing in any second. Good thing I got here when I did."

"Yeah." Eli watched the players warm-up for a few moments before standing. Maybe he could find a way to get away from Luke without hurting his feelings. "I think I'll get a coffee before the line gets too long."

"Good idea. Would you mind grabbing me a hot chocolate? I'll save your seat."

"Sure," Eli mumbled and headed down the bleachers. He waved to a few familiar faces standing in the ticket line and wove his way through the increasing crowd towards the concession stand.

By the time he took his place in line, Eli had been elbowed twice without the courtesy of an apology. He began to doubt the wisdom of wearing the Cattle Valley colours. When the man in front of him turned and scowled, he was sure of it.

"You one of them?"

"Excuse me?" Eli couldn't believe the nerve of the guy. Although not as muscled as he used to be, Eli still managed to keep himself in shape. The man talking was perhaps three inches shorter and a good thirty pounds lighter.

"You have a kid playing?" the man asked.

"No."

The man nodded. "Yeah, that's what I figured. You're one of the town fairies come to cheer on your team."

"Where's your skirt?" another man joked.

Refusing to rise to the bait, Eli gestured to the concession stand. "You going to order or what?"

"Maybe," the guy answered. "Or maybe I'll just stand here so you can't."

Eli sighed. He'd spent the first eighteen years of his life learning to control his temper so as not to get his ass kicked, but this redneck fucker was really pushing his control. "Listen, guy, I don't want any trouble, just a cup of coffee."

"Coffee? I thought fags liked those fancy cappuccino drinks."

"Go ahead and get your coffee, Mr. S. I'll deal with this prick," Luke said, walking up behind Eli.

The man's eyes rounded. Although Luke was lean, he'd always had an air about him. Eli had no doubts Luke could kick the guy's ass. Of course the colourful ink decorating the entire surface of Luke's arm and the studded dog collar tattooed on his neck also went a long way in convincing the homophobe he wanted no part of Luke.

With a narrowed look, the guy turned and finally placed his order. Luke stood in line beside Eli, practically daring anyone to say another word. Eli wasn't sure what surprised him more, the fact that Luke Hatcher had actually stuck up for him or that it felt damn good to know someone had his back, even if it was a short-term arrangement.

The asshole took his order and walked away without another word. Eli stepped up to the counter. "A large black coffee and a large hot chocolate."

He waited until they were back in friendly territory to say anything to Luke. "Thanks for your help back there. The last thing I wanted was to get kicked out and probably fired for getting into it with that guy."

Luke took his hot chocolate and shrugged. "No big deal. I've been to plenty of away games to know the drill." He gestured at the stands. "Zac and Jakob are saving our seats."

The information pleased Eli even further. He liked Zac a lot. Maybe if he played his cards right with Zac, he could start working on that first item of his list. "Great. Let's go."

* * * *

As was the team custom after a big win, Kenny's players took a quick shower. Sadly, even the kids took a lot of shit from parents and players from the losing team. Kenny had decided long ago it was better to just get the hell out of Dodge while they could.

After making sure they had everything, Kenny followed his players out to the waiting bus. He stowed the equipment and climbed in, doing a headcount to make sure he had everyone. "Okay," he told the driver.

As the bus pulled around the back of the school to the main parking lot, Kenny noticed Eli's black Subaru Outback sitting alone in the nearly empty parking lot. "Hey, Jim, drive by that SUV over there."

The bus driver nodded and headed that way. The bus' headlights illuminated the interior of the Subaru enough for Kenny to notice something was wrong. He could make out the top of Eli's head where it rested against the steering wheel.

"Go ahead and stop," Kenny told Jim.

"What is it, Coach?" Chase, his star quarterback asked from the seat behind Kenny.

"I think something might be wrong with Mr. Sanchez," he answered. "Stay here."

Stepping off the bus, Kenny held his breath. Eli hadn't moved, his head still resting against the steering wheel. Kenny squatted down and knocked on the window. "Eli?"

Eli's entire body jerked as his head popped up.

"Fuck!" Kenny spat, regardless of the kids in the bus behind him. He tried the door handle only to find it locked. "Open the door."

Eli looked straight at Kenny through a bruised and swollen eye before turning his attention to the bus of players. From the looks of the dried blood on Eli's face, Kenny would guess he'd also been punched in the nose at least once. Eli shook his head and turned his face away.

Kenny stood and put his hands on his hips. Sometimes Eli was too proud for his own good. Kenny walked back to the bus and climbed on board. "I'm going to make sure Mr. Sanchez gets back to Cattle Valley. Behave yourselves or you'll all be running sprints come Monday."

The kids groaned in unison. "Is Mr. Sanchez okay?" Chase asked.

Kenny slapped Chase on the shoulder as he reached in the seat for his gym bag. "I think he's run into some trouble, but I'll take care of it."

"Go ahead and get these boys home," Kenny told Jim after stepping back off the bus.

"Sure thing."

After the bus left, Kenny turned back to Eli's car. "They're gone. Now will you unlock your door?"

Eli didn't look up, but Kenny heard the click of the automatic locks disengaging. He opened the door and squatted down until he was eye level with Eli. "What happened?"

"A couple of guys I had trouble with earlier were waiting for me after the game," Eli mumbled.

"And no one bothered to step in and help you?"

It took Eli a few moments, but he eventually looked at Kenny. "My plan was to wait for the bus to leave and follow you back to town."

Kenny reached out and touched the swollen skin around Eli's eye before he could stop himself. "Why'd you want to follow the bus? Forget your way?" he asked with a grin.

Eli's eyes squeezed shut and he took a deep breath. Kenny could hear the wheeze as Eli exhaled. "Eli? Are you okay?"

Eli opened his eyes. "I think I need to go to the hospital."

"Is it your lungs?" Kenny asked.

"No." Eli leant back in the seat and moved his hand away from his abdomen, revealing a dark stain on the front of his shirt.

"Fuck!" Kenny frantically looked around for more help. "Fuck! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I don't think it's bad. The knife was pretty small. I was planning to drive myself, but I don't think that's an option anymore, besides, I think I broke something in my hand."

"Crescent Ridge doesn't have a hospital." Kenny pulled out his phone and called Luke.

"Hey, great win," Luke answered.

"Yeah, whatever. Where are you?"

"About fifteen minutes outside home. Why?"

"Eli's been stabbed. I found him in the parking lot. Where's the closest hospital?"

"Shit! Ummm, I guess Sheridan. How bad is it?"

Kenny lifted the bottom of Eli's shirt and carefully pulled it up high enough to see the wound. "It's bleeding, but not pumping. Maybe one and a half to two inches. It's hard to tell."

"You have two choices. Drive him as fast as you can without killing both of you or I can call the hospital and get them to send a helicopter."

"I'm okay. Really," Eli said.

"I'll drive him." Kenny hung up the phone and reached inside the car. "I'm gonna have to move you."

Eli winced when Kenny lifted him high enough to clear the console between the seats. "Sorry," Kenny apologised.

Eli released his bottom lip from between his teeth and attempted a smile. "No problem."

With Eli safely in the passenger seat, Kenny tossed his bag into the backseat and started the SUV. "We have to get to Sheridan." He reached across Eli and grabbed the seat belt. Despite the tense situation, Kenny paused when his gaze met Eli's. "We need to call the police, too. You know that, right?"

"I tried to fight them off," Eli said. He held up his injured hand, the same hand mangled in the grandstand collapse a year earlier. "Guess I discovered this is pretty useless in a fight."

Kenny brushed his lips over the swollen hand before he could stop himself. Eli's eyes rounded at the contact, but he didn't protest the gesture. *Interesting*. Deciding it was better to not push his luck, Kenny settled back in his seat and pulled out of the parking lot.

Once on the highway towards Sheridan, Kenny pulled out his phone once more. The police in Crescent Ridge would need to be notified of the incident, but Kenny didn't trust them.

"Hello?" Ryan Blackfeather answered.

"Sheriff, it's Kenny Trenton. I'm on my way to the hospital in Sheridan. Eli Sanchez was beaten and stabbed in the parking lot in Crescent Ridge."

"Is it bad?" Ryan asked.

"Bad enough that I'm not about to sit around and wait for the Crescent Ridge PD. I thought you could give them a call. If they need to talk to Eli we'll be at the hospital."

A few moments later, Ryan finally answered. "I'll meet you at the hospital."

"Are you going to call them?" Kenny asked.

"Yeah, but I'll feel better if I'm there when they get there."

It seemed Kenny wasn't the only one who felt uneasy about the neighbouring police department. "Thanks."

"Be careful driving," Ryan said before he hung up.

Eli's head rested against the shoulder strap where it attached to the car. Kenny reached over and ran his palm over Eli's closely cropped black hair. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Eli mumbled.

"Sheriff Blackfeather's going to meet us at the hospital."

"Sorry to be a bother."

Kenny glanced away from the road and ran his knuckles down the side of Eli's bruised and swollen face. "Don't apologise. You know how I feel about you. I've never hidden that side of me from you."

Eli didn't reply but Kenny would swear he felt the man lean into his touch. He settled his hand on Eli's shoulder, needing the contact. "We'll get you through this. Trust me."

Chapter Three

Eli was awake when Kenny came into the hospital room. The honest look of concern on Kenny's gorgeous face almost melted Eli's reserve. His inability to defend himself against three rednecks was embarrassing for a former Marine. He'd worried Kenny would think less of him, but the genuine expression on Kenny's face told him otherwise. "Hey."

Kenny reached out and placed his hand on Eli's thigh. "According to the doctor, there's no permanent damage. You should be up and around in no time."

"Yeah," Eli answered. The knife wound hadn't required surgery, just stitches, inside and out. "I was just trying to convince the nurse to let me go home, but they're insisting I stay overnight."

With a grin on his face, Kenny gave Eli's leg a slight squeeze. "You should probably listen to them. Besides, tomorrow is almost here. You'll be home before you know it."

"It can't be soon enough for me." Eli shook his head.

"The Crescent Ridge police are here, along with Ryan and Luke."

Eli kept going back and forth with himself about talking to the cops. "I'm not sure I want to talk to them."

"That's why Ryan's here. He said he'll be in the room."

"It's not that I'm afraid of them. It's just...I'm still not sure if I should push the issue," Eli admitted. It was bad enough that Kenny, Ryan and Luke knew he'd been bested by a group of homophobes. If he talked to the police it would most likely get out to the local media then everyone in the area would know what a pussy he'd become in his old age.

Moving further up the bed, Kenny braced his hands on either side of Eli's pillow and leant down. "We're not talking about an issue, Eli. We're talking about aggravated assault and battery on a gay man. Two things no one should take lightly."

"Who says I'm taking it lightly? There'll be media. Once again I'll have reporters digging into my life, my past. I don't want that, and I don't think the people in Cattle Valley want that." The media frenzy following the tragedy a year earlier had finally died down and things were starting to get back to normal. Gay bashing, in one form or another, had

probably happened to most people in Cattle Valley at least one time in their lives. Why was this incident so different?

"Besides," Eli added, "the state of Wyoming doesn't give a fuck that I was beaten for being gay."

"But I do," Kenny whispered. "And your friends do. Someone who could do something like that guy did tonight is dangerous to all of us. Don't you see that?"

Eli did see it, which confused him even more. "I just..." Eli sighed. What could he say without coming off as a selfish prick? It was one thing to stand up with a group of others, but it was an entirely different thing to do it on your own. "I guess I'm scared."

"There's no reason for you to be scared. You're not alone in this. As a matter of fact, Luke wanted me to ask if it was the same man from the concession stand?"

"Yeah. Him and two others, one of them was also at the concession stand, but I doubt he drew Luke's attention. I heard him call the one who stabbed me Mike."

"That's good then. At least we have a first name."

Eli stared up at Kenny. God, it would be so easy to fall head over heels for the handsome man. Watching Kenny in action on the sidelines earlier in the evening had stirred something deep, almost primal, within Eli. The decision to follow the bus back to the school in order to talk Kenny into having a beer had backfired.

Every time he tried to break out of the safe world he'd created, he managed to get hurt. "Did you ever see that movie Final Destination?"

Kenny's expression turned confused. "You mean the one about not being able to cheat death?"

"Yes, that one. I think maybe that's what's happening to me," Eli mumbled. Staring into Kenny's blue eyes, he thought of the list of goals he'd made. Maybe he'd never attained those things because he wasn't meant to. "For some reason, I think God wants me dead."

Kenny leant down even further until they were almost nose to nose. "Stop it. God doesn't want you dead. If He did you would've died in the collapse. I happen to think he's keeping you around until you get it through that hard head of yours that someone loves you."

Eli shook his head. "I'm probably the only person who's ever turned you down for a date. The chase is what you love, not me."

"Shut up," Kenny said as he lowered his mouth to Eli's.

Caught off guard, Eli didn't respond to the tongue running across the seam of his lips. *Was this really happening?* Kenny evidently wasn't giving up and continued to kiss Eli, slowly sucking first his top lip then the bottom. Fuck. It had been too long since anyone kissed him and never with such emotion.

Eli couldn't help himself. He needed the taste of Kenny on his tongue. He opened his mouth slowly, afraid of making an ass out of himself.

Kenny groaned and delved his tongue inside Eli's mouth.

Eli's breath hitched at the erotic way Kenny kissed him. No one had ever sucked his tongue before. *Heaven.* If heaven had a taste it would be Kenny. Eli opened wider, accepting a deeper kiss. He started to lift his arms, to pull Kenny closer but the weight of the cast brought him back down to earth. Turning his head, he broke the kiss. *What've I done?*

"How could you possibly love me? You don't even know me."

Kenny turned Eli's face back towards him. "Yeah, I do. I know you better than you think I do."

"But I'm your teacher," Eli tried to explain.

"You *were* my teacher. Now *I'm* a teacher, and there are no rules in place to keep us from being together," Kenny argued.

"It's wrong though." *Isn't it?*

Kenny rimmed Eli's lips with the tip of his tongue. "When you look at me, do you see me as a high school boy or a man?"

"That's not fair." Kenny was every fantasy Eli had ever allowed himself to indulge in, but it had been that way since Kenny *was* his student. It had been wrong then and it was wrong now.

Eli tried to turn away again, but Kenny stopped him. "Would you let me make love to you?" Kenny asked.

"Here?" Eli shook his head. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

Kenny grinned. "I wasn't talking about fucking you right now, but the fact you even considered it gives me hope."

Embarrassment heated Eli's cheeks. It wasn't the question, or Kenny's smile, that embarrassed him. It was the fact that he had been considering it. If the hard state of his cock was any indication, he'd been more than considering it.

"Please give me a chance. I've waited so long for you to look at me the way you are right now."

Eli had his own admission to make. "I was hoping to ask you out for a beer. That's why I was planning to follow the bus back to the school."

Kenny pulled back, standing straight once again. "Really?"

Eli nodded.

"I would have jumped at the chance," Kenny said.

A knock on the door drew Eli's attention. He turned his head to find Ryan standing in the doorway. Eli looked back up at Kenny. "I don't want to do this."

* * * *

Kenny paced up and down the sidewalk in front of the hospital, cell phone to his ear. "So let me get this straight. According to this Mike Burger guy he left right after the game and didn't even see Eli?"

"Yep. That's what he's claiming," Ryan answered.

"That's bullshit. What did the cops in Crescent Ridge say?"

"Let's just say we're lucky the case will be investigated further by the Sheridan County Sheriff's Department. There's got to be someone out there who saw something."

Kenny glanced up at the window to Eli's room. "What am I supposed to tell Eli?"

"I'd go with the simple truth. Tell him the Sheriff's Department is investigating and leave it at that. Is he being released today?"

"Yeah. We're just waiting on the paperwork to go through."

"So Burger will probably get away with it," Kenny surmised.

"I don't know. Like I told you up front, the Sheriff's Department arrested Mike and took him into custody, but it wasn't long before he made bond. The county will continue to investigate the case, but the guy doesn't have a record, so it won't be easy. If we're lucky, they'll be able to convince a judge to issue a search warrant for the knife."

Kenny scrubbed at his tired eyes. "Did I do the wrong thing by taking him to the hospital instead of calling the cops?"

"No. The officers from Crescent Ridge and Sheridan County don't doubt Eli was stabbed in the parking lot. They found the blood evidence to prove it. They just have no proof it was Mike Burger who committed the crime."

"What about the guy Eli punched hard enough to break his hand? Surely that guy's showing signs of a fight."

"Yeah, and if they had a name, I'm sure they'd pull him in for questioning. Unfortunately, Eli can't give them that and Burger claims he doesn't know what they're talking about."

The idea that someone could get away without paying for what they did to Eli crushed Kenny. "Are you trying to tell me these guys are gonna get away with what they did?"

Ryan sighed. "Unless one of them comes forward or the police can find another witness, yeah, that's what I'm saying. I'm sorry, Kenny. Believe me, if I could beat a confession out of them, I would."

"I know." Right on cue, a nurse wheeled Eli out of the hospital. "I gotta go. We'll be in touch."

"I won't give up on this. If you get a chance to tell Eli, make sure he knows that," Ryan said.

"I will. Thanks." Kenny slipped the phone into his pocket and headed towards Eli. "You all set?"

"Yeah," Eli answered.

Kenny gestured to the parking lot. "Hang on while I get the car." He jogged to Eli's SUV and unlocked the door. He was in the process of moving the passenger seat back as far as it would go when he spotted the packaged set of CDs. *Breaking Out of the Box?* A quick read of the back told Kenny what he needed to know. Eli wanted, was trying, to change.

Kenny sighed and stuffed the CDs back under the seat. He didn't see any reason to embarrass Eli, but maybe he could help him without the aid of the CDs. With luck, the recent attack wouldn't hinder Eli's will to live outside the safe world he'd created for himself.

* * * *

Settled in his comfortable bed, Eli stared out the window while Kenny rummaged around in the kitchen for something to make for lunch. Thankfully, the ride home from

Sheridan had been quiet. After Kenny gave him a quick rundown of the current status of the investigation, Eli had pretended to fall asleep.

Eli's thoughts kept returning to the murder of his sister, Angel. The police had never arrested the man who fired the .38 into the crowd of students. Although there had been plenty of witnesses, not one of them was willing to talk. Given the neighbourhood, Eli knew the repercussions of naming the gang member would've been wide and violent.

Unfortunately, he was dealing with that same mentality again. Eli shook his head in anger. He'd moved to Cattle Valley for the safety and acceptance. *But it hadn't happened in Cattle Valley*, the logical part of his brain told him.

The bedroom door opened and Kenny came in, carrying a tray. "I wasn't sure if you liked mustard or mayonnaise on your ham sandwich, so I brought a little of both."

Eli grinned. The world outside may be full of people who find it easy to look the other way when someone's in trouble, but the man handing him a glass of milk wasn't one of them. He sat up and rested his back against the headboard. "Thanks for being here. You didn't have to do this."

"I'm not much of a cook, but I reckon I can handle a sandwich."

"It's not about the sandwich, although it looks great. Just...thanks. For all of it." Eli placed the glass on the bedside table while Kenny settled the tray on his lap.

Kenny sat at the foot of the bed and rested his hand on Eli's leg. "Luke called to see how you're doing. He wanted to know if it would be okay to come by later and check your bandages."

Although his opinion of Luke had started to change, Eli had yet to figure out the man's relationship with Kenny. He wanted to ask but didn't know if he'd earned the right to get into Kenny's personal life. "I can do it."

Kenny squeezed Eli's calf. "I know Luke's never been one of your favourite people, but I think he feels guilty about what happened."

"It wasn't his fault." Hell, Luke was half Eli's size. It was a pitiful truth that it had taken Luke to scare Mike and his friends away at the concession stand. He glanced down at the cast on his hand. He'd managed to throw one punch and look what happened.

"Luke can be a pain in the ass, but he really is a good guy."

Eli looked up at Kenny. Did he dare confess his reasons for not liking the guy? They were childish to the point of being absurd. "Why's he living with you? Surely he's been in town long enough to find his own place."

Kenny shrugged. "I guess I enjoy having him around again. I'm not like you. Being alone sucks. Luke makes me laugh."

"Yeah, being alone isn't all it's cracked up to be." Eli set his half-eaten sandwich on his plate.

"You done?" Kenny asked, reaching for the tray.

"Sorry. I guess I wasn't as hungry as I thought I was."

"No problem." Kenny placed the tray on the floor before scooting up to sit beside Eli's hip. "I saw the CDs."

It took a second for Eli to realise what Kenny meant. *Shit!* Eli turned his head to look out the window once more. Now Kenny knew just how pathetic he was. *Should I make up an excuse for having them?*

Kenny covered Eli's hand with his own. "Would you be willing to step outside the box with me?"

Eli's cheeks heated at the idea. He didn't want to come off as a man who didn't know his way around the bedroom because that simply wasn't the case. It was love and trust that he'd never given, never allowed himself to even consider. "What're you asking?"

Kenny's hand slid up Eli's arm to his chest. He pulled the sheet down and ran his palm across the expanse of bare skin above the bandage. "I'm asking you out."

"On a date?" Eli had been fucked by countless men in his life, but never had he gone on a real date. It hadn't been allowed in the military and he'd taken an ungodly amount of classes in college in order to graduate with his masters in four years. After moving to Cattle Valley he'd concentrated on his work. It had always seemed like enough until...

"Of course on a date," Kenny said, interrupting Eli's trip down Memory Lane.

The thought of going outside the safety of his house suddenly terrified him. It wasn't the date, but the location he worried about. "Where?"

Kenny shrugged. "Doesn't matter to me. Where would you like to go?"

Eli glanced down at Kenny's thumb as it brushed back and forth over his nipple. Besides feeling the handsome man's cock plunge in and out of him, what would he like to do with Kenny?

"I wouldn't mind dancing. Do you know of a place?" Eli asked.

Before answering, Kenny leant down and brushed the flat of his tongue across the pebbled nub on Eli's chest. "The Grizzly Bar," he said before taking Eli's nipple between his lips.

"Fuck," Eli moaned. Without even realising he was doing it, Eli's hand came up to hold the back of Kenny's head, keeping him in place.

Kenny didn't seem to mind. If anything, it seemed to fuel his ardour. With a deep groan, Kenny moved to stretch out on the bed next to Eli. He worked first one nipple then the next until Eli's cock was hard and leaking.

What the hell am I doing? Eli asked himself.

"Let me love you," Kenny whispered, teasing the tip of his tongue around Eli's areola.

Eli was so tempted to give Kenny everything he'd asked for, but he knew better. Once Kenny fucked him, the challenge would be over and soon the handsome man would lose interest. *One date.* One official date, was all he'd ask for in return. He'd just have to keep his heart out of it, no matter who it was making love to him.

"Do you think I'm a slut?" Eli asked Kenny.

Kenny released the nipple in his mouth and looked up at Eli. "Why would you ask me something like that?"

"Because you haven't even taken me out yet and already you're ready to stick your cock in my ass."

Kenny sat up and shook his head. "That's not...I...no. I want to take you out."

Staring into Kenny's big blue eyes, Eli sighed. "Then let's see how the date goes first."

Looking down at Eli's bandaged mid-section, Kenny nodded. "You're right, but in the meantime, will you at least try to get to know the real me?"

Eli reared back. "What're you talking about? I've known you since you were a freshman."

Kenny shook his head once again. "No. You know me as a teenager, not as a man. Give me the chance to prove to you that I'm worth your time."

There was something so sad in the way Kenny said it. The words, combined with the want in Kenny's expression, convinced Eli to do just that. "Okay."

* * * *

"How'd it go?" Eli asked Kenny when he walked through the door the following Wednesday.

Kenny shrugged and took off his jacket. "Okay, I guess. I mean, English isn't exactly my area of expertise, but I think I did alright."

Eli had agreed to take the week off from work only if Kenny would substitute teach for him. He'd gone over his lesson plans with Kenny every evening and felt confident in Kenny's abilities.

Kenny dug into his gym bag and came out with a folder of papers. "Here're the essays from Monday's homework assignment."

From his position on the sofa, Eli crossed his right leg over his knee and settled the folder in his lap. The assignment had been to describe your childhood in two hundred and thirteen words, no more, no less.

"Mine's in the back," Kenny said.

Eli's head snapped up. "Huh?"

"I thought it might be a good way for you to get to know me without having to drag out all the old memories," Kenny explained.

"Should I read it now?" Eli asked.

"No. Why don't you wait until I leave. I thought I'd stop and get something from O'Brien's for dinner. Interested?"

Eli couldn't concentrate on anything but the essay with Kenny's name neatly written in cursive at the top. "A cob salad would be great. No dressing. I'll make my own here."

Looking uneasy, Kenny bent down and gave Eli a quick kiss on the forehead. "I'll be back."

Eli glanced up from the paper and smiled. He and Kenny had done quite a bit of kissing over the last few days, but it was the little things Kenny did that meant the most. Like the kiss on the forehead. "Can I have another one of those before you head out?"

Kenny grinned and rested his hands on the back of the couch, caging Eli in with his body. Eli opened his mouth at the first brush of Kenny's lips. Although he never saw Kenny eat candy, the man always seemed to taste minty.

Out of his head with need, Eli reached between Kenny's legs with his good hand and ran his palm up the hardened length of Kenny's erection through his sweatpants. How many

years had he carried the secret fantasy of submitting to Kenny Trenton? Eli was barely aware of the papers falling to the floor as Kenny straddled Eli's lap and slipped his hand under the elastic waist of Eli's pyjama pants.

Eli released Kenny's mouth and rested his head on the back of the couch as a moan broke from his throat. He was a second away from begging when Kenny slipped to the floor and separated Eli's legs.

Gazing down, it took several moments for Kenny's intentions to register. With a hand around the base of Eli's exposed cock, Kenny's mouth hovered over the tip of Eli's shaft.

"Please," Eli whispered, giving into his body's demands.

Kenny swiped the crown with his tongue. "I thought you wanted a date first."

Eli's hips thrust up at the warm contact. "Okay. New rule. No fucking until after our date."

Kenny opened his mouth and took Eli's length in until it nudged at the back of his throat before pulling back off. With an evil grin, he stood and readjusted Eli's pyjamas to cover his cock. "I'll wait. I wouldn't want you to compromise those strong beliefs of yours just for my benefit."

Chuckling, Kenny picked up his jacket and headed to the door. "I'll be back in thirty minutes or so."

"Fucker," Eli mumbled, making Kenny laugh harder. He grinned after Kenny shut the door and shook his head. Kenny Trenton might be twenty-seven, but he still had a lot of that cocky high school kid in him.

Chapter Four

Kenny pulled up in his driveway and shut off the engine. He had to be back to the school in an hour and wanted to make sure he had time to stop by Eli's on the way. Opening the front door, he came face to face with a very naked and very drunk Luke.

"What the hell's going on?" Kenny took off his coat and tossed it over Luke's groin. His best friend was definitely living up to his nickname recently.

"Oh! Wow! Cold!" Luke cried, throwing the coat onto the floor.

Luke rarely drank enough to get really wasted, so Kenny knew something big must've happened. He walked to Luke's room and found a pair of clean underwear. "Here, put these on and talk to me."

Luke grinned and spread his legs further apart. "Why? Don't like the view?"

Of course Kenny liked the view. Hell, he may be in love with Eli, but he still had a pulse. "What's going on?" he asked again, shoving the underwear back into Luke's hands.

With a sigh of resignation, Luke pulled the tight black boxer-briefs into place and disappeared into the kitchen. He was back a few seconds later with another beer and a magazine. "I'm a celebrity."

Kenny took the magazine and read the headline aloud, "NBA All-Star Apologises to Fans."

Fuck. It had to be about Stretch. He continued reading silently, shaking his head at the mention of Luke's name. "Shit, I'm sorry, man."

"Can you believe that fucker! Blaming me for introducing him into an unholy world? What the fuck is that? I sure as hell didn't stick my dick up his ass. He knew exactly what he was doing. And it doesn't even mention he continued to fuck me for five months!"

Although Luke had put on a good show about not being hurt when Stretch McGee had broken it off between them, Kenny knew different. He had no doubt the two men would still be blissfully happy if Stretch's wife hadn't hired that private dick to follow her husband.

"It's only a matter of time before the press figures out where to find me." Luke started pacing the living room. "Damn that man! I can't believe I ever loved him."

"I can," Kenny added. "The two of you were cute together." Although Kenny was only around Luke and Stretch on a couple of occasions, he'd seen their mutual love. Because despite what Luke thought, Stretch had loved him, he just happened to love his career and money more.

"Cute. Yeah right. Now I'm labelled some kind of man-whore who has an uncanny ability to change big, tough married guys into queers."

Luke's entire body sagged at the statement, and Kenny couldn't help but comfort his best friend. He stepped forward and pulled Luke into a hug. "It'll get better."

Luke shook his head. "I keep thinking that, but I've been here for a couple of months and it still kills me to wake up without one of his goofy text messages."

"You could always publicly defend yourself," Kenny offered.

"No, I couldn't. Warren McGee may be able to fuck me over, but that's just not who I am."

Kenny kissed the top of Luke's head. "Yeah. That's why I love you so much, doofus."

Luke turned his face and kissed the centre of Kenny's chest before pulling away. "You'd better get going or you're going to miss the bus to the game."

Kenny nodded. "Yeah, and I still want to go by Eli's on the way."

"He's not going, I take it?"

"No. I'm not sure I'll ever get him to another game." Although the investigation into the stabbing was still ongoing, so far the police hadn't uncovered anything of use in the case. "Our last game of the season is at Crescent Ridge. I'm thinking of cancelling it."

Luke nodded. "I doubt anyone in town would blame you, but what will that do to the team record? I thought you said Chase was hoping to get a scholarship out of this season."

"Yeah. That's the only thing that's stopping me. I need to talk to the school board and the team." Kenny ran his fingers through his hair. "Anyway, as long as you're okay, I'd better get changed."

Luke held up the beer can he'd never put down. "Mr. Coors and I'll be just fine. Good luck tonight."

* * * *

Eli had just put the vacuum away when the doorbell rang. He closed the closet and crossed the room. "Hey," he greeted Kenny.

Kenny stepped into the house and shut the door before wrapping his arms around Eli. "I missed you today," Kenny said, his lips descending to meet Eli's.

Kenny's kisses had become his favourite part of the day. He opened immediately, accepting the thrusting tongue he'd grown addicted to. When he felt the hard length of Kenny's arousal against him, Eli broke the kiss. "Keep that up and you'll miss your bus."

Kenny grinned and peppered several more kisses to Eli's neck before answering. "They can't very well leave without their coach. I think I'm pretty safe."

Staring into Kenny's eyes, Eli wanted nothing more than to drag the man to the bedroom. Did he really need a date to know the two of them would be good together? No, but he wanted the date before Kenny got bored of him and took his pretty cock to the next challenge.

It said a lot for Kenny that he hadn't even asked Eli to attend the game. Eli's body was nearly healed, but they both knew his mind wasn't. Once again Eli was fortifying the box he lived in, afraid to even step out onto the porch. The one exception he'd made was allowing Kenny inside, and God help him, but he was glad he'd taken the leap.

"I would've been over sooner, but Luke's having a bad day," Kenny explained, resting his hands on Eli's hips.

Although Luke had been by the house twice during the week to check on his wound, Eli still didn't trust the guy around Kenny. He'd seen the melancholy expression on Luke's face when he thought no one was looking. Was he upset that Kenny had been spending so much time with Eli?

"What's wrong with him?" Eli asked.

Kenny quickly told him the story of Luke and Stretch McGee, including the tabloid article. "Don't say anything to him about it. Luke likes to pretend he's a hard-assed bastard, but he really loved the asshole."

The information slowly sank in, and Eli suddenly felt like shit. "I didn't know any of that."

Kenny cupped Eli's cheek. "I need to get. We're still on for tomorrow night, right?"

Eli's body clenched in anticipation of their big night. "I've thought of little else all week."

“Good, that makes two of us,” Kenny said with a smile. His hands moved around to squeeze Eli’s ass. “Dinner and dancing first. Then I plan to keep you occupied for the rest of the weekend.”

Eli groaned and rested his face against Kenny’s shoulder. “We could always grab a quick burger after the game tonight and skip the big dinner tomorrow?”

Chuckling, Kenny turned his head and kissed the side of Eli’s head. “Tempting. More than you know. But no, I want to do this right. I’ll pick you up at six. Wear your dancing shoes.”

As much as Eli hated to see Kenny leave, he knew it would be selfish to keep him any longer. “Go, before I have the whole football team on my back.”

“You’d better not,” Kenny laughed. He gave Eli another deep kiss before opening the door. “See you later.”

Eli nodded and shut the door as Kenny headed down the sidewalk towards his Jeep. He waited until the Jeep was out of sight before closing and locking the front door. He turned and glanced around the room. He used to take comfort in being alone with no one to answer to, but suddenly the house felt like a prison instead of a haven.

He glanced at the desk, more specifically to the drawer where his list now resided. His thoughts swung to Luke. Maybe it was time to overcome his jealousy and get to know Kenny’s best friend?

* * * *

An hour later, Eli stood uncomfortably on Kenny’s front porch, a sack of Coronas under his arm.

The door opened and Luke’s nearly naked, tattooed body stood in front of him. “Mr. Sanchez?”

Eli rolled his eyes. “Stop calling me that.”

Luke stumbled backwards, leaving room for Eli to enter the house. “Sorry. Habit.” His eyes narrowed. “What’re you doing here? Kenny’s in Big Horn.”

“I know.” Eli held up the sack. “Thought I’d drop by and see if you felt like having a couple of beers with me, but I can tell you’ve already started without me.”

Luke grinned. “Did Kenny ask you to come over and babysit?”

"No. This is all my idea. I just...wanted some company." Eli felt like an intruder. "No big deal. I'll catch up with you some other time."

Eli moved to leave, but Luke stepped around him and leant against the door. "Stay. It just feels weird. You usually want nothing to do with me."

"I'm an ass," Eli said. "I'm trying to get over my own prejudices."

Luke gestured to his heavily tattooed chest, arms and neck. "Is it the ink?"

"Hell no." How could he admit the real reason he'd always held a grudge against Luke? "I'm not used to having grown-up relationships with former students, that's all."

Luke nodded and gestured to the couch. "Wanna sit down?"

Eli lifted the sack. "Mind if I use a knife and a bottle opener first?"

"Not at all." Luke led Eli into the kitchen. He pulled a cutting board out of the cupboard and a knife out of the drawer.

Eli pulled the bag of limes out of the sack. "You like limes with your beer?" he asked as he started slicing the sour fruit.

"Hell, I like beer whether it's with salt, peanuts, tomato juice or lime. I'm an equal opportunity drinker."

Eli glanced over his shoulder. "Peanuts?"

"Yeah. Don't tell me you've never put peanuts in your beer. Damn, man, you've been missing out."

The thought of soggy peanuts floating around in his beer turned his stomach. "No thanks." He went back to slicing the limes, putting them into a small bowl Luke had produced.

"It's the salt, I guess." Luke shrugged. "I'll have to get you drunk one day and make you try it."

"Don't hold your breath," Eli mumbled. He squeezed two lime wedges into his bottle. "You know, my grandma told me they started adding lime to the lip of the bottle to keep away the flies."

"Really?" Luke opened a bottle and stuffed a lime inside after running it around the rim of the bottle. "I thought it was all about the taste."

Eli shrugged and waited for Luke to put the rest of the twelve pack into the refrigerator. "Grandma wasn't a big drinker, so I don't really know if it's the truth or not." He settled in one of the big recliners and grinned. "This must be Kenny's chair. It smells like him."

"You mean eau de man sweat?" Luke asked, stretching out on the couch.

Eli shook his head. He'd never known Kenny to stink. "No. It's that spicy cologne he's always worn."

Luke laughed. "That's not cologne. That's the crappy Old Spice aftershave he used to steal from one of his dads."

"I like it," Eli said. The mention of Kenny's family brought the essay of Kenny's to mind. "May I ask you something?"

"Sure," Luke said, swinging one leg up to rest over the back of the sofa.

Eli didn't want to give away the personal feelings Kenny had written about, but after reading the paper, he'd been left with far too many questions. "What was Kenny's life like growing up?"

"I don't know much before they moved to town, except that Kenny had been the reason they moved. I guess he was having trouble in school in Cleveland. Too many parents showing up for parents' night and all that."

"And after he moved here?" Eli prodded.

Luke set down his beer bottle and lazily started braiding his long hair. Eli figured it was a nervous gesture, because Luke wouldn't meet his gaze any longer. "The Trentons are a strange lot. I mean, they're nice enough, I guess, but Kenny's folks seem to live in their own little universe." Luke shrugged. "It's hard to explain."

"Kenny wrote a paper about his childhood for one of my classes. It was mostly about feeling alone without actually being alone. I didn't understand how that was even possible given that he was lucky enough to have three parents at home."

"I was at his house most afternoons when we were in school, and I rarely even saw them. Usually at least his mom and one of his dads was home, but they tended to stick to their suite of rooms." Luke dropped the makeshift braid onto his chest and reached for his beer. "He always acted like their lack of attention didn't bother him, but I know it did."

Luke levelled a stare at Eli. "I think it's why he's so fixated on you. In school, you paid him the attention he didn't get at home. I think he's confused that attention with love."

"That was ten years ago," Eli reminded Luke.

"Yeah and for ten years he's thought about no one else. I fixed him up with some of the hottest guys at UCLA. Kenny'd go out with them until they started getting serious and then he'd drop 'em."

Eli nodded. "I've always known he was more interested in the chase than actually catching someone."

Luke sat up and shook his head. "No. You're misinterpreting him. He breaks it off with other guys because he thinks he can't love anyone but you." Luke looked away, staring at the muted television for a few seconds. "So if this whole, wait-until-after-our-date thing is your way to fuck with him, don't."

Eli had never seen this side of Luke. It was protective and brotherly and a little odd coming from a man who looked like Luke. "Once Kenny's had me, he'll wonder why he thought he loved me at all. I just want a good memory to remember him by before that happens," he confessed.

* * * *

Kenny was surprised to see Eli's SUV parked outside his house when he arrived home after the game. They'd lost, but Kenny's mood lightened at just the sight of Eli's vehicle. He unlocked the front door and walked into an empty living room. What the hell was going on?

The house was quiet except Luke's drunk snore, as they'd always called it. Kenny's chest tightened as he made his way to his best friend's bedroom. *Please, no.* The light from the living room cast a spotlight on Luke's still half-naked body passed out diagonally on the bed.

Kenny released the breath he hadn't even realised he'd been holding. He turned and opened his bedroom door. There, under the covers, was a sleeping Eli. Kenny leaned against the doorjamb and wondered what the hell had gone on in his house while he'd been away.

He finally turned and closed up the house for the night before returning to the bedroom. After turning on the small lamp on his dresser, he started to undress. He'd planned to leave his underwear on until he noticed the pile of clothes on the floor at the foot of the bed. His gaze went back to Eli. "What're you playing at?" he whispered to the sleeping man. He opened his bottom drawer and rummaged around until he finally came up with the blue silk scarf he'd had since college. After draping it over the lampshade, he shed his underwear and walked to the side of the bed.

By the time he lifted the covers to climb inside, his cock was rock hard and dripping with pre-cum. He hoped to God Eli wasn't going to tease him again, because he knew once he felt Eli's skin on his bare cock, he wouldn't be able to stop.

Kenny scooted in until he was chest to chest with Eli. With only a small bandage on his stomach and his cast tucked under the pillow, Eli was breathtaking in sleep, those plump lips appearing even more sensual. *Damn.* He couldn't resist and stretched forward to take Eli's bottom lip into his mouth, suckling it like a newborn babe.

Eli moaned and opened his eyes, pulling his head back far enough to release his lip from Kenny's mouth. "Hey."

"I should probably ask what you're doing here, but it's such a nice surprise to find you in my bed, I don't think I care why." Kenny rested his hand on the dip in Eli's waist and almost moaned again when he felt Eli's awakening cock brush against him.

Eli stared at Kenny for several moments. "I came over to keep Luke company and decided I didn't want to go home. Do you mind?"

Kenny shook his head. "Not at all. Guess I just need to know your boundaries before I do something to piss you off."

In answer, Eli lifted his leg to drape over Kenny's hip. "I realised making love with you shouldn't be about dinner and dancing, although I'd still love to do those things with you."

Kenny's hand moved to rub circles across Eli's ass. "I want those things, too."

Although Eli was nicely muscular, he seemed almost frail in Kenny's arms. Kenny kept that bit of information to himself though. Eli prided himself on being a former Marine. The attack a week earlier had already wounded the man's pride enough. Eli didn't need to know Kenny's greatest desire was to protect the man until the day one of them died of old age.

The two of them continued to hold each other until Kenny started to worry Eli had fallen back to sleep. "You still with me?" he whispered.

"Yeah," Eli mumbled, his lips brushing Kenny's neck. "Just feels good, beyond good."

With his hand still on Eli's ass, Kenny pulled Eli closer until their erections pressed together. He still wasn't sure what Eli's hang-ups were about sex, but he didn't want to ruin the moment by pushing the man beyond his comfort zone. "We can stay just like this all night if that's what you want."

"Mmmm," Eli moaned and ground against Kenny. "I'm not sure what I want other than to not let you go."

Kenny couldn't resist the lure of Eli's ass. He slowly ran his fingers up and down the sweet crevice, smiling when Eli once again ground against him. Kenny brushed the puckered

skin surrounding Eli's hole with his middle finger. Another moan escaped Eli's lips. "You like that?"

Eli nodded. "Very much."

Without pulling his body away from Eli, Kenny stretched his arm out behind him and blindly searched the drawer. Closing his hand around the bottle of lube, he pulled his arm back, hearing his shoulder pop with the sudden change in position.

"Ouch," Eli chuckled.

"I'm used to it. After years throwing a football, my joints aren't as tight as they used to be."

"Just wait until you reach my age. You'll discover nothing is as tight as it used to be."

Grinning, Kenny popped the top on the lube and slicked his fingers. He dropped the bottle on the bed behind Eli and returned his hand to the crack of Eli's ass. When he circled Eli's hole with his lubed fingers, Eli began that delicious slow grind again. It was clear there wouldn't be any fucking, at least not in the next few hours, but Kenny discovered he didn't care. It was a dream come true just to hold Eli, everything else was gravy.

Eli's body slowly opened for him, and Kenny gently pressed the tip of his finger inside. He let out a long moan as Eli's body seemed to suck his finger deeper. Nothing in his sexual experience had prepared him for that moment. In a flash, Kenny finally understood why his parents hadn't needed him. They'd had each other, they'd been in their own little world, and Kenny finally got it.

"What's wrong?" Eli asked.

Kenny realised his body had stilled in thought. "Nothing. Just had an epiphany of sorts, I guess."

"Yeah? About what?"

Not sure he was ready to talk about his folks, Kenny slowly inserted another finger. "That too much?" he asked at Eli's loud groan.

"No. Not quite enough, to be honest. I...I want you."

"Tonight? Or would you rather wait?" Kenny asked, sawing his fingers in and out of Eli's hole.

"Tonight, tomorrow, the next day. As long as you'll have me," Eli said around another moan.

Kenny closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He knew to read too much into Eli's statement would be setting himself up for an even bigger fall if the time came. Removing his fingers he rolled to his back and reached for the new box of condoms in the drawer.

Eli's hand landed on his chest. "So did we win?"

"I don't know yet. Ask me again in about fifty years," Kenny answered without thinking.

"I'm forty-four. I doubt I'll make it another fifty years. But, anyway, I was talking about the game."

Kenny's heart squeezed at the reminder of Eli's age. It wasn't that he begrudged the man for being older, it would just mean less time if things worked out between them. "Ummm, we lost. Seventeen to fourteen in overtime."

Eli took the condom from Kenny and opened the package with ease. "Sorry to hear that. Big Horn's always tough."

"Yeah." Kenny glanced down his body, amazed to see Eli confidently rolling the condom down his length. He'd never had anyone do that, and Kenny found he liked it. Well, he'd prefer to do without the condom at all, but if he had to wear one, having a lover take the time and care to sheathe him made up for it.

"Thank you," he whispered against Eli's lips. He started to roll on top of Eli but stopped. "How's your injury? I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't unless you start digging your elbow in my stomach or something," Eli said with a chuckle in his voice.

Kenny reached for the lube. "I promise to keep my elbows in check."

Eli rolled to his back and spread his legs as Kenny applied more lube to Eli's stretched hole. In the blue glow of the draped lamp, Eli looked like a dream. The realisation of what he was about to do hit Kenny like a bullet between the eyes. What if he didn't live up to Eli's expectations? He couldn't move. There he was with his cock in his hand just staring down at the man he'd dreamt of for ten years and he was suddenly paralysed with fear.

Eli made a sound in his throat and reached for the sheet. He covered himself as he rolled to his side. "It's okay. I understand," he mumbled.

The sadness evident in Eli's voice and actions, snapped Kenny out of his stupor. He glanced down at the cock in his hand. The realisation that he was about to get what he'd always wanted had caused his cock to soften. Kenny knew it was a nervous reaction, but Eli

evidently didn't. "What? No." He reached out to roll Eli over onto his back, but Eli swung out with his casted hand.

"Don't. Just give me a second to gather what's left of my pride, and I'll go."

Fuck! What had he done? Kenny stared down at Eli, afraid he'd just lost everything he'd ever wanted.

Chapter Five

Eli squeezed his eyes shut, mortified. When Kenny had stared down at him, Eli felt empowered, but the handsome man's wilting erection quickly proved the opposite. He'd acted like a slut and put himself on display like some wanton college kid. *How could I have been so stupid?* A man like Kenny Trenton could get any piece of ass he wanted, hell, he'd just proved it.

The air in the room grew thick, too thick for Eli to breathe. *I gotta get outta here.* He threw back the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Don't," Kenny said. "Please, God, don't go. It's not what you think."

Eli stood and reached for his clothes. "Not what I think? I'm a man. I know what a soft cock means."

In his haste to make a speedy retreat, Eli struggled to get his underwear on. Losing his balance, he fell forward, but before he could land face first on the floor, Kenny's arms surrounded him.

"Dammit, just listen to me for a second!" Kenny bellowed.

Eli righted himself and stared up at Kenny, anger surging through him. "What?" he barked.

Kenny sighed and sat back down on the bed. "I'm nervous. That's all it was. I suddenly realised everything I've ever wanted was right in front of me and..." Kenny stopped and rubbed his eyes. "I was afraid of disappointing you."

It took several moments for Kenny's explanation to sink in. "Disappoint me? Look at you. How could anyone with a body like that disappoint someone?"

The corner of Kenny's mouth lifted in a lopsided grin. "Just because someone's got a big cock doesn't mean they know how to use it."

Eli dropped the clothes in his hands and sat beside Kenny. If a man like Kenny could feel insecure, what hope did someone like Eli have? "Are you telling me I just made an ass of myself for no reason?"

Kenny laughed. Not some good-natured chuckle, but a full-blown belly laugh. Eli sat wide-eyed. He couldn't see the humour in the situation, and Kenny's reaction was starting to worry him. "Are you okay?"

Wiping the tears from his eyes, Kenny reached out and pulled Eli against him. "I don't know," he said, still laughing. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Maybe you should lie down."

"Maybe you should just kiss me," Kenny argued, before covering Eli's mouth with his own. The moment Kenny's tongue invaded Eli's mouth, the laughter turned into a moan.

Eli accepted the kiss although his mind was still trying to process what the hell had just happened. He didn't bother to fight him when Kenny began to remove Eli's tangled underwear.

When it was obvious the underwear would require more than a shove to get them off, Kenny broke the kiss. "What the heck did you do to yourself?"

Eli shrugged. "I was pissed. I don't get that way often, and I'm not used to pulling on underwear in that state of mind."

Smiling, Kenny nodded. "Good to know. From now on, we argue naked. At least I'll know you won't go running out of the house before we've worked shit out."

After extricating himself from the ripped and twisted underwear, Eli climbed back in bed. "So, are you planning to argue often?" He didn't care for the thought of fighting, but it did speak volumes for how long Kenny planned to have him around.

"If it keeps you naked, we can bicker every day like my Grandma and Grandpa Moses did before they died."

"You honestly had a Grandma Moses?" Eli asked around a laugh.

"Yeah. That's my mom's maiden name. Grandma was a tough ole broad though. She looked like that old woman on those Tweety Bird cartoons. My grandpa was bigger than me, but Grandma always held that man in check."

The love Kenny felt for his grandma was obvious by the peaceful expression on his face. "Were you close with your grandparents?"

Kenny pulled the sheet up over them and snuggled against Eli's side. "Yeah. Well, at least until we moved here. They were too old to drive and Grandpa refused to fly. They died when I was sixteen. Grandma went first, cancer, and Grandpa just seemed to give up after

she was gone. He died almost six months to the day after she did. They said it was a heart attack, but I knew it was more likely a broken heart."

Eli rolled to his side and propped his head on his good hand. "You're a romantic," he said, his surprise clearly evident.

Kenny brushed Eli's bottom lip with his thumb. "There something wrong with that?"

"No, not at all. I guess I just didn't know that about you."

Leaning in, Kenny gave Eli a quick kiss. "Believe it or not, there are a lot of things you still don't know about me."

Eli pushed Kenny over and rolled on top of him. He straddled his lower torso before leaning down to lay against his chest. Kenny was right. There were a lot of things about the man he wanted to learn. Starting with... "Put your fingers back inside of me."

Kenny's eyes opened wide. "Really? I was afraid I'd blown it."

"No. I have a habit of thinking the worst. You know, if anything's going to come of this, we should probably learn to be more honest with each other."

"I've never lied to you," Kenny said, dripping lube down the crack of Eli's ass.

Eli ran his tongue over Kenny's late-night beard. He moaned when two of Kenny's fingers were slowly pushed inside of him. "I'm not talking about lying to each other. I just meant you need to be honest with me as to what you want, how you feel, if you're mad, ya know, everyday stuff."

Grinning, Kenny rubbed his fingers against Eli's prostate. "You mean, if I want to make love to you, I should just tell you?"

"Yeah. As long as I can do the same, of course."

"So I can tell you that, at this moment, all I want in the world is to drive my cock as far into this bubble butt as I can get?"

Eli didn't know whether to laugh or groan, but he needed to lay a few more cards on the table. "I've never had a boyfriend," he admitted.

Kenny's eyebrows drew together. "No way are you a virgin."

Eli snorted. "Hardly, but I've never had to care about someone else's feelings during sex, so if I start acting like a selfish prick, call me on it."

"Duly noted," Kenny replied. "Now, will you hand me another one of those rubbers?"

Eli went as far as to unwrap the condom. He held it out and smiled. "You're gonna have to put it on yourself this time. I'm too comfortable."

Kenny started to remove his fingers from Eli's ass, but Eli shook his head. "Leave them."

Kenny sighed and managed to reach under Eli to sheathe himself. "You know you're a lot bossier than I thought you'd be."

Damn. Eli was used to being in charge. His training had started at a young age when he'd suddenly been put in charge of his sisters. He'd always believed if he was in charge, he wouldn't get hurt. Of course that hadn't proved true. His cocky I-don't-need-anyone attitude had only left him lonely.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

Kenny removed his fingers and rolled them over. From the top position, Kenny lined his cock up with Eli's hole. "Don't be. I didn't say I didn't like it, just that I wasn't expecting it."

Eli moaned as Kenny's fat cock slowly began to fill him. Even if Kenny didn't understand, Eli did. It wasn't about being bossy or giving orders, it was about keeping a wall up around his heart, something he'd become damn good at over the years. As much as he wanted to give Kenny the key to his heart, Eli knew he wasn't ready. It was selfish and probably wrong, but he didn't trust Kenny, at least not yet. Fucking was one thing, but opening himself emotionally would need to wait until he was sure.

"Okay?" Kenny asked once he was fully seated.

"Yeah," Eli answered, trying to shut off his brain.

As Kenny began a slow rhythm in and out of him, Eli remembered his earlier conversation with Luke. Even Kenny's best friend didn't believe Kenny really loved Eli, that for some reason, Kenny had just convinced himself he was in love. If that were really the case, where would it leave Eli when Kenny finally figured out the truth?

It took Kenny hooking Eli's legs over his shoulders to fully get Eli's attention. Driving in deeper, Kenny stared down into Eli's eyes. "You feel even better than I prayed you would."

Eli felt heat creeping up his neck at the compliment. "I feel the same about you." What Kenny said earlier was true. Eli had been fucked by men with big cocks, but many of them didn't know how to use the gift they'd been blessed with. They relied solely on their length to please a partner. A great lover fucked with his whole body, not just his cock. Kenny was

that kind of lover. His hands continued to roam Eli's body, stimulating him like no one ever had.

Eli's brain shut down as he lifted his ass off the bed to meet Kenny's thrusts. Full wouldn't begin to describe the way Kenny's cock fit his ass.

"God, you're sexy," Kenny groaned, wrapping his hand around Eli's cock. "This is how I'll picture you whenever I think of you."

"That's funny. This is pretty much the way I've always pictured you. Above me, dominating my body until I lose my grip on reality."

The intensity of Kenny's thrusts increased, rattling Eli's teeth with each snap of his hips. "When?" Kenny asked over the sound of skin slapping against skin.

Eli didn't answer. He rode the edge between pleasure and pain. Suddenly the grip on his cock softened. Eli started to protest, grabbing for his cock, but Kenny knocked it away. Eli opened his eyes and gazed up at the man. "What the hell?"

"When?" Kenny growled.

"When what?" Eli asked.

Kenny gripped Eli's cock once more and squeezed to the point of pain. "How long have you been picturing me fucking you?"

Eli closed his eyes and turned his head. "You're hurting me."

Kenny eased his grip and began jacking Eli's cock in time with his thrusts. "You're going to fucking talk to me when this is over."

Whatever. Eli didn't care about anything at that moment but the climax that was quickly building. It wasn't long before he heard himself cry out Kenny's name as the first strand of cum shot from his cock.

Kenny must have been waiting for him because before Eli had finished, Kenny was howling Eli's name to the ceiling.

Eli's body continued to twitch with aftershocks as Kenny released his legs and lay on top of him, burying his face against Eli's neck. Completely sated, Eli's eyes drifted shut.

"Don't you fall asleep on me," Kenny mumbled against Eli's neck.

"I'm not the one on top," Eli mumbled back.

Kenny rolled to the side and stripped off the condom before tucking Eli against his chest. "I know you don't want to answer the question, but I really, really need to know."

"Why? Why is it so important that you dig around in my head until you find my biggest source of shame?"

Eli's eyes sprang open when Kenny grabbed his jaw and tilted his face up.

"You're ashamed to want me?" Kenny asked, the hurt clearly evident in his thick speech.

"No, I mean, yes. I mean, I'm not now but I was." Eli was so tired he knew he wasn't making any sense. "You were my student. They lock people up for that shit." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he wished he could take them back.

Kenny released Eli and jumped out of bed, disappearing into the bathroom.

Fuck! Eli groaned and sat up. He'd probably ruined any chance he had. Now Kenny would think he was a pervert, and Eli knew he wouldn't be far from the truth. When he heard the shower turn on, Eli accepted the inevitable. He found a box of tissues on the dresser and cleaned himself as much as possible before putting on his clothes, stuffing the ruined underwear in his pocket.

Within a matter of minutes, Eli let himself out of the house with a heavy heart. He had no one but himself to blame, of that he was sure. As he climbed into his SUV, Eli prayed that someday Kenny would, once again, be able to look him in the eyes.

* * * *

Taking the residential streets faster than the law allowed, Kenny sped his way towards Eli's house. Would the two of them ever get their shit together, or were they destined for a life of misunderstandings?

A few moments, that's all he'd needed. The last thing he expected was to find an empty bed when he got his head on straight and stepped out of the bathroom. "Dammit!" he yelled, hitting the steering wheel with his fist.

He turned into Eli's driveway and slammed on the brakes. "What the hell?"

Every derogatory word for homosexual was etched across the front of Eli's house in neon orange paint. Kenny jumped out of his Jeep and ran to the front door. "Eli! Open up. It's me, Kenny."

When no answer came, Kenny pressed his face against one of the front windows. "I'm gonna break the door in if you don't open it right now!"

A car horn sounded, and Kenny spun around, ready for a fight. It was then he noticed the dark shadow in the front seat of Eli's SUV. Kenny raced over to the vehicle and opened the driver's door. "Are you hurt?"

Eli shook his head. Just like the night of the attack, Eli refused to make eye contact. Kenny kissed Eli's temple. "Hang on, babe. I need to call the police."

Eli didn't move. There was no indication that he'd even heard Kenny. He started back to his Jeep before realising he hadn't taken the time to bring his phone. Stopping in mid-stride, he put his hands on his hips and glanced around the neighbourhood. He went back to Eli's SUV and squatted down. "Do you have your phone?"

Without turning his head, Eli reached into the passenger seat. He held out the phone. "I doubt there's much they can do," he mumbled.

Kenny put his hand on Eli's thigh and dialled Ryan, bypassing the normal 9-1-1 procedure.

"It's one o'clock in the fucking morning. This better be important," Ryan barked.

"That asshole's trashed the front of Eli's house. So now he's pulling his shit in your town, what're you going to do about it?"

"Who the fuck is this?" Ryan asked.

"Kenny. Who do you think? I'm at Eli's house and that Burger guy's evidently paid his house a visit."

Kenny heard Ryan speaking to either Nate or Rio, he wasn't sure which man. "No, baby, everything's okay. Go back to sleep," Ryan whispered.

Kenny closed his eyes at the tender way Ryan spoke to his lover. What would it be like to sleep next to the same man, or in Ryan's case, the same men, every night, knowing they'd still be there in the morning?

Ryan sighed. "I'm not trying to be an asshole, I'm really not, but could this wait until morning? Unless of course you want to actually call the deputies on duty and have them come over."

Kenny felt the slap to his hand as if Ryan had been standing right beside him. He glanced at the house. It was spray paint. Not like it was going anywhere anytime soon. "I'm sorry. It's...I just pulled up and found Eli sitting here." Kenny stood and walked several feet away, turning his back to Eli. "I'm worried about him, Ryan. Like I said, he's just sitting there. He hasn't even looked at me yet."

Ryan sighed. "If you think it'll help, I can be there in twenty minutes."

Kenny shook his head even though Ryan couldn't see him. "No. You were right. It can wait until morning. I'll...I don't know. I'll try to get him to come home with me."

"You could always take him to the clinic. Zac should be on duty."

"Maybe. We'll see how things go."

"Call me in the morning, and I'll meet you over there," Ryan said.

"Thanks. Sorry about waking you."

"Don't be. If it was the man I loved sitting in that car, I'd probably be pounding on the Sheriff's goddamn door."

Kenny didn't have to ask Ryan how he knew of his feelings for Eli. He'd never tried to hide them, telling anyone who cared enough to ask. "Thanks." He hung up the phone and walked back over to Eli's side. "Ryan said to call him in the morning, and he'll come out and make a report."

Eli nodded. "I should've been here," he whispered.

"No. Oh, baby, no. I'm glad you weren't here." Kenny reached out and held Eli's chin, turning his head to look at him. "It's just a house. We'll start painting tomorrow and by Monday you won't even know it happened."

Eli's eyes filled with tears. "I'll know."

Kenny swallowed around the lump in his throat. He hated seeing the man he loved so...lost. "Come back home with me."

Eli shook his head. "No. This is where I'm supposed to be. Inside. Safe."

It was apparent Eli's connection to the house went beyond anything Kenny could understand. It was just a house, wasn't it? "Okay. Let's get you inside then."

* * * *

"You can go," Eli told Kenny once he was settled on the couch.

"Sure I can, but I don't want to," Kenny answered, sitting beside Eli. "I think we need to talk."

Talk? All Eli wanted to do was go to bed and never get up. Why would he want to sit and listen to Kenny tell him what a pervert he was? "I don't think there's much I want to talk about."

"Too bad. You're the one who ran out of my house after the best sex I've ever had."

Eli glanced at the man beside him. "If I remember correctly, you were the one who ran into the bathroom and shut the door. I was just following your lead."

Shoving back the coffee table, Kenny knelt in front of Eli. "You dropped quite a bomb on me. I just needed a few minutes to process it."

"A bomb? I admitted to dreaming about you when you were seventeen! That's not a bomb, that's a fucking crime!" Eli leant back on the couch. He grabbed a small paisley throw pillow and covered his face. "Dammit!" he screamed into the pillow.

The pillow was yanked from his hand and thrown across the living room. "Stop it! Now you listen to me. When I was seventeen, we both know I didn't look it. I was already taller than you, more muscular, and far more mature than anyone else my age. Don't be ashamed of your body's reaction to me. You didn't act on it. You didn't even once say anything inappropriate to me."

"But I dreamt it. I could try to squash any thoughts of you during the day, but when I went to sleep..." Eli shook his head.

Kenny laid his head on Eli's chest. "The reason I reacted the way I did to your confession was because I was angry, not disgusted. I knew ten years ago that I'd fallen in love with you. I knew it that day you stayed after school to help me figure out how to draw up my fucked up family tree. It wasn't even an assignment for one of your classes, but you still gave up your evening to help me."

"That's what a good teacher does," Eli mumbled. Luke's words once again came to mind. "Maybe you've confused attention with love."

Kenny shook his head. "No. Even a seventeen year old is capable of falling in love. Please don't try to tell me otherwise. I've spent the last ten years being made fun of by my friends for feeling that way. Believe me if it wasn't genuine I'd be over you by now."

Eli gazed down at the blond-haired head on his chest. "Even after you've seen what a complete pussy I am? I was a Marine. Did you know that?"

"Yes, but I don't think you're a pussy. How can you feel that way about yourself? You were outnumbered three to one in that parking lot."

"There's something about me that I haven't told anyone, not even my own family."

Kenny glanced up. "What's that, babe?"

"I hated being a Marine. Just didn't have the stomach for it. I made it through because I knew it was the only way I'd get to go to college, but I wasn't a real soldier, simply didn't have the heart most of the men did, I guess. My commanding officer was smart enough to figure that out soon after basic training."

Eli took a deep breath. "I worked behind a desk, proofreading news releases." He threaded his fingers through Kenny's hair. "So there you go. It wouldn't have mattered if Mike Burger was alone that night, I still couldn't have fought him and won."

Eli could see the confusion on Kenny's face. Maybe if he started from the beginning, Kenny would have a better understanding of just how pathetic he really was. "See that blue photo album on the shelf?"

Kenny turned his head. "Yeah."

"Would you get it for me?" Eli watched as Kenny did as asked. When Kenny went to kneel again, Eli shook his head and patted the sofa beside him. "Sit next to me. I need to show you something."

After settling beside Eli, Kenny wrapped his arm around Eli and pulled him closer. "Nothing you can show me will change my mind. Just like nothing you've said makes me feel any less for you."

"We'll see." Eli opened the album. He didn't have many pictures from his childhood, but he thought he had enough to make Kenny understand what kind of brother he'd been. He turned to a picture of a small Christmas tree. The decorations weren't much to look at, mostly homemade stuff, but the photo showed the majority of the inside of their small three bedroom house. "This is where I grew up."

"It's nice," Kenny said.

"It was a shithole on the outside. You know why?" Eli asked.

Kenny shook his head.

"Because I was too afraid to go outside to take care of it. Mom and Dad worked from sunup to sundown but everything else was my responsibility. In the summer, the weeds were up to my fucking waist, but I couldn't bring myself to go outside and mow."

"Why?" Kenny asked.

"I was afraid. We lived in a bad section of San Diego. There were gangs, drive-bys, you name it, Barrio Logan had it."

He turned the page and smiled. "Here's me and my sisters that same Christmas." Eli ran his finger over their faces one by one. "I tried to protect them in my own way. I made cleaning a game, one we played every evening after school." Eli rolled his eyes. "It wasn't really a game, of course, but it kept them busy, out of harm's way. At least I thought it did."

Eli tapped the picture of his oldest sister. "This is Maria. After I joined the Marines, she got involved in drugs, and ended up running away." He shook his head. "Still don't know what became of her."

"I'm sorry," Kenny whispered, kissed Eli's temple.

Eli told Kenny about Angel with tears in his eyes. "The day I got the call was the worst day of my life."

"Sounds to me like you had reasons to be afraid, so why're you still being so hard on yourself?" Kenny asked.

"Because I'm a goddamned grown man now, and I'm still afraid," Eli tried to explain.

Kenny took the album out of Eli's hands and carefully set it back on the shelf before returning to stand over him. He held out his hand. "Come with me. There's something I want to show you."

Chapter Six

Eli stood on the sidewalk beside Kenny. "Did you bring me here to remind me I almost died in a fire?"

"Nope," Kenny said, placing a hand on the small of Eli's back. "I brought you here to remind you that being a man, a good man, has nothing to do with how tough you are or how well you can fight." Kenny pointed towards the school. "That's your place in this world. Making a fucking difference in the lives of kids who need you. I can only dream of being a teacher with your kind of talent."

Kenny turned Eli to face him. "That's your gift. Making students feel like they matter. You have the ability to change lives here, Eli. Grab it and embrace it."

Eli glanced up at Kenny and grinned. "You know you could've given me this pep-talk at home instead of dragging me out here in the middle of the night."

"Yeah, I could've, but would you have heard me?" It had surprised Kenny to hear Eli talk about his childhood and his time in the Marines. Eli wasn't a small man by any stretch of the imagination. Kenny kissed Eli's forehead. He wondered if Eli's lack of fighting skills had less to do with fear and more to do with the enormity of the man's heart.

Eli kissed Kenny's throat. "Will you take me home now?"

"That depends."

"On?" Eli questioned.

"Whether or not you're going to let me stay the night." Kenny ran his hands over Eli's back before settling them on Eli's hips. "Give us a chance. Please?"

"You still want that after everything I've told you?" Eli asked.

Kenny nodded. "I want it more now than ever."

"Because you feel sorry for me?" Eli started to pull away.

"No." Kenny's arms tightened around Eli. "Because you trusted me enough to confide in me. You love me, Eli Sanchez. You just haven't admitted it to yourself yet."

* * * *

With the doorknob digging into his back, Eli broke the kiss. "We shouldn't be doing this here." He looked around the equipment room Kenny had started using as an office. "I came in to eat lunch with you."

"Maybe what I want for lunch is you." Kenny leant in for another kiss.

Since the first night they spent together, Eli was helpless when it came to resisting Kenny. His eyes closed as he opened his mouth for Kenny's skilled tongue. The man had become his everything in only a few short days. How would he survive the heartache if things didn't work out between them?

When Kenny touched him, nothing else mattered, not the attack, not the graffiti, nothing. Although Eli wanted to put those things behind them Kenny refused, making a point to call Ryan at least once a day to check on the investigation. It seemed Ryan was as frustrated with the lack of evidence as Kenny, but none of it surprised Eli. He'd grown up in an area where very few crimes were solved. Eli knew Ryan and the county sheriff's department were doing everything they could, but producing enough evidence to tie Mike Burger to the crimes just wasn't happening.

Kenny reached between them and unzipped Eli's khaki pants. "Need you."

Eli reached behind his back and locked the door. There was a time when making love on school property would have appalled Eli, but that was before he'd succumbed to Kenny's touch.

Kenny stepped back and started removing his clothes, tossing them to the floor. "I have lube, but no condoms. I guess I could always go to the nurse's office."

Eli unbuttoned his shirt and kicked off his shoes, never taking his eyes from the gorgeous man in front of him. He knew the subject would come up eventually, and he'd given it a lot of thought. Kenny was clean, he'd made that clear several nights earlier, but in Eli's heart, bareback meant commitment and he told Kenny that.

"You know what that means to me, right?" Eli asked, shedding the rest of his clothes.

Kenny nodded.

"Are you sure, because it's been less than a week."

"Not to me, and I think if you're honest with yourself, not to you either. I've always known you were the one for me. It just took me ten damn years to make you believe me."

Okay. So the question was whether or not Eli believed him. *Yes*. The answer came to him without much thought. He moved to the short pile of gymnastic mats and sat. "You know we'll get fired if anyone suspects we're doing this here."

Kenny chuckled, moving in to push Eli down with his body. "I know, that's what makes it exciting. This is the stuff of my fantasies."

Before Eli could say more, Kenny kissed him. Once again, Eli was swept into a world that revolved around him and the man on top of him. He wrapped his legs around Kenny's waist and gave himself up to his body's demands.

Without breaking their kiss, Kenny opened a foil packet of lube. Although Eli didn't voice his concerns, he did question Kenny's ability to have packets of lube in the equipment room but no condoms. Now that he thought about it, he knew Kenny had condoms. Safe sex was a big focus of the health class Kenny taught.

Eli pulled out of the kiss. Was he being manipulated? Eli stared up at Kenny. The expression on his lover's face said no. "May I ask you a question?"

Kenny paused in the process of sliding another finger inside Eli. "Now?"

"Why's it so important to you to fuck me bareback?"

Instead of getting mad, like Eli had expected, Kenny grinned. "Because I needed to know you've accepted what's between us." Kenny removed his fingers and replaced them with the crown of his cock. He pressed the wide head against Eli's hole and stopped. "I won't go any further until you agree with that statement."

Kicking his fear to the kerb, Eli nodded. "I agree."

Kenny surged inside, giving Eli his entire length in one thrust. Eli struggled to breathe as the pain shot through him.

"Sorry," Kenny said, biting his bottom lip. "I...I don't know why I did that."

Eli concentrated on relaxing his body to accommodate Kenny's cock. He lifted his hand to cup Kenny's cheek. "I know why, and it's okay, just give a guy some warning next time."

Kenny turned his head and kissed Eli's palm. "I don't deserve you," he whispered.

Eli didn't argue. It would only seem as if he was fishing for compliments, but he knew in his heart Kenny deserved so much more. He nodded his head, indicating his readiness. "Better make this quick. I only have another ten minutes left in my planning period."

Kenny smiled and began to move. He took Eli at his word and didn't bother with a slow build-up. Eli dug his short nails into Kenny's back as the onslaught of thrusts tried to push him from the mat.

Kenny broke away long enough to scoot them both down on the slick blue vinyl surface, before kneeling between Eli's legs. "Falling isn't an option," he said as he wrapped his arms around the top of Eli's thighs, anchoring him in place.

When the need to call out Kenny's name became too great, Eli held his hand over his mouth. Whether it was being fucked bareback for the first time, or the overwhelming intensity of the fuck itself, Eli didn't know. One thing was certain. He'd never had a more enjoyable planning period.

"You like that?" Kenny panted.

Eli answered by coming, the strings hitting as far up as his chin.

"Fuck!" Kenny yelled, heedless of their location. He plunged his cock deep into Eli's body and came.

Kenny released Eli's legs and pulled him up into his lap. Eli opened his mouth, expecting a kiss, but Kenny evidently had other ideas. "Too sexy," Kenny groaned as he licked the cum from Eli's neck and chin.

A noise outside the door drew Eli's attention. "There's someone out there," he whispered. What had he been thinking? As much as he loved sex with Kenny, an afternoon fuck wasn't worth losing his job. He jumped up and searched the room, his gaze landing on a stack of towels.

"We shouldn't have done this," he said, cleaning himself. "The whole room smells like sex now."

Kenny chuckled and took the towel out of Eli's hands before pulling him into a deep kiss. Eli tasted himself on Kenny's tongue and almost gave in to his body's demands once more. He shook his head and pushed away. "I can't." He shook his head. "We can't do this at school anymore. I just don't feel right about it."

Kenny sighed and began dressing. "What about after hours? Does that count?"

Eli sat down to pull on his socks and took a deep breath. "I don't know. Right now I feel like I'm going to have a heart attack."

Kenny tripped over his work-out pants to get to Eli. "Should I call someone?" he asked, a worried expression on his face.

"What? No! I'm not really having a heart attack. Damn, Kenny, I'm not that old."

Kenny sighed and fell to his ass. "Neither was Erico. Fuck! Don't ever do that to me again."

On one hand Kenny's reaction pissed Eli off, but on the other it was further proof that Kenny's feelings were genuine. He shoved his feet into his shoes before squatting in front of Kenny. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. Guess I'm just not the kind of man who's used to risking everything on a spur of the moment decision."

Kenny grabbed the back of Eli's neck and pulled him in for a deep kiss. Eli swore he tasted the worry on Kenny's tongue as the other man delved deep. The bell rang and Eli pulled back. "I've gotta go."

"Luke's grilling out tonight. Come by and have dinner with us?" Kenny asked.

Eli stood and straightened his clothes. "I'll be there." He walked towards the door. "You'd better hurry and get those pants on."

Grinning, Kenny stood and pulled up his pants and T-shirt. Once he was finished, Eli unlocked the door. "See you tonight." Eli almost ran into Chase, who waited outside the equipment room door with a big smile on his face. "He'll be with you in a second."

Chase continued to smile but nodded. "Thanks, Mr. S."

Eli stood there for several moments. Should he apologise?

The handsome quarterback stepped forward and slapped Eli on the back. "You'd better get to your class. I'll stand guard out here until Coach is ready to come out."

Eli couldn't help but smile at the young man. "Thanks," he mumbled as he walked towards his classroom.

* * * *

Dressed in a white, long-sleeved T-shirt, Eli grabbed his coat off the back of the couch and headed to the door. If it weren't Homecoming, he knew he wouldn't even go to the game, but Homecoming meant a lot to the people of Cattle Valley. It was alumni weekend. The one time of year graduates gathered to reconnect with the friends they'd made growing up. Eli enjoyed catching up with his old students and the various weekend activities that had been planned.

He opened the front door to find Luke sitting on his top step. "What're you doing?" he asked, locking the door.

"Thought I'd see if you wanted to ride over. That way you can just leave with Kenny after the game," Luke answered, getting to his feet.

"I don't need a bodyguard," Eli snapped. Had Kenny said something to Luke about protecting him? *Dammit*. Maybe he'd been wrong to trust Kenny with his secrets.

Luke's eyes narrowed. Everyone knew it was hard to get Luke mad, but once you'd pushed him over the edge, watch out. "Fuck you. I actually had fun the other night and thought we were becoming friends." Luke shook his head and walked down the porch steps. "Forget it. Go by your damn self."

The burn of tears clouded Eli's vision as he ran down the stairs towards the retreating man. "Wait!"

Luke stopped but didn't turn around.

"I'd like that," Eli admitted. "I'm an ass. I'm just not used to having friends. I thought maybe Kenny had put you up to it."

"Well he didn't," Luke answered.

Eli thought of the list he'd made. *Friends*. It was something he'd always wanted. He stood at a crossroads in his life, wanting to follow Luke down the path but afraid to do so.

Luke turned to stare at him for several moments. With a roll of his eyes and a devilish grin he waved Eli towards him. "Well? You coming or not?"

Eli nodded. "Yeah. Right. Just let me lock up."

"You already did that," Luke reminded him.

Eli slapped his forehead and followed Luke. "Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking."

Chuckling, Luke climbed on his motorcycle. Eli paused. "I've never been on one of these."

"Well then it's your lucky day," Luke answered, firing up the Harley.

Yeah. Eli had a feeling Luke was right.

* * * *

After their victorious win, everyone of age packed into O'Brien's Pub. Kenny had been slapped on the back so many times he was afraid he'd have bruises before the night was over.

He carried a pitcher of beer and three mugs to one of the long tables. "You mind?"

Luke glanced up and laughed before scooting over to the next available seat, vacating the one beside Eli. "Just keeping it warm for ya."

Eli was in the middle of a conversation with Nate on the progress of the school's reconstruction. "So you're telling me I can move back into my classroom over Christmas break?"

Nate nodded. "Barring any unforeseen complications."

Kenny filled the glasses and set the pitcher on the table before resting his arm over the back of Eli's chair. Eli turned and smiled. "Did you hear that?"

"Yep." Although Kenny would miss sharing a classroom with Eli, he knew the other man was chomping at the bit to get back into his own space. Kenny settled his hand on the back of Eli's neck and rubbed the short black hair of Eli's hairline with his thumb. As much as he wanted to take Eli home and celebrate the team's win in his own way, it was obvious Eli was enjoying himself.

Luke bumped Kenny's shoulder. "You up for some pool?"

Kenny glanced towards the pool area and shook his head. "I'm good."

"Well I'm going to scrounge me up a game." Luke stood and leant down. He started making kissy faces, resembling a fish more than a man. "Lord knows I wouldn't want you to get more than three feet away from *your man*."

"You're just jealous," Kenny said around a laugh.

Luke sobered immediately. "Yeah. Maybe." He turned and walked away from the table without another word.

Kenny watched his friend until he was swallowed by the crowd before returning his attention to Eli.

"Everything okay?" Eli asked, squeezing Kenny's thigh.

"Yeah." He lifted his glass and tipped it towards Eli. "Here's to friends."

Eli smiled and echoed Kenny's motion. "I'll drink to that."

The simple act warmed Kenny to the bone. It was nice to see Eli let loose and enjoy himself. He leant forward and kissed Eli's neck. "I'm going to have a word with the fire boys if you don't mind."

Eli shook his head. "Don't mind at all as long as Ethan gets back here with that other pitcher sometime tonight."

"I'll see what's keeping him," Kenny said as he stood. Eli tilted his head up and Kenny couldn't resist kissing the man he loved. "I'll be over in that crowd of rowdies if you need me."

On his way to the dart board, Kenny stopped at the bar and waited to get Sean's attention.

"What can I do for you?" Sean asked, wiping the bar in front of Kenny.

"I ordered another pitcher about twenty minutes ago, but Ethan must have gotten slammed because we haven't seen him since," Kenny explained.

Sean glanced around with an uneasy expression. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen him for a while myself." Sean grabbed another pitcher from the shelf. "What're you drinking?"

"Michelob."

Sean nodded and filled the pitcher. "On the house."

Kenny shook his head and slapped a bill on the bar. "I appreciate it, but it's not necessary. As busy as this place is, it's a wonder Ethan can keep up at all."

Sean glanced around the room once more. "Still. It's not like him to disappear. Do you see Pete or Brian anywhere?"

Kenny glanced around the room. He didn't know the two newest additions to the Sheriff's Department as well as he should, but he did know what they looked like. "Isn't that Pete over at the pool table?"

"Yeah. Could you do me a favour and send him over?" Sean asked.

"Problem?" Kenny didn't like the worry etched on Sean's face.

"I don't know," Sean answered. His eyebrows drew together for a moment before giving a slight shake of his head. "I'm sure it's nothing, but if you could send Pete over, I'd appreciate it."

Before talking to Pete, Kenny stopped by his table and filled his and Eli's beer mugs. Eli was engaged in conversation with Nate again, so Kenny kissed his love on top of the head and went to find Pete.

"Pete?" Kenny said, stepping up to the man.

The tall handsome man nodded. "We've not met, but I'm glad you came over. Great game, Coach."

"Thanks." Kenny shook the deputy's hand. "Sean needs to see you. Ethan Drake seems to have gone missing, and I think Sean's worried about him."

Pete clapped Kenny on the arm. "Thanks for telling me."

Pete was across the room and to the bar before Kenny could say another word. Kenny watched the two men for several moments. Whatever was going on, Pete appeared even more distressed than Sean. *Interesting.*

An arm wrapped around Kenny's waist and a set of soft lips kissed his neck. "You about ready?"

Kenny moved Eli's hand up to cover his heart. "I thought you were having fun with Nate."

"I was, but I'm suddenly interested in having fun with you." Eli kissed Kenny's neck again, adding a quick slide of his tongue. "And only you."

At the purr in Eli's deep voice, Kenny upended his beer and drained his glass. He found a nearby table and set it down. "Let's go."

* * * *

"You know what I hate most about this Jeep?" Eli asked, as his hand wandered up Kenny's thigh.

Kenny reached down and repositioned Eli's hand to the bulge in his jeans. "What's that?"

"These damn bucket seats. Why can't you be like one of those cowboys who drive a big truck with a bench seat?" Eli began kneading the thick cock trapped behind Kenny's fly.

"Mmmm." Kenny spread his legs further apart as he slowly made his way down Pine Street. "And what would you do with a bench seat?"

Eli lowered Kenny's zipper. "The same thing I'm about to do only I'd be more comfortable."

"I like this side of you," Kenny joked. "Is it the beer or the friendship that has you so pliable?"

Holding Kenny's cock in his hand, Eli bent over and swiped the flared head with his tongue. "Do you really care?"

Kenny rubbed the back of Eli's head. "Not really. I just thought it would be a useful bit of information."

When the Jeep stopped, Eli rose up and looked around. They were parked behind Logan's brand new motorcycle shop. Satisfied that Kenny wouldn't wreck, Eli took the head of Kenny's cock into his mouth. Damn, the man tasted good. With the help of Kenny's persistent hand on the back of his head, Eli took as much of Kenny's length into his mouth as he could.

Eli gagged when Kenny's length hit the back of his throat. He pulled back off, watching a string of saliva follow him as he released Kenny's cock. He swallowed and smiled up at Kenny. "I used to be really good at this," he apologised.

"News flash. You're still damn good at it. Just suck on the head. That's what I enjoy most anyway."

Eli reached down and lifted the lever to scoot Kenny's seat further back, giving himself more room. Still staring into Kenny's big blue eyes, Eli wrapped his hand around the base and lapped at the head of Kenny's cock. He grinned when Kenny's nostrils flared, knowing it was a sure sign he was doing something right. If they'd had lube in the Jeep he'd have been in Kenny's lap in a heartbeat but this was probably better. It was important to Eli to show Kenny how much he meant to him. Since Eli wasn't much of a talker when it came to expressing his love, he hoped to accomplish it through his touch.

With the taste of pre-cum coating his tongue, Eli carefully reached between Kenny's legs to fondle his balls. It wasn't easy with the cast still on his hand, but his three fingers were left free of the confining plaster. As long as he didn't scratch anything overly sensitive, he should be okay.

"Oh, babe," Kenny moaned. "Scrape it with your teeth," he instructed.

Still maintaining eye contact, Eli lightly bit the area just under the crown and pulled up, scraping his top and bottom teeth along the slippery flesh.

“Oh, fuck!” Kenny’s grip on the back of Eli’s head grew stronger. “I’m gonna come.”

Eli pulled back enough to tap the slit with the tip of his tongue as he jerked Kenny’s cock. From experience, Eli knew what a thrill it was to see the seed entering a lover’s mouth. The first strand had too much force behind it and ended up on Eli’s face instead of in his mouth.

The resulting mess was worth it when Kenny cried his name. Although Eli would normally move to cover the head with his lips and swallow the rest, he stayed where he was, giving Kenny the full face painting experience.

“Yeah. Yeah!” Kenny howled each time a strand landed on Eli’s face.

Kenny’s hand moved down to squeeze his own length, draining the last of the orgasm from his sac. “Shit, babe,” Kenny panted, drawing a finger through the thick cum on Eli’s cheek. He held his finger to Eli’s mouth, and Eli eagerly sucked it clean.

Kenny grinned down as he continued cleaning and feeding Eli. “No doubt about it. If beer and laughter does this to you, I can see a lot of parties in our future.”

Chapter Seven

The smell of bacon woke Kenny the following morning. With Eli still sound asleep, Kenny knew Luke was up and if Luke was cooking, something must be bothering him. He carefully slid out of bed, and grabbed a pair of sweats from the drawer.

Entering the kitchen, Kenny stopped and stared at the large stack of pancakes beside the stove. *Shit. Something was seriously wrong.* With his back to the doorway, Luke obviously hadn't heard him come in. Kenny studied his best friend for several moments, wondering if he dared enter the room further.

"Morning," Kenny finally said.

Luke grunted.

Kenny walked to the coffee pot and filled one of the mugs on the counter. "You're up early."

Luke turned bloodshot eyes towards him. "There's a football game this morning, or have you completely forgotten about everything but that man in your bed?"

"I didn't forget." Kenny glanced at the wall clock. "But the game isn't until ten. It's only six."

Luke placed two more pancakes on the plate and turned off the stove. He carried the food to the table and sat down without another word.

"Need more coffee?" Kenny offered. He wasn't sure what the hell was going on, but given time, he was sure Luke's damn would burst on its own accord.

"Nope," Luke answered, filling his plate.

Kenny took a seat at the table. He hated to sit down to breakfast without waking Eli, but something told him it would be best to deal with the situation without Eli present. "Smells good."

Luke passed Kenny the bacon and continued eating.

"I didn't hear you come in last night. Did you have a good time?" Kenny asked, trying to make conversation and fish at the same time. "Would you pass the syrup, please?"

Luke grabbed the bottle and slammed it down beside Kenny's plate.

At the end of his patience, Kenny dropped his fork onto the table. "Okay. What the fuck is wrong?"

"I'm just pissed. I'll get over it. I always do."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Kenny asked.

"You haven't given me the time of day for the last two weeks even though I've gone out of my fucking way to make your boyfriend think I like him."

Anger surged through Kenny. He stood slowly in an effort to keep from punching his best friend in the face. "That's a lie, and you know it. Take it back."

"No," Luke said, jumping up so fast his chair fell to the ground. "I even took the time to go get Eli to make sure he was at the game because I knew how important it was to you that he was there. And what do I get in return? You can't even find time to play a simple *fucking* game of pool with me. This is alumni weekend. As far as I know, Eli didn't graduate from Cattle Valley."

Before Kenny could argue back, Eli stepped into the room. His expression said it all. Not only had their fighting woke Eli up, but he'd heard every word.

"Hey," Kenny said, crossing the room towards Eli.

Eli held up his hand. "Don't."

Kenny stopped.

Eli stared around Kenny to Luke. "I'm sorry that you felt you had to babysit me. Believe me, you'll never have to do it again." Eli turned his attention to Kenny. "You should enjoy your weekend with your friends. I'll see you on Monday."

"Wait!" Kenny yelled, following Eli out of the room. He reached out and put a hand on Eli's shoulder, stopping him. "Please. I'm sorry about what you heard but don't go."

Eli turned and wrapped his arms around Kenny's waist. "I'm not upset with you. I love you, and nothing your friend says will change that. But Luke's right. This weekend is for reconnecting with your friends. You should be able to do that without me hanging around."

Despite everything that had happened, Kenny couldn't keep the smile off his face. "You love me?"

Eli pulled Kenny's head down. "Yes," he whispered just before he kissed him.

Kenny accepted Eli's tongue with enthusiasm. He felt his cock harden and ground against his lover.

Eli broke the kiss and shook his head. "Now's not the time. Go make up with Luke."

"Fuck him," Kenny spat, so angry with Luke he didn't know if he'd ever forgive him.

"Please don't," Eli said with a slight grin. In the next instant, Eli's eyes filled with tears. "No one knows better than I do what it's like to be without friends. Believe me, you don't want to travel down that road."

It was obvious Luke had hurt Eli's feelings, but it wasn't until that moment Kenny realised how deeply. Kenny felt his own eyes begin to burn as he stared down at the man he loved. "I love you with all my heart."

Eli nodded. "I know." Eli took a step back. "Now, do me a favour and go in there and make things right."

Kenny did need to settle things with Luke, but he doubted they'd be bosom buddies anytime soon. "Let me take you home first."

"Not necessary. It looks like a beautiful morning for a walk. Besides, it'll give me a chance to clear my head."

Kenny gave Eli one last kiss. "Can I call you later?"

"Sure." Eli said on his way out the door.

Kenny stood there for several moments before returning to the kitchen. With the table cleared, Luke stood at the sink with his head down.

"I didn't mean for him to hear me," Luke mumbled.

"Well he did. I'm not sure I've ever seen him so hurt, and I don't know that I can ever forgive you for that."

Luke nodded but didn't turn around. "You're the only one in my life that's ever made me feel truly important. I guess with all the shit I've been going through lately, I was jealous and angry that you haven't been there for me. And the thing that really pisses me off is that I actually like Eli, and I'm happy that the two of you are finally together."

Luke glanced over his shoulder. "But where does that leave me?"

The anger Kenny felt suddenly balled in the centre of his chest and changed to an overwhelming ache. He was ashamed of himself for brushing off the effect the tabloid articles had had on Luke. He'd been so busy trying to get close to Eli he hadn't been a very good friend to Luke. Kenny understood that now.

"Hopefully not looking for a new best friend, because we've been through too much shit together to give up on each other now." Kenny walked over to the sink and wrapped his arms around Luke's neck from behind. He kissed the side of his best friend's head. "Truce?"

Luke nodded.

"You still have to work things out with Eli," Kenny reminded Luke. "I can't do that for you."

"I know. I'll think of something."

* * * *

On his way home, Eli heard a car pull up beside him. His first reaction was fear. He readied himself to run but was met by Zac's smiling face.

"What're you doing out and about so early?" Zac asked, putting his car in park.

Eli walked over to the open window. "I thought it was a nice morning for a walk. What about you?"

"I'm on my way to the bakery. Wanna ride?"

Eli rarely ate sweets, but the thought of a gooey cinnamon roll appealed to him. "I shouldn't, but I will."

Chuckling, Zac gestured to the car. "Hop in."

"Your lungs must be doing better," Zac said once Eli was buckled in.

"Yep. They feel good. I haven't started back at The Gym yet, but I'll get there." Eli didn't mention the stabbing although he knew full well Zac had heard about it, everyone in town had. "So where's Jakob?"

"He's working today, so I thought I'd take some goodies to the station. What're you doing later? Plan on going to the game?"

"Nah. I think it would be best if I didn't," Eli answered.

"Why's that?"

Eli shrugged. "I think Luke would like a day with Kenny without me in it. What about you?"

Zac shook his head. "The only thing I like about football is watching Jakob's ass in a tight pair of shorts. Since he won't be playing, I don't see any reason to go."

Eli nodded his understanding.

"We could go to the park though. It's a cool enough day to build a fire in the pit and roast some hot dogs and marshmallows, if you're interested?" Zac parked in front of Brynn's Bakery and turned off the engine.

Eli had already been hurt that morning by someone he thought was becoming a real friend. He wasn't sure he was ready to be fooled again, although Zac clearly had no agenda, unlike Luke. As a matter of fact, Eli knew Zac better than Kenny did. "Yeah. I think I'd like that."

* * * *

Kenny was busy cleaning the blood from his scraped elbow when a student he'd had several years earlier spoke to him.

"Didn't I see you with Mr. Sanchez at Brewster's?" Chad shook his head. "I mean O'Brien's last night?"

"Yeah," Kenny answered.

Chad glanced around the emptying field. "Where's he at? I didn't get a chance to talk to him before you guys took off."

Although Kenny and Luke had made peace earlier, the things Luke had said to Eli still stung. "Eli was reminded that he wasn't an alumnus."

Chad's head jerked back. "Are you kidding me? I wouldn't have even graduated if it hadn't been for Mr. Sanchez."

"You and half the guys playing today," Kenny agreed.

"That's fucked up. Who told him that?"

"Doesn't matter."

"It does to me. I'd like to set whoever said it straight." Chad's hands fisted at his sides.

It was clear to Kenny he wasn't the only one who found the idea that Eli didn't belong upsetting.

"You bringing him to the party tonight?" Chad asked.

"Probably not. I doubt Eli will feel much like it, and I'd rather spend the time with him." Kenny realised how that must have sounded. "I mean, it's not like I don't enjoy being around everyone, but these days, Eli's my first priority."

Chad grinned. "Good. Will you let him know I was asking about him?"

"Sure. He'll like that."

"And tell him thank you for making us learn all those Latin root words. I had no idea how important those were, but they saved my ass last year."

Kenny remembered learning them from Eli when he was in school. All the students groaned because it wasn't a requirement, but Eli had promised them the knowledge would come in handy in ways they wouldn't believe. As usual, Eli had been correct. To this day, Kenny pulled out his Latin foundation to figure out medical terms when he read them in the newspaper or whatever.

"I'll tell him," Kenny agreed.

"Thanks. If I don't see you later, maybe you can convince Mr. Sanchez to come to the picnic in the park tomorrow."

"Maybe," Kenny replied. He doubted it, but he didn't share that with Chad.

Chad jogged off to join a group of men his own age and Kenny walked to his Jeep. He pulled the phone out of the locked glove compartment and called Eli. It rang several times before Eli picked up.

"Hey. How was the game?"

"Sucked. My team lost, and I skinned my elbow," Kenny said.

"Poor baby. Remind me to kiss it later."

"No worries there. Where're you at?"

"Enjoying a peaceful afternoon with Zac. Did you get things worked out with Luke?"

"Pretty much." Wanting to steer away from his argument with Luke, Kenny changed the subject. "Hey, I just talked to Chad Bullock, you remember him?"

"Of course. How's he doing?"

"Great. He was pissed he didn't get a chance to talk to you. Told me to thank you for making him learn Latin."

Eli laughed. "Honestly? That's probably the number one thing I hear from graduates. Of course it doesn't make trying to get them to learn it any easier, but at least I know I'm providing them with a good foundation for the future."

"Amen," Kenny agreed. He heard someone speaking in the background and assumed it was Zac.

"Zac's decided to throw a get-together later if you want to come over before your party," Eli said.

"Are you going to be there?"

Eli chuckled. "Yes. Why does that make a difference?"

"Sure as hell does, beside's, I figured something out today."

"Yeah, what's that?" Eli asked.

"I may have gone to school with some of these people, but besides Luke, not a one of them is really a friend. Hell, all my friends are transplants. They're the ones who chose to come to Cattle Valley, not grow up and leave."

"It's once a year, Kenny. You should still go to your party."

"Nope. I'd much rather spend an evening with you and *our* friends." Despite what Eli thought, the man did have friends. "Who knows, maybe I'll get lucky again."

"I think that's a pretty safe bet."

Kenny couldn't get over the change in Eli's mood since that morning. He sounded genuinely happy. "Ask Zac what I should bring?"

"Well, for starters, you can swing by my place and pick me up a pair of jeans. It's supposed to cool down, and I changed into shorts earlier not realising Zac was kidnapping me for the rest of the day."

"Okay. I can do that."

"Hang on." Eli asked Zac what they'd need for later. "Zac said just bring a cooler of beer and plenty of marshmallows since we've eaten the bag we bought earlier."

"Tell Zac I'll also pick up some hamburgers and buns. It sounds fun. No way should he foot the entire bill."

"I'll tell him. Then I'll tell him to call you back if he wants to argue."

"You do that. I'll make sure to turn off my phone." Kenny grinned. "So should I meet you at the park or Zac's?"

"Zac's. We're getting ready to head out. Jakob get's off in a couple of hours and we have people to invite."

"I need to shower and change, so I'll be there in about an hour."

"Oh, Zac said if no one answers the door we'll be around back."

"Don't worry. I'll find you." Kenny hung up and smiled. What had changed in the last several hours? Eli not only sounded happy and relaxed, but completely at ease with himself. Kenny made a mental note to tackle Zac later and give him a big bear hug, with Jakob's permission of course.

* * * *

After stuffing himself with two hamburgers and a huge pile of Zac's homemade potato salad, Eli stretched out in one of the thickly padded lounge chairs. "What a perfect day," he said, closing his eyes.

"I wouldn't go to sleep if I were you. Zac still has to make the ice cream," Rio said.

"Mmmm. I don't know that I've ever had homemade ice cream."

"Where the hell have you been, living under a rock?" Rio chuckled.

"Something like that," Eli answered. He opened his eyes and turned to grin at Rio. He'd enjoyed watching the man eat earlier. "How do you manage to put away so much food and stay in such great shape?"

Rio pointed towards himself. "Hello? I own a gym."

Eli rolled his eyes. "I know that, but even when I worked out every day I still had to watch what I ate. I'm just saying it sucks."

Rio shrugged. "I burn a lot of calories in a day. You should try pleasing two horny fools."

"No thanks." Eli chuckled at the idea. "I have a feeling keeping up with Kenny's going to be hard enough. I'll be forty-five in a couple of months. I'm getting too old for sex more than once a day."

Rio grinned and pointed towards Dr. Browning. "Sam's got a few years on you, and I have a feeling he does just fine in that department."

Nate walked over and joined Rio on the lounge chair. "Who're you talking about now?"

"Eli thinks he's too old to have sex more than once a day. I suggested he ask Doc Browning," Rio explained.

Nate looked around. "Hey, Matt!"

Matt Jefferies turned towards Nate. "Yeah?"

"You like sex more than once a day?" Nate yelled across the yard.

Eli's cheeks heated at the nosey question.

Matt grinned. "Sorry, Nate, I don't have time to service you, too. I'm too busy keeping up with the two I have."

"Okay, just asking." Nate settled back against Rio's chest and crossed his arms. "See? If you've got someone who turns you on, you're never too old."

Before Eli could answer, Ryan came stalking over towards their chairs. "Did I just hear you right?" Ryan asked Nate, a scowl on his handsome face.

"Relax. I was just taking an impromptu poll."

"He was," Rio agreed, backing up Nate's story.

"Where've you been?" Nate asked, reaching out to hold Ryan's hand.

"On the phone." Ryan looked at Eli. "Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure." Eli got up and stood beside his chair. "What're the odds that this'll still be empty by the time I get back?"

"Slim to none," Nate answered. "Unless, you have a friend keep it warm for you."

Eli smiled. "And do I have a friend who would be willing to do that for me?"

Nate stood and flopped into Eli's chair. "I suppose."

Eli followed Ryan towards the side of the house. "Something wrong?"

"No, right, actually. I just received a call from Crescent City. Mike Burger was just picked up for destruction of private property and trespassing." Ryan grinned. "Those prints we took from the front of your house matched the bastard's."

Although happy about Mike being forced to answer for defacing his house, Eli was hesitant to mention the stabbing. "And the other?" he finally asked.

"Nothing new on that front." Ryan put his hand on Eli's shoulder and squeezed. "Sorry."

Eli shook his head. "It's not your fault. At least he'll be brought up on charges for the spray paint, right?"

"Yes, but since his record is otherwise clean, they'll probably let him off with a fine and community service." Ryan shrugged. "You may get lucky. The judge might order Mike to pay for the damages to your property."

Eli nodded. "That'd be great. I've had a hell of a time getting anything from the insurance company."

"I wish I could do more," Ryan said.

Eli knew he was no different than the thousands of people who were victimised without justice on a daily basis. "I know." He nodded once more. "Thanks for telling me."

"Just continue to keep your eyes open. I'm not saying you should walk around paranoid, but short of building an electric fence around Cattle Valley, it's your best defence."

Ryan was right. Even the friendliest towns couldn't keep crime from knocking on their door once in a while.

"Come on, let's rejoin the party."

Eli turned and started back towards the back of the house. He scanned the area for Kenny and found him on the deck talking to Luke and Jakob. Eli's steps faltered. He considered his options and finally decided to go back to his chair and let Kenny come to him once he was ready. Although Kenny said he'd made peace with Luke, Eli wasn't ready to get within firing range of Luke's jealousy again.

* * * *

"Ice cream's ready," Zac shouted.

Getting in line, Kenny picked up two bowls and held them out.

"I can get you a bigger bowl if you're that hungry," Zac said with a chuckle.

"Funny. One's for Eli. You know he's never had homemade ice cream," Kenny explained.

"He told me. Why do you think I decided to make it tonight? I wouldn't do that for just anyone." Zac winked. "He's a good guy."

Kenny's gaze wandered to Eli. "Yeah, he is."

Bowls in hand, Kenny walked over to the lazy group surrounding the fire pit.

"There you are," Eli greeted, moving his feet to make room for Kenny to sit on the end of the lounge chair.

"Brought you something." Kenny held out Eli's ice cream.

"Thanks. Rio was going to get me some." Eli searched the crowd. "Should I tell him?" he asked Nate.

Nate laughed. "Naw, he'll eat 'em both."

Eli settled back and lifted his spoon to his mouth. Kenny couldn't take his eyes off the man he loved. When Eli's eyes rolled back and he let out a satisfied moan, Kenny's cock stiffened. "Good?" Kenny asked.

"Oh. My. God. Why've I never had this before?" Eli took another spoonful and repeated the process.

"Ice cream's my new favourite," Kenny mumbled, as he watched Eli devour the bowl's contents.

Laughter caught his attention and Kenny glanced over to Nate and Ryan, snuggled together but staring at Kenny. "What?"

Nate covered his mouth and shook his head. "The two of you are so cute together."

"Cute?" Kenny questioned.

Ryan laughed and grabbed Nate between his legs. "I think he means hot." Ryan groped Nate for a second. "Yes, he definitely means hot."

Eli set his empty bowl on the ground and looked at Nate like he had a screw loose. "I've never been hot in my life."

The entire group broke into laughter. Rio ambled up and started to pass his extra bowl of ice cream to Eli, but when he saw Eli set an empty one down, he grinned and walked back over to stand beside Ryan and Nate with both bowls of ice cream. "What's so funny?"

"Eli doesn't think he's hot," Ryan explained, taking one of the bowls from Rio.

After scowling at Ryan, it was Rio's turn to look at Eli like *he* had a screw loose. "What? You really think all your students moon over you because you're such a good teacher?"

"I am a good teacher," Eli argued.

"Of course you are, babe," Kenny put a hand on Eli's thigh before leaning in to give his lover a kiss.

"He is," Luke said, joining the conversation. Kenny glanced at the grin on his best friend's face. "But he's also hot." Luke looked at Kenny. "Did you ever go a class without getting a boner?"

"Shut the fuck up," Kenny said. He felt his face heat and knew he was bright red.

Luke chuckled and took a seat on the soft grass. Despite their fight earlier in the day, Luke had a way of apologising that seemed seamless. Kenny didn't realise he'd forgiven the man until they were sharing a laugh.

Luke glanced at Eli and grinned. "Thank you for putting my best friend out of his misery."

Kenny watched Eli closely for his reaction. It was obvious to him, if not anyone else, that Eli was still hurt by Luke's morning comments. "You're welcome," Eli said, straight faced.

Luke must have also seen the damage he'd done to his budding friendship with Eli. His big eyes blinked several times before he attempted an awkward smile. Standing, Luke picked up Eli's bowl. "I'll go toss this for you."

Kenny held out his empty bowl. When Luke tried to take it, Kenny held on. "Thank you." He held Luke's gaze, hoping his friend understood.

Luke shrugged, and Kenny released his grip on the bowl. "I'm gonna head out. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Kenny watched Luke leave with a lump in his throat. He was about to call his best friend back when Eli jumped up.

"I'll be right back," Eli said before jogging after Luke.

Easing his way up the chair, Kenny took Eli's spot and closed his eyes. "Damn I love that man." He felt warmed by the gesture and he didn't care who knew it.

* * * *

Eli caught up to Luke as he reached his motorcycle. "Can I talk to you?"

Luke lifted his helmet from the seat and turned around. "I shouldn't have come."

"That's bullshit. You may not like me, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy your friends," Eli said.

Luke hugged the helmet against his chest. "You see, the problem is that I do like you. I was just jealous. What I said about you this morning is unforgivable. I wish I could take it back, but the damage has already been done, hasn't it?"

Lying had never been something Eli engaged in. He simply nodded while he tried to gather his thoughts. He didn't hate Luke. "I was hurt, I won't kid you. But I think the reason I reacted as strongly as I did was because everything you said, I'd already said to myself. I've always known Kenny deserved better. He's one of the most amazing men I've ever met, so I can see where you'd be jealous."

"You're wrong," Luke said, cutting Eli off. "Kenny deserves you. My jealousy has nothing to do with the love the two of you feel for each other. It's more a question of time. I'm used to him being around to ground me when I fuck things up."

"He is good at that," Eli agreed with a grin. "I know we've been selfish with our time lately, but that's because it's still new to us. I'm sure Kenny didn't mean to ignore you."

"I know. He's not that kind of guy."

A week earlier, Eli would have told Luke he had nothing to worry about because Kenny's attraction to him would blow over quickly, but now he hoped he knew differently. "Kenny needs you in his life, Luke. Don't ever doubt that."

Luke's mouth lifted into a half smile. "Not as much as he needs you."

The idea made Eli feel good all over, but this wasn't about him. "It's just a different kind of need. Maybe you should suggest a weekly poker game, or the two of you could join a pool league at O'Brien's? Something you guys can do together, just the two of you."

"And you'd be okay with that?" Luke asked.

"Why wouldn't I be? I want to love Kenny, not consume him."

With a genuine smile on his handsome face, Luke nodded. "Thanks for being so nice about this. I'll talk to him when I get a chance."

"The sooner the better. Why don't you drag him to that picnic tomorrow."

Luke shook his head. "Can't. I've already got plans, but I'll look into the poker thing. You play?"

"Yeah, but I don't wanna be included. I think it's healthy for a relationship to miss each other on occasion."

Luke settled his helmet on his head. "You're alright, Mr. S."

Chuckling, Eli turned to go. "Drive carefully."

"Always do," Luke answered before he started his bike.

Eli returned to the party feeling good about his talk with Luke. In time, maybe they could get over the hump in the road and become real friends.

Chapter Eight

A hard cock pressing against his ass woke Kenny the following morning. He heard Eli's soft snore and grinned. Although Eli professed to be a bottom, it seemed his cock had other ideas.

Kenny slowly reached for the bottle of lube they'd used only hours earlier and poured a sizeable amount into his hand, dripping some onto the sheet below. It had been a while for him, but Kenny wasn't opposed to being filled by Eli's fat cock.

Reaching behind himself, Kenny used the majority of the lube to slick his hole. He took his time, running his finger around the puckered hole, feeling the tight muscles soften at his touch. Damn, he'd forgotten how good it felt.

"Mmmm." Eli moaned in his ear. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"What makes you think that? You're the one who's been poking me in the ass with your morning wood."

Eli took his hand off Kenny's chest and reached for the lube. "Help me out?"

"My pleasure." Kenny dripped lube onto Eli's fingers. "Just do me a favour and keep that scratchy cast away from my ass."

Chuckling, Eli's fingers replaced Kenny's. "I might be a little rusty at this."

"You and me both," Kenny assured his lover.

Eli stopped in the process of working a finger into Kenny's hole. "We don't have to if it bothers you."

Shoving back, Kenny impaled himself on Eli's finger. "Oh, shit!" Kenny's entire body broke out in goose bumps at the invasion. Damn. The sensation was unbelievable and it was only Eli's finger. What would it feel like with his lover's cock?

"More," Kenny begged. He felt another finger probe his hole for entrance at the same time as soft lips began to kiss his neck.

"Do you have any idea how much I love you?" Eli whispered.

"No. Why don't you tell me?" It may be self-indulgent, but Kenny had waited ten long years.

"I was so afraid to love you." Eli rested his forehead on Kenny's shoulder as his fingers continued their smooth slide in and out of him. "Wanting something and having the guts to go after it are two completely different things."

"I know, babe." Kenny reached up and ran his hand over Eli's hair. "I think I understand now why you shut yourself off for so long. I'm just grateful you bought that audio book."

Eli shook his head. "It wasn't the CDs. Hell, I only listened to half of the first disc. It was you. Watching you on that football field the night of the attack, I knew I would sacrifice everything I'd ever believed for a chance to be with you."

Eli removed his fingers and picked up the bottle of lube once more. Soon, the head of his cock pressed against Kenny's hole. "I love you," Eli whispered as he slowly worked his length inside Kenny.

"I love you, too. More every day if that's even possible," Kenny said as soon as he could relax enough to speak.

Eli had made his fears quite clear in the past several weeks. Even though Kenny would never tell him, he vowed to put his own life on the line to keep his lover safe. "We're together for good, right?" Kenny asked.

Eli's rhythm faltered. "That depends on you, I guess."

Kenny craned his neck to look Eli in the eyes. "No. That depends on you. Accept me and everything I have to give you. Believe me, after a lifetime spent without the attention of the ones I loved, I have a feeling I may get pretty damn needy."

Pulling out of Kenny's body, Eli rolled Kenny to lie flat on his back before climbing on top of him. Eli repositioned his cock and drove in to the hilt. "You won't ever have to worry about me ignoring you. I'm sorry you had to deal with that from your folks. It wasn't the way your childhood should've been."

Kenny grinned. "I could say the same to you." He spread his legs further apart as Eli started fucking him harder.

They gave up on talking as Eli's speed increased. It didn't matter to Kenny who of them was doing the fucking, it truly was making love. Now that he knew how Eli felt, everything, including sex, took on a whole new dimension. Kenny welcomed his new life with open arms.

"You feel amazing," Eli panted. "I'm not going to last much longer."

Reaching between their sweaty bodies, Kenny grabbed and squeezed his cock. "That's mutual, babe," he said, feeling his balls draw up. He reached down and grabbed Eli's ass with his free hand. "Almost there."

"Yeah," Eli grunted.

Kenny was thrust over the edge first, soaking his hand and stomach with cum. He was still floating when he heard Eli shout his name.

Eli collapsed on Kenny's chest almost immediately, panting for air. Kenny rested both hands on Eli's back, rubbing soothing circles against the bronzed skin. Although Eli claimed his lungs were better than ever, Kenny knew the man was struggling.

"Where's your inhaler?" Kenny asked.

"Don't need it. Just give me a sec."

"The hell you don't." Kenny rolled Eli to the side and dug in Eli's bedside drawer until he came up with the small inhaler. He shook it, hoping it still contained enough medicine. Placing the inhaler at Eli's lips, Kenny kissed his lover's temple. "Here, babe, breathe some of this in."

Eli did as instructed without further argument. Kenny pulled the inhaler away after he felt Eli breathe in two solid puffs of the medicine. "Good. Just relax."

With his eyes closed, Eli finally grinned. "Will you always try to mother me?"

"Nope," Kenny answered right away. "But I'll always try to partner you."

* * * *

Eli was making a pot of coffee when he heard something scrape the side of his house. He dropped the carafe in the sink and spun around, oblivious to the sound of glass breaking as the pot hit the enamel sink.

He started to run to the bathroom to get Kenny but stopped just short of the hallway. *What the hell am I doing?* He shook his head. *I will not let this stupid fear dictate my life.* Eli knew if he said it enough times, he'd eventually believe it.

"Help me out here," someone said from outside the living room window.

With a deep breath, Eli slowly walked towards the front door. He gripped the doorknob so tight his knuckles turned white. *You can do this.* After another deep breath, Eli unlocked the deadbolt and threw the door open. "What the hell..."

"Hey, good morning," Luke said, paintbrush in hand.

Eli's heart skipped a beat when he realised it wasn't vandals but alumni and friends milling around in his front yard. "What's going on?"

"We're tired of seeing these words on your place, so we thought we'd give you a hand in getting rid of them," Zac said.

Eli felt his eyes sting as he stared at the people gathered to help paint his house. So overcome with emotion, Eli held up a finger before stepping back inside to close the door. He slid to the floor as the first sob escaped.

"What happened?" Kenny asked, rushing into the room wearing only a pair of underwear.

Eli shook his head and pointed towards the front yard. "They're here," he choked out.

Anger replaced concern in Kenny's expression as he stood, ready to go into battle for Eli. The gesture touched Eli to the core.

"Move, babe, I'll take care of them." Kenny tried to slide Eli away from the door.

Eli stopped him with a shake of his head. "No. It's Luke, and Zac, and...hell I don't even know who all's out there. They're painting my house."

"Huh?" Kenny went to the window and pulled back the curtains.

Eli chuckled when he saw a grinning Luke wave at Kenny. "They said they were tired of seeing the spray paint."

Kenny laughed. "Yeah, I'm sure that had something to do with it, but more than likely they wanted to show you how much they care about you." Kenny knelt and pulled Eli into his arms. "There's not a single person out there who doesn't know what it feels like to be looked down upon for who they sleep with. I think it's their way of telling you that you're not alone."

Eli nodded. "I guess we'd better get out there and help them then."

Kenny gave Eli a deep kiss before standing. "Maybe I should get dressed first."

"That might be a good idea."

* * * *

Because Luke hadn't been able to find an exact match to Eli's paint colour, the group had ended up repainting the entire house. Now, as Eli stood on the sidewalk next to Kenny he was forced to, once again, swallow around the lump in his throat.

"We suck at painting," Kenny commented.

Eli smiled. Kenny was right, it wasn't the neatest paint job he'd ever seen. He doubted his bushes would ever recover from the trampling and paint spatter, but it didn't matter to him a bit. "I think it looks better than it ever has."

Kenny wrapped his arm around Eli's waist. "You don't have to say that. The guys have all headed to the bar. It's just the two of us here."

Looking up into Kenny's blue eyes, Eli shook his head. "I wasn't lying. My house has always been perfect because I demanded it look that way, but with a few brush strokes and a hell of a lot of heart, my friends accomplished in a day what I've tried a lifetime to do."

"What's that, babe?"

"Make a home. A real home that the two of us can live in and be happy." Eli pulled Kenny's head down for a kiss. "Move in with me?"

Kenny grinned. "I'm glad you said that because I just asked Luke today if he'd be interested in buying my place."

Eli's brows rose in surprise. "And if I hadn't asked you to move in?"

"I would pay Luke rent and continue to try and wear you down. Not sure if you know this about me, but I'm pretty patient when it comes to waiting for what I want."

The last ten years crossed Eli's mind. "I risked losing you once. Now that I've finally wised up, I don't plan on taking any more chances." He gave Kenny another kiss, sliding his tongue across Kenny's. His lover tasted of beer, sunshine and laughter. It was the perfect combination for an almost perfect day.

Pulling back, he looked back at the house once more. "You know, the only thing that could make this day even better?"

Kenny's hand reached down to squeeze Eli's ass. "I have a pretty good idea."

"I'm sure you do, and I'm sure that'll happen, but I was thinking more along the lines of buying all my friends a beer. Feel like taking me to O'Brien's?"

"Absolutely."

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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