

# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

## MEASURING THE REIN

Jae Moran

## Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....	3
Measuring the Rein – Information.....	5
Measuring the Rein.....	6
Chapter 1.....	7
Chapter 2.....	22
Chapter 3.....	33
Chapter 4.....	47
Chapter 5.....	61
Chapter 6.....	75
Chapter 7.....	89
Chapter 8.....	104
Chapter 9.....	121
Chapter 10.....	133
Author Bio.....	138

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## MEASURING THE REIN

**By Jae Moran**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Measuring the Rein, Copyright © 2014 Jae Moran

Cover Design by Goodreads M/M Romance Group

Photographs from Public Domain Pictures.net

[Sunset](#); [Sunset on the beach](#); [Smooth sunset](#);

[Morning mist background 6](#);

[Blue sunset and boat](#); [Sunset](#); [Sunset 15](#)

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

# MEASURING THE REIN

By Jae Moran

## Photo Description

Black and white photo of a muscular cowboy standing in a field, holding his saddle in one hand. He is shirtless and wearing jeans. His head is dropped to his chest and his face is obscured by his hat.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I thought that I could hide who I really am from everyone. My family and friends don't know my secret, I'm gay. More specifically I'm a gay cowboy, I've been riding the rodeo circuit for several years now. What's worse is my best friend, the person I've shared everything with since we were in grade school, doesn't know the 'real' me. So here I stand, saddle in hand, trying to muster up the courage to come clean with him. He's over in the arena getting ready to ride one of the most dangerous bulls in the circuit, he's probably looking for me right now for support. We've been there for each other through all the injuries and self-doubts, been supportive for each other when our families have thought we were crazy for leading a rodeo life.*

*I take a deep breath and go watch my friend, the one I'm about to lose when I tell him I'm gay, I wonder what he'll think when I tell him I'm in love with him too?*

Sincerely,

Lily

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** cowboys, rodeo, first time, coming out, friends to lovers

**Word Count:** 56,545

# **MEASURING THE REIN**

**By Jae Moran**

## Chapter 1

The most difficult questions in life are not the ones without answers. They're the ones with plenty of possible solutions and you can't live with any of them. Gavin Hayes has been wrestling with one of these dilemmas for the last thirteen years. He was gay, and no matter how hard he hoped and prayed, that was never going to change. Every time he thought about coming out, all he could see were the enormous risks and no potential rewards save one... his personal integrity. Lying to his family and friends weighed on him, but was he willing to sacrifice his whole life in order to come out? After all this time, he finally thought the answer was yes.

Gavin was a professional saddle bronc rider on a national rodeo tour, and he thought he knew something about being fearless, but he was terrified. It wasn't so much he thought his parents would throw him out or anything dramatic. Gavin just didn't want to disappoint them. His dad would be crushed to know his family line would end with Gavin. His sister, Piper, would eventually give them grandchildren, but there would never be a fifth generation of Hayes progeny to grow up at Hazy Hill Farm. Those were things he thought he could overcome, but rodeo and Toby were entirely different.

Being out as a nationally ranked rodeo cowboy was an absolute impossibility. If his secret was ever discovered, he would lose his sponsors and be shunned, or worse, by the people he considered his friends and colleagues on the circuit. When he was in college, one of the ropers got caught kissing a guy behind the stock barn. The kid tried to tough it out, but he was beaten and bullied over and over until he quit rodeo entirely. Gay rodeo was out there, but you couldn't make a living at it. Gavin had finished in the top twenty saddle bronc riders since his first year as a professional. He placed twelfth last year and was sixth in the money so far this year. Gay rodeo would be a huge step back for him. He knew there had to be other guys on the tour who were gay, there were always rumors, but he stayed as far away from them as humanly possible.

And then there was Toby. Gavin sat at the picnic table behind the RV lot outside the arena making a small repair to his saddle. He couldn't stop the sigh that bubbled up in his chest. Toby Prescott had been his best friend since they were twelve. They'd helped each other through everything that happened in their lives so far, from Toby's dad's death when they were fifteen, to

convincing their parents to let them seriously pursue rodeo during their freshman year of college and all the milestones in between.

Gavin watched the activity moving in and out of the rodeo arena, trying to imagine what he could say to ensure he wouldn't lose his best friend. After a few moments, he could imagine Toby sitting in the dinette of the RV they shared with a beer in front of him. His sandy brown hair, in the same short ivy-league haircut he'd kept since he bought his first cowboy hat, was a little squashed from the day and his pine green eyes curious and concerned about whatever Gavin needed to say. The next image he conjured was of Toby scowling angrily with his jaw clenched right before he started yelling, calling Gavin a faggot and a liar, followed by Toby storming out and never speaking to Gavin again. He knew that was unlikely, especially if he left his revelation at his being gay, but Gavin wasn't sure he could reveal the first part without the second. Gavin was not only gay, but also stupidly and irrevocably in love with his best friend.

"This is fucking insane. I can't do this," Gavin muttered to no one. He couldn't risk blowing up his whole life only to lose the one person he couldn't live without. When he fell in love with Toby was a mystery, sometimes it felt like he was born loving his best friend. Checking his phone for the time, he knew he had to get back to the arena. Toby was probably already looking for Gavin. Bull riders, like saddle bronc riders, were nothing if not slaves to their routine.

He stretched his arms into the air, feeling the sun on his shoulders and chest. He'd taken his shirt off after his ride earlier to absorb a little vitamin D on the hot August afternoon while he did his repairs. Picking up the saddle, Gavin walked across the field towards the trailer. About halfway across, he stopped when the ache in his heart overwhelmed him. Since the start of the rodeo season, his loneliness and the weight of his secret had begun to manifest themselves as physical pain on top of the bruises and injuries which were constants in the life of a saddle bronc rider. He dropped his chin to his chest and took a few breaths as he stood there holding his saddle in one hand. All he wanted was to live an honest and open life with Toby by his side. Why was that too much to ask?

He didn't even know if Toby could reciprocate his feelings. Gavin thought he'd seen Toby check out some of the guys on the circuit in addition to the multitude of women following him around. Rodeo was certainly full of eye candy of both genders. And then every once in a while, Toby would look at him



and smile in a way that was more intimate and loving than is usually shared between friends. Gavin knew Toby had slept his way through his share of girls, but that had tapered off to almost nothing since last season. It was wishful thinking, but Gavin thought Toby might be at least hetero-flexible, probably a one, maybe a two, on the Kinsey scale. Even more than the sex, Gavin wanted Toby to love him back someday. In any case, it all gave him too much hope to ever move on with his life.

“Dammit. I don’t have time for this.” Gavin trotted to the RV and took a navy shower before rushing over to the arena. He hoped Toby did well today. His friend hadn’t had the best week and finished out of the money so far. Odds were in Toby’s favor today though. He’d drawn the money bull of the day. Pomodoro was a dangerous asshole of a bull, but if you were one of the rare few who managed to stick, the scores had been awfully good.

When Gavin rounded the corner into the contestants’ area, Toby was sitting alone on a bench doing his visualization exercises before he looked up and smiled with the crooked grin Gavin knew belonged only to him. Returning the smile, Gavin’s heart clenched with a familiar ache. “Hey dude. You ready?”

“I am now. Where the hell have you been?”

“Fixing my saddle. I noticed a worn billet after my ride and thought I had time to fix it before you needed me.”

“I always need you, Gav.” There was that look again. Gavin couldn’t figure it out. “You’re my best friend.”

“I know... Tell me about Pomodoro’s last few rides.” It was Gavin’s way of getting Toby focused for his ride. They chatted about the bull’s recent history as Toby went through his stretching and warm-up routine. Toby was a sports science major in college and had developed a pretty intense training and warm-up program tailored to their needs. To be honest, Gavin knew Toby’s nutrition and training plans were responsible for a lot of their success.

Toby sat on the ground with his legs spread nearly into a split while he stretched his hips and thighs. “Gav, you going out tonight? The guys said something about going to Miss Kitty’s Place.” Miss Kitty’s Place was the local roadhouse that catered to rodeo cowboys looking for a party. It was the best spot in Coeur d’Alene to hook-up with a buckle bunny for the night.

“Naw. We’re done early today. I’m gonna make some real food, play some Xbox and go to bed. I’m not up to their brand of debauchery tonight.”

"I hear you. I wasn't feeling it either."

"We should start talking about next year over dinner." Gavin made a snap decision that would change everything. "I got some other stuff I need to talk to you about anyway."

"Anything wrong?" Toby looked worried.

"Not really. I got some stuff on my mind and Dad's been squawking about wanting me on the farm more. We'll talk later. You need to focus on warming up."

Valentín Figueroa, a roper from Brazil and one of their closest friends on the circuit, laughed as he walked up to Gavin and grinned mockingly at Toby. "Go on, yoga boy. Show us your moves."

"Fuck off, Val. You only dream of being able to do this." Toby smiled wickedly as he bent forward and lifted his leg into a standing split with little effort. Gavin almost let out a groan as Toby's package was perfectly on display in his Wranglers. For someone only five foot nine and about a hundred and sixty pounds, Toby's well-muscled body made him appear larger and more imposing than he actually was. Gavin had to look away as Toby repeated the stretch with the other leg.

"Hey, Val. Nice ride today." Gavin liked Valentín. He was one of the people who stayed with Toby at the hospital after Gavin wrecked last year.

"Thanks, you too. String Theory didn't give you much to work with, but at least you finished in the money. You guys going to Miss Kitty's tonight?"

"No. We're headed home early tomorrow and it's a long drive hungover. Where you heading?"

"Sacramento overnight then straight to Ellensburg. I have a meet and greet with a potential new sponsor. My agent thinks it's a good opportunity. We'll see." At their level, chasing sponsors was a necessary evil. Gavin was always amazed at how much time he spent wooing corporate sponsorship.

"Good luck. I just signed with Rimrock Denim. My mom says a huge box of clothes turned up at the house the other day. I'm gonna miss my Wranglers but a national sponsor is a national sponsor."

"You know it, man."

Gavin noticed Toby had stopped stretching and was glowering for all he was worth. Rolling his eyes, Gavin chuckled to himself. "Come on, Tobes,

focus. Calves and ankles. Let's go." If it were anyone else, he'd think Toby was jealous, but Gavin knew he just didn't like his routine interrupted.

Val looked to Toby. "I wanted to ask yoga boy about this damn nagging groin pull. The doc and physical therapist keep saying it takes time, but no matter how I stretch or what I do it doesn't get better. You helped Matty so much with his ab strain, I thought you might have an idea."

"I bet it's your psoas, not your groin. The pain is deeper than the groin pulls you've had before, yeah?"

"Exactly. I didn't know how to describe it, but that's it." The amazed look all the cowboys got when they realized Toby could help them passed over Val's handsome Brazilian face.

"I'm not a doc or a PT, so I can only give you my inexpert opinion. If it doesn't work, don't get pissed at me. Gav, I need to keep going. Show him the psoas stretch." Gavin rolled his eyes and knelt on the dirt, moved his left leg so his foot was on the ground and his leg formed a ninety degree angle at the knee. Toby continued. "From there, tighten your abs like you're gonna take a punch, tuck your ass tight, hands on your hips. Keep your back and pelvis as straight as you can. Lean forward until you feel the stretch, hold for twenty seconds and repeat three times. Switch to the other side, rinse and repeat. You have to be gentle with it until the muscle is stretched out and happy again. Once you can do that with your hands over your head and pain free, come back and I'll show you some exercises to strengthen the muscle. You'll be blown away by how much less lower back pain you'll have after you ride and I bet you'll see an increase in your average score within a couple months. If you run into trouble, ask me or Gav to demonstrate again."

"I can do that. Thanks, Toby. I know I give you shit for being yoga boy, but I've seen you help most of our friends get better at what we do and heal faster than we would otherwise. You're a good guy to have as a friend."

"No big. I like using the stuff I've learned, especially when it can help. Just so you know, I watched you ride in Casper, you could use some core work too and not the kind that makes the six-pack abs everyone seems to be chasing. Come see me when the pain's gone and I'll show you that too."

Gavin checked the time. "Come on, Tobe, you gotta finish stretching and get to your warm up."

"Yes, mother." Toby snarked at him.

Turning back to Val, Gavin knew he needed to focus as much as Toby did. His best friend was a bit off kilter from his uncharacteristically mediocre rides that weekend. "If we don't see you later, we'll definitely see you at Ellensburg. I gotta focus on the princess. He needs a good ride."

"Thanks again, Toby. I'll let you get back to your routine. Good luck."

\*\*\*\*

"You're up, Prescott," the chute boss hollered.

Toby climbed up to sit on the rail, stepping firmly on the back of the bull as he moved to straddle the chute. Pomodoro threw his head around in protest, banging his horns on the chute, but settled pretty quickly. Gavin stood at Toby's shoulder waiting for him to hand off the bull rope. They'd done this so many times it was fluid and well-choreographed. It didn't take long for Toby to get set. The last thing Gavin did was to lean in to the side of Toby's helmet and say the same thing he'd said for almost every one of Toby's rides. "Time to dance with the devil. Good luck, cowboy." It was a little silly and pretentious, but somehow it became a tradition back when they were both seventeen and new to the sport. Gavin banged on Toby's helmet as he stood up straight. Toby did his cross-checks one more time before he nodded his head to signal the gate keeper.

The first two seconds were always the worst for Gavin. Once he could get distracted by analyzing Toby's ride, it was easier. Most people would expect Gavin to be afraid of Toby getting hurt, but that wasn't it. At. All. He stressed over two things. One, the bull wouldn't give Toby enough fight for a high score and two, Toby would get bucked off before his eight seconds were up.

Gavin had been doing this long enough to understand Toby was going to get hurt, it was just a question of when and how bad. Injuries happened. Toby made a promise to his Grandma Betty when she gifted him the money to attend their first rodeo camp the summer after they graduated high school. She managed to extract a commitment from him to wear a helmet for every ride as long as he competed to protect his handsome face. Grandma Betty would call tonight after watching the television broadcast of the rodeo and without a doubt she would mention the helmet.

Out of the chute, Pomodoro exploded into a huge leap, kicking and rolling his shoulders hard to the left. Gavin held his breath as Toby countered the move without losing his seat. Sometimes, when Gavin could pull his attention back far enough from studying the details of the ride, Toby's athleticism and grace

stole his breath. On the next buck, the big, red bull started spinning into Toby's hand while still in the air. Toby got shifted out of position a little, but he pulled up on his bull rope and got himself back into his set position on the next jump, which was good because the damn bull started spinning in the opposite direction again while he was still in the air. All Gavin could think was *come on, come on come on, come on...* and he only took a full breath again when he heard the buzzer sound. The bull was a little wily, and Toby was forced to dismount away from his hand before he could scramble to the fence.

Gavin cheered and pumped his fist in the air. It was by far the best bull ride of the entire event. He couldn't help but watch Toby across the arena while they waited for the score to be announced. After a few seconds, Toby pulled off his helmet and looked back to Gavin. His smile was as broad and open as it had ever been. Gavin's heart swelled in his chest, full of love for this man. The announcer reported a score of eight-seven. Toby leapt to the top of the fence and raised his hands in triumph. The crowd was still going nuts, and Gavin was right there with them. As Toby walked out of the arena, Gavin jumped off his perch on the bucking chute and hugged him as tight as he could. There were a couple riders left, but Gavin knew it was enough for Toby to win the day.

They talked about the ride all the way back to the contestants' area. Friends and fans stopped to congratulate him along the way. Toby was always willing to stop and thank the fans for their support. Those diehard fans were the ones who kept him in sponsorship money and they deserved his gratitude. In the locker room, Toby hugged Gavin and put a hand on the back of his neck. Something weird crossed Toby's face and Gavin was once again confused because on any gay man that look would precede a kiss. Toby shuttered his eyes and pulled away before Gavin could wrap his brain around what was happening. Damn. The conversation later was going to be interesting. The butterflies in Gavin's belly morphed into California condors which left him more than a little nauseated.

\*\*\*\*

"Dammit, Gav, put the dishes in the sink. I'll help you do them later. Tell me what's going on." Toby sprawled on the sofa in the RV with a beer in his hand. Gavin stood leaning on the kitchen counter. He could tell Toby was anxious by the tiniest twitch in his left eye.

"I talked to my folks on Wednesday. Mom had spent the night in the hospital after having some minor chest pain. Dad forced her to go to the ER to get it checked out."

“Fuck. Was it a heart attack?”

“No, thank God, but she was diagnosed with the early stages of coronary artery disease. They caught it while she’s still healthy, but she has to take some new meds and make some lifestyle changes.”

“Let me guess... she needs to improve her diet and reduce stress. I can’t imagine they think she needs more exercise. She already works harder than most of the ranchers we know. She runs your folks livestock operation practically by herself.”

“Yeah. That’s the problem. Dad called me back after Mom went to bed and told me, the doctor was clear. We need to find a way to reduce Mom’s workload and make her relax more. His solution is for me to spend more time at home working the farm and taking over the responsibility for the cattle and helping with the orchards, which would leave Mom with managing the sheep and the farm store.”

“What about Luis or Brendan? I thought they were being given more responsibility.”

“Luis is the assistant orchard manager under my dad and Brendan is the farm foreman. They know fruit trees and managing picking crews, not livestock. Dad’s going to hire some help to get them through the end of the year, but he’s hoping I’ll be willing to cut my rodeo time next year.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know yet. I told him I had to talk to you first.”

“Why?”

“We’ve needed to talk about next year for a while now, but you’re not going to like what I have to say.”

“Tell me.”

“It’s time for you to move to the PBR. No one understands why you haven’t already made the jump. People ask me all the time and I just shrug, but we both know you’ve held yourself back to stay with me. You’re my best friend and I love you for it, but it’s time for me to let you go. I’m only holding you back. If I were sure I’d be on the circuit full time next year, I might have waited another year, but shit Toby, I’ve never been as talented as you are. I can be happy as the Columbia River saddle bronc champion from now ’til my body gives out. You won’t be satisfied until you win the PBR world championship. We’ve always

known that.” Gavin tried hard to hide the pain he felt at acknowledging the truth of what he said. It was time to let Toby go.

“Maybe, but you don’t make my decisions for me, Gav. I haven’t moved up because I don’t want to make the switch until I am ready to storm the Built Ford Tough Series. The Touring series isn’t much different than what I’m doing now except there’s more money to win. I decided that doing this with you was worth giving up the extra income and I don’t regret it. We’re both gonna go into the National Championships in the top ten this year and we get to do it together. If we stick this out another year, we’ll both be serious contenders to win it all. Why wouldn’t I want to be able to do that together? We’ve come this far.”

“You don’t have to give up PRCA completely, ya know. Lots of guys do both, even at the BFTS level. They aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“So you’re really gonna do this?”

“It’s not what I want, but what choice do I have? I’m not willing to put my mom’s health at risk so I can chase some rodeo glory. While we’re home this week, I’m going to sit down with them and figure out how it will all work. Mom wants us at dinner tomorrow and I’d like you to be there. My dad is worried you’ll be upset. I don’t care if you are, for an hour you can pretend not to be and that it all works out great since you planned to move to the PBR anyway.”

“The only thing I’m upset about is Angie’s heart. Jesus. You think I’d care about anything else? Shit. She’s been more of a mom to me than my own since my dad’s heart attack. I’d give up bull riding right now if it would keep her healthy.”

“I know. I do. But Dad doesn’t want this to get in the way of you living your dream. Everyone knows my future is on Hazy Hill. I was never going to have a twenty-year pro rodeo career. Riding saddle broncs will always be part of my life, but it isn’t meant to be my whole life. You were born to be a professional bull rider, that’s who you are.”

“But it’s not all I am, Gav. I’m a man with a heart and soul who feels like he’s losing his best friend. I love our life. I love traveling with you, training with you, and doing this together. I don’t want it to end. I don’t know if I can do this without you.”

“Well, it’s time for you to find out, Tobes. Nothing is ending, it’s just changing. I’m still your best friend. You will always have a home at the farm. I

promise. Anyway, I'll still be on the circuit a lot, just not full-time. We'll make it work. I wasn't exactly ready to give all this up either, ya know."

"Nothing changes until after the end of the season, right?" Toby's words sounded so bittersweet in Gavin's ears he almost couldn't listen anymore. "We'll finish this together in Las Vegas, same as when we were seventeen at that tiny rodeo in Upton."

"Yup. Mom, Dad, Piper and Chad are all coming to Vegas for the finals again. They've booked flights and rooms already." His parents came to a few rodeos close to home each season, but Gavin's sister Piper and her husband Chad used seeing him ride as an excuse for a weekend getaway. They usually turned up at four or five rodeos a year all over the country.

"Angie told me when we were home last month. She stopped by the high school to give Mom the VIP tickets and hotel information for Ellensburg. My mom wouldn't commit to going to Vegas at all, never mind if she and Oscar wanted to travel with your family. You know, I've told my mom a dozen times I wanted her to be there to see me ride in the finals. I even said I'd pay for the trip. I know money is an issue for them, but she still wouldn't agree. I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

"You're not doing anything wrong. Your mom doesn't make it easy. She never has, even before your dad died. All you can do is keep trying."

"I guess. Sometimes I think I keep you around just for your family."

"They're your family too. You think my mom would call us 'her boys' if you weren't?"

"True enough. Why didn't you tell me about Angie when it happened? We could have gone home for a couple days, even if it meant we'd have to fly instead of taking the truck."

"Mom forbade it. She didn't want us to rush home like she was on her deathbed or something. And I didn't say anything because after I talked with Dad, I needed some time to think some things through."

"What's to think about? Your mom's sick. Your family needs you. You go home."

"It's not that easy. I needed to decide if I was ready to give up saddle bronc altogether or if I could stay on the pro tour at least part time. If it would still be worth it, when I wasn't going to qualify for the championship... I also have some personal stuff I need to work through, if I'm going to be home more."



“What personal stuff? I’m with you almost twenty-four seven... What else are you hiding from me?” Toby couldn’t hide the twitch in his thigh as he stopped himself from bouncing his leg.

This was the moment. Gavin could either come clean about being gay, or stay in the closet for the foreseeable future, if not forever. He didn’t want to be alone anymore. Even if he couldn’t be with Toby, Gavin wanted to find a love like his parents had. Ending all of the pain and shame he’d fought with for so long, was the only way forward. If it meant he lost Toby, his home and his family, Gavin could still make a life as a saddle bronc rider until he could afford to buy his own ranch somewhere. The irony of hearing Toby in his head telling him to “cowboy up, asshole” wasn’t lost on him.

Gavin dropped his head to his chest and took a few deep breaths as he tried to stop his hands from shaking. After a long silent pause, he raised his head and looked Toby square in the eyes. “I’m gay, Toby.”

As much as he’d wrestled with how this conversation would go, there was one response Gavin hadn’t considered. Toby closed his eyes and sighed, “I know.”

“You know. How long have you known?” Gavin was genuinely perplexed.

“About a year and a half.”

“How?”

“You told me.”

“I did not.”

“You did, but you were pretty high on pain meds at the time.”

“My wreck in Austin...” At Rodeo Austin last year, Major Tom threw him into a fence before kicking him as he ran off. His injuries included a severe concussion, a few broken ribs and a lacerated liver. After surgery and a few days in the hospital, Gavin returned to the circuit ten weeks later. “I don’t remember much from the ICU. What did I say?”

“It was maybe five in the morning. I’d been sitting with you all night. Your folks weren’t flying in ’til later in the day. Val, Matt, and Pietro were around but they’d wandered off for some food. You almost died, Gavin. You woke up, saw me sitting by your bed and holding your hand. I saw you close your eyes and thought you’d drifted off again, but you started mumbling that I wouldn’t even be there if I knew you were gay. I was stunned. I mean I’d wondered a few times, but...”

Okay. Gavin could cope with this. “You wondered?” Okay, that qualifies as a complete sentence, right?

“Well, yeah. I haven’t seen you date anyone since college and you don’t seem interested in most of the women who are always sniffing around, so I wondered... Wait. Do you have a secret boyfriend? Is that why you’re telling me now?”

“No, no boyfriend since college. I’m just sick of being lonely and dishonest.”

“At school? Really? We shared a room for four years. How did I not know?”

“I was careful and you weren’t looking. Remember Wes Lunsford... We dated for almost half of sophomore year.”

“Wes hated me.”

“That’s part of why we broke up. Do you hate me?” Gavin recoiled at sounding like an insecure little boy.

“No, Gay, no... I could never hate you. How long have you been worried about that?”

“Since I figured out I was gay, September twenty-sixth, two thousand and two in the boys’ locker room at the high school after soccer practice. One of the guys walked out of the shower room naked with a towel around his waist... a single glance and any doubt I had about being gay disappeared.” Gavin didn’t mention the guy was Toby.

“Wait... Two thousand two... We were fourteen. What about Jenna?”

Gavin figured Toby would get around to asking about Jenna. “High school was hard for me. I desperately wanted to be normal. Junior year I decided I would force myself straight. Jenna was a good Christian girl and took her abstinence pledge seriously. We didn’t have sex until we were freshmen at Wazzu. It was the beginning of the end for us. She started talking about getting married and having kids like it was a foregone conclusion. I couldn’t lead her on anymore. She deserved better than a husband who fantasized about Chris Hemsworth to get it up.”

Toby finished his beer and stood up to grab another out of the fridge. When he turned around, he raised his left eyebrow. “Chris Hemsworth? Awright.” Toby chuckled wickedly as he settled back on the sofa and some of the tension

evaporated from between them. "It doesn't matter to me that you're gay, Gav. But I am kinda pissed you didn't tell me. After Austin, I could see the barely hidden pain on your face every time you left a party to go home alone. You should have told me. I would never out you. Did you think I would?"

"I couldn't be sure how you'd react, Toby. I couldn't bear losing my best friend. Remember what happened to Josh Kitchens? He's the guy who got caught kissing one of the male concession workers behind the stock barn at Vernon Creek. People we know bullied him and beat him over and over until he dropped out of rodeo. He was nineteen. I heard from Brady Benning that when his parents found out, they kicked him out of the house and Josh committed suicide a few months later. I promised myself I was never going to be that guy."

"You didn't have to carry this alone."

Gavin whispered, "I couldn't risk losing you. I couldn't do it."

Toby burst off the sofa and moved into Gavin's space. "You'll never lose me. Friends to the end. Isn't that what we promised each other in middle school?" He reached out and hugged Gavin tightly. "It's okay, dude. It's gonna be okay."

It only took a few seconds for Gavin to relax into the hug. His love for Toby filled him as he accepted the comforting gesture. In a moment of terror, Gavin stepped back, putting a couple inches of distance between them. "What else did I say that night in the hospital?" Gavin sensed more than felt Toby's entire body freeze in response to his question. "I know there's more."

Toby stepped back further and froze. "Don't make me say it. Gav. I've told you enough."

"Finish it." Gavin's glare was angry enough to take the fight out of Toby.

"Please, Gav... Let it go. You were out of your mind." Toby crossed his arms, standing less than an arm's length from Gavin. Something must have shifted in Toby's head because he seemed to deflate as his breath left him. "Fine. You told me none of it mattered anyway because you would always love me, even if I could never love you back."

"Shit, shit, shit..." Gavin stammered. He felt like he was suspended in that moment of free fall between being thrown by a bronc and his body slamming into some immovable object, usually the arena floor.

“Did you mean it? Do you love me?” Toby’s expression was completely unreadable.

In a breathy, barely audible voice, Gavin whispered, “Yes.” It was only then that he felt a tear slip down his cheek. Gavin didn’t dare look at Toby again. He was too afraid of what he might see. The next thing Gavin knew Toby held his face gently in his hands, brushing the tear away with his thumb. Startled into paralysis, Gavin felt Toby guide his face closer and brush his lips with a tentative kiss. Toby pulled back a fraction of an inch before kissing Gavin again. When he pulled back again, Toby looked deeply into Gavin’s eyes before unmooring himself and launching into a full-scale assault of a kiss.

As the kiss deepened, hope filled Gavin while he prayed the kiss was more than just an experiment. It took him a nanosecond to return the kiss with an equal amount of passion, broadcasting his love for Toby in each movement. Gavin knew this might be his only opportunity to show Toby how he felt. Words couldn’t fully express the depth and breadth of his feelings and all he had was this one kiss.

Eventually, reality began to intrude once again, and Gavin pulled back from the kiss. He rested his forehead on Toby’s while they each caught their breath. Gavin separated them so he could see Toby’s eyes. He searched Toby’s handsome face looking for some handhold to grasp what the kiss meant. Was it pity? Was it goodbye? Was it an experiment? Was it real? Toby’s expression again gave nothing away. Gavin didn’t know where the boldness came from, but he needed to know what the hell was going on. “Tell me. Was I wrong? Could you someday love me back?”

“I don’t know.” It was Toby’s turn to whisper.

“That’s not a no. Do you want to find out?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know? You son of a bitch! You’ve had a year and a half to answer the question and you have nothing to give me. Shit, Toby. Man up and tell me what you want. I’ve spent years shredding my own heart in love with someone I thought would never want me back. Now you kiss me and you don’t know what it means. Jesus. Fuck, Toby. Can’t you see how cruel that is? Ya know what... Don’t answer. I can’t have this conversation right now. I’m going out and you need to pull your head out of your ass. I need some space. Please, don’t follow me.”

“Gav... let me explain...” Toby’s anguish was finally plain, but right then Gavin couldn’t care.

“Not now. Don’t wait up.” Gavin grabbed his keys and his hat as he walked out of the RV into the over-warm dusk.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 2

The sound of the screen door slapping shut was followed closely by the rumble of the truck driving off towards town. Toby was still standing in the middle of the RV with kiss-swollen lips and a hard dick. Not only had Gavin left without letting him explain, he'd taken Toby's truck leaving him stranded at the arena. It would be easier to deal with all this if he were angry with Gavin, but he wasn't. He was just confused.

Toby understood he was to some degree bisexual, but he'd never had any inclination to act on it. Until today. While he'd known since puberty that he was somehow different from his friends, it wasn't until after high school that he realized what he felt was attraction to some of the other boys as well as the girls. Even so, he certainly didn't think about Gavin that way, not then.

Truly accepting that he was sometimes attracted to men didn't happen until the end of their first year on the rodeo circuit. It had taken a long time to earn some respect on the tour. Eventually, the other cowboys realized that they were both talented and tough enough to survive in their brutal sport. As a gesture of friendship, Gavin and Toby were invited to have a few beers with some of the competitors, most of whom were in the top twenty of whatever discipline they competed in. At the bar, Toby saw Dean Barlow, one of his rodeo idols, dancing with one of the many buckle bunnies wearing more cleavage than shirt, but she wasn't what Toby noticed. He was absolutely mesmerized by the muscles in Dean's back highlighted by his tight T-shirt, and the more Dean danced, the more Toby was spellbound by Dean's tight little cowboy butt moving with the music. That had never happened before. Toby could admit he'd noticed a couple of the men on the circuit were hotter than the others, but he'd never found himself hard and wanting by the sight of another man. Gavin broke the spell by suggesting Toby ask the girl to dance, if he was so taken with her. Toby thanked a god he wasn't sure he believed in that no one noticed who had actually caused his hard-on. In an act of pure rebellion, Toby did ask the girl to dance and proceeded to spend the rest of a sweaty night in her hotel room.

It took him a long time to get over his crush on Dean, but once he did, he discovered Dean wasn't the only guy who could tickle Toby's pickle. Not that it mattered much, Toby wasn't faking his attraction to the girls he hooked up

with and not once did he have any inclination to act on his occasional attraction to a guy. That was a complication he didn't need.

\*\*\*\*\*

Last March, everything changed. Gavin had been on a killer run of high scores all week in Austin. He had placed well in the money every single day. Going into the short-go, Gavin was in the lead and if he stuck his horse, he'd win the event. He'd drawn Major Tom, a big paint with a habit of throwing riders straight over his head, but Gavin rode him for a good score the year before so Toby wasn't worried. Six seconds into a highlight reel of a ride, the bronc threw Gavin head first into the fence before running over him as he ran out of the arena. Toby leaped over the fence and sprinted toward Gavin's unconscious body with the sports medicine team. Gavin remained unconscious for a couple minutes while he was being strapped to the backboard. Once they took him into the medical room, Toby was forced to wait in the hallway until they had assessed his injuries. Doc Weiland came into the hallway looking grave. A year and a half later and Toby could still hear Doc's voice telling him it was bad, really bad. Severe concussion, possible internal bleeding and multiple rib fractures, but, mercifully, there didn't appear to be any paralysis or head trauma. Val, who had apparently followed them to the med room, kept a grounding hand on Toby's back as the doctor spoke to him. Pietro and Matt showed up a few minutes later with a plan. Their friends quickly took charge, knowing Toby wasn't in any mind to deal with the details. Pietro went to collect their gear and notify the chute boss Toby wouldn't be riding. Matt ran to get his truck and Val stuck to Toby like they were glued together.

As they were unloading the ambulance at the emergency room, Gavin started coughing up blood and even Toby knew that was a bad sign. The trauma team at University Medical Center sped Gavin off for an abdominal ultrasound on arrival at the hospital, and Gavin was in emergency surgery shortly thereafter. Once he went into surgery, the wait became a nightmare. After competition ended, Doc Weiland came with a copy of Gavin's records including his living will and medical power of attorney which ensured Toby could make decisions regarding Gavin's care if he was unable to do so for himself. Because their families rarely traveled with them, Toby and Gavin had chosen to give each other those responsibilities instead of leaving it to their parents. Never did Toby believe he would ever have to use them, until that horrible night. Seeing those documents was what finally broke Toby. The realization he could lose his best friend was overwhelming. But his friends

were amazing. They anticipated every need and organized themselves so Toby was never alone while they waited. Together they decided not to call Gav's parents until he was out of surgery. It was already late and they didn't have much to report yet.

A few hours later, the surgeon came out looking for Gavin's family. "Your friend is one lucky SOB. The concussion is relatively severe, but without a skull fracture, it should eventually repair itself. Same with the fractures to his ribs. That's all good news, but he's not out of the woods. He lacerated his liver and has lost a lot of blood. We've already given him six units with more on the way. Keep in mind, the human body only has about ten units of blood total. The repair to the liver went well and we stopped most of the bleeding. Now he just needs to heal. Gavin's young and in phenomenal physical shape which is in his favor, but even so, he still has a significant risk of complications. He's going to be in recovery for a few more hours and then in the ICU for a few days to keep a close watch on him. If all goes well, and I have no reason to believe it won't, he should be able to go home in about a week. You can see him once he makes it over to the ICU in a couple hours."

Toby thanked the surgeon for his hard work and steeled himself to make the most difficult call he would ever make in his life. He had to wake up Keith and Angie, Gavin's parents, at nearly three in the morning to tell them their son was hurt badly enough they needed to fly to Austin as soon as possible. The call went as expected and by the time they hung up, Angie was on her laptop booking flights. Toby looked forward to Keith and Angie's arrival. They were always a calming presence for Toby, besides it was hard to stay upset for long with earth mother Angie around.

Both he and Gavin had spent a night or two in a hospital bed here and there... Toby's shoulder, Gav's knee, a couple concussions and more, but this was the first time an injury had proven to be life threatening. All this time, Toby had assumed it would be him with the serious injury. In theory, riding bulls and riding saddle broncs should be pretty comparable in terms of the injury rates, but that didn't account for the nature of the beasts they rode. Broncs just want you off their back, literally and figuratively. They throw you and run. Bulls want the rider off too, but more than that, they want the rider dead so he won't come back and bother them ever again. Even as a kid, Toby was glad Gavin had settled in as a saddle bronc rider because while it was technically the most difficult of the three roughstock events, it was also marginally the safest. And while Toby rarely thought about his own safety, he



did worry about Gavin's. After that night, Toby couldn't watch Gavin ride without getting a little sick to his stomach.

Because Toby had Gavin's medical power of attorney, he was allowed to stay with Gavin the whole time he was in ICU. Val, Pietro, and Matt cycled through one at a time keeping Toby company as the nurses would allow, but that left Toby alone with Gavin a lot in the hours which followed. Toby pulled the guest chair up as close as he could to the side of the bed, so he could hold Gavin's hand and rest his head on the side rail of the hospital bed. Sometime in the early hours of the morning, Gavin struggled to open his eyes and look around the room as best he could. He looked right at Toby before grimacing and closing his eyes. Toby was about to hit the button on Gavin's morphine pump when Gavin started muttering.

"Can't be real..."

"Gav, what can't be real?"

"You. You're not real. Just a dream. Toby would never cry over me..."

"It's okay, Gav. It's Toby. I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere."

"Wouldn't be here if you knew."

"Knew what?"

"That I'm gay."

The mumbled statement was enough to send Toby spinning into what had to be the Twilight Zone. There was no way Gavin was gay. He would have known or seen something, but all he'd ever had were a few random thoughts over the last few years, but not enough for him to believe it was true.

"You're my best friend, Gav and that won't change no matter who you want in your bed."

Gavin tried to shift a little in the bed and grimaced again and Toby hit the button to give Gavin more pain killer. Gavin slurred now. "Doesn't matter anyway. I'll always love you, Toby, even if you can't love me back." With that, Gavin was gone again for a few hours.

By the time Gavin's parents arrived, he was a lot more coherent and didn't seem to remember the conversation or his revelations. Toby kept quiet, wanting time to think about what Gavin had said and at some point he started pretending he didn't remember the conversation either. Gavin would come out when he

was ready. Toby didn't want to make waves before then no matter how hurt he was that Gavin would keep such a huge secret from him.

\*\*\*\*

Toby scrubbed his face with his big bear paws trying to free himself from the memory and make sense of what had just happened between them. He kissed a man. He kissed Gavin and it was amazing. If there were any lingering doubts about Toby's bisexuality, they were expunged when his skin caught fire and his dick turned to steel in response to the kiss. But could he give Gavin the love he wanted and frankly deserved? Toby couldn't say. This was so new, so overwhelming. Sex would be easy, but Gavin couldn't be a fuck buddy or a trick. With Gavin, it had to be all or nothing. He needed to talk to someone about all this. Normally, he talked to Gavin about everything, well everything except his sexuality. The walls of the RV were starting to close in on him, he needed to get out of there for a while. Sitting around waiting for Gavin to come home was not going to be productive. Toby grabbed his hat and ambled over to the stock barns.

Communing with the animals always seemed to settle him down. The saddle broncs were a favorite, especially the big draft crosses. They might be crazy psychopaths when you strapped a saddle to their back, but a lot of them were sweet and affectionate the rest of the time. Toby took some time to chat with the stock contractors and their assistants while he got to visit with the horses. After a while, the staff in the barn just let him be, they'd all seen him there before and understood his affection for the animals.

"Hey, yoga boy!" Val called from the end of the row with a laugh.

Toby couldn't help but smile. Val was a good friend, who'd had his back on the darkest night of his life. "Hi, Val. How's it hangin'?"

"Limp and to the left. You?" Val's wicked smile lit his face.

"Same. Speaking of which, how's the groin pull?"

"Better. I did the psoas stretch twice already and it seems to be helping. It certainly did more than anything the sports medicine people showed me. I was gonna check my horses and then go have a beer at the rig. Wanna join me?"

"Sure. I could use the company."

"Yeah. I saw Gavin tear out of here a little bit ago. Lovers' quarrel?"

Blanching at the implication, Toby rolled his eyes. Val couldn't possibly know what happened. "Something like that."

“You can talk to me, ya know. I’d never say anything, not even to Gavin.”

“I know. I think I’m still too confused to talk about it yet.”

“Whatever. Come on. I don’t think you’ve met my new horse yet. Dizzy’s along for the ride this time, getting used to the traveling. I’m hoping to start him in competition next season.” Val started walking towards the area where his horses were stabled.

“How’s he coping with the chaos?” Toby followed Val down the aisle.

“Okay, for the most part. He’s getting used to all the loading and unloading, but he can be a bit of an asshat when he gets tired of it. He’s a goof, but he’s probably the best roping prospect I’ve had in a while.” Val couldn’t help but smile as the big dun gelding nuzzled Toby’s neck looking for pets. “And he’s a cuddler.”

Toby laughed as he gave Dizzy the attention he wanted. “Matt and Pietro are driving the horses to Ellensburg, while you’re in Sacramento?”

“Yeah. They’re the only people I trust to care for the horses my way. Matty and I have been together for four years, he knows the routine by now.”

Did Val just out himself? Toby grabbed Valentin’s elbow and pulled him further away from the activity in the barn. “Together or together-*together*?”

“Together as in lovers, life partners, significant others... Why do you look so shocked?”

“You’re gay...” Toby was beyond shocked, closer to gobsmacked.

“As a daffodil... We thought you knew. Is it going to be a problem?” Val was starting to get a little defensive.

“No. God, no. I’ve never even heard a rumor about you or Matt for that matter.” Eyes squinched shut, Toby worked to assimilate this new information.

“Really? Then you’re not listening. We’re discreet, but it’s kind of an open secret.”

“Gossip isn’t my thing, but... Wow. How am I so oblivious? Shit. I need that beer more than I did before.”

“Sure. Let’s go back to our rig. Matt and Pietro went to Miss Kitty’s with the guys, but they should be back in a couple hours. I need to figure out what to pack for this sponsor thing tomorrow.” Val and Toby started walking back toward the RV lot.

“Business cowboy... white button-down, sport coat, jeans, boots, hat. And don't forget to have your boots polished at the airport. The four-one-one comes straight from Danielle, the image consultant who works with my agent. Companies want you to look like a cowboy, but not a hick... and don't forget to use your sir and ma'am manners. Sponsors eat that shit up.”

“Bull riders live in a completely different world. The rest of us are like the red-headed stepchildren of rodeo...”

“Gavin says the same. I wouldn't worry about the meeting. Everyone knows you're in the mix for the all-around championship. I hope you like almond milk...” Toby chuckled. He'd met with the almond grower a few weeks ago.

“You already had a meeting, eh?”

“On the way back from New Mexico. They're talking to people for another month or so. They want to announce in Vegas.”

“How do you know that stuff?”

“My agent gets paid to keep me up to date on potential sponsors. I'm pretty easy as a client but he's going to earn his keep this winter.”

“You're jumping to the PBR finally.” It wasn't a question.

“I'm not giving up PRCA completely, but yeah.”

“What's Gavin gonna do?”

“Don't know yet. He's got some family stuff going on and he's probably going to be competing part-time next year. The details are still up in the air.” Toby sighed hard. “This all happened today.”

“You heard Matt and I bought a horse ranch outside Missoula, about five hours from you guys. It's a little rough around the edges, but the bones are good. If I win the all-around or tie-down in Vegas, I'm gonna semi-retire next year. I'm thirty-one and don't want to be one of those broken-down cowboys who can't run his own ranch after I retire. Matt says he wants to keep riding, but it's going to be harder when I'm waiting for him at home. We're not any more settled than you are.”

“What about Pietro?”

“P's like a brother to me, but he's a rodeo lifer. He'll ride bulls until he can't make a living at it anymore. We offered him an equal share in the ranch, but he's not interested. He wants to go back to Mato Grosso someday and work

the family cattle ranch with his brother. He'll marry some good Catholic girl his mother picks out for him and live a miserable double life until he dies young of debilitating melancholy. That's the reality of being a gay Brazilian cowboy who isn't willing to give up his family. You have to remember, gay men are still murdered at a rate of almost one a day in Brazil even if they have some of the most liberal gay rights laws in Latin America."

"You managed to escape."

"I was lucky. My grandparents moved to Connecticut from São Paulo when I was twelve. I was sent to live with them and go to private school nearby. I have my U.S. citizenship now and no interest in going back. I love Matty and I want to build a life with him here. Besides, my parents all but disowned me after I came out to them when they came for my high school graduation and were introduced to my very white, very blond boyfriend."

"What happened to the boyfriend?" A wry smile crossed Toby's face.

"At the end of the summer, I left for Montana State and Ryan went off to Columbia. We saw each other on breaks for a while but... you know how it goes."

Toby nodded and they lapsed into a long silence while they finished their beer. With a sigh, Toby stared at Valentín for a moment. He needed to talk to someone, who wasn't Gavin, about being bi and doing right by Gavin. He didn't have enough information on his own. He wasn't even sure what the questions were. "Val, I need you to give me your word what I'm about to tell you won't go any further than you and me. I get that you'll tell Matt the bones of it, but Gavin doesn't even know..."

"Relax, Toby. I outed my family to you. You can trust me to keep your secrets."

"I don't know where to start... I kissed Gavin after he came out to me tonight. But it's more complicated..." Toby told Val the whole story of Gavin's drug-induced confessions in Austin and the conversation before Gavin took off.

Toby did not expect Val to laugh. "I am surprised. When you guys first came on the big circuit, we were sure you two were together. You two are this little self-contained unit that doesn't get close to anyone else on the tour. You're fun, friendly and helpful, but Gavin is the only person male or female, who holds your attention for long. Matty, P, and I are probably the closest, but you guys are so busy trying to hide your secrets from the world, you can't see what's right in front of you. It makes more sense now.

“Anyway, it didn’t take long for us to notice you were picking up girls right in front of Gavin and therefore probably not together. Even if Pietro hadn’t seen Gavin in a gay club in Reno, we knew he was gay just from the way he looks at you when he thinks no one will notice. Once he was back to competing after his wreck in Austin, you started looking at him the same way. His confession opened your eyes to a lot of things you never saw in your best friend before, eh?”

“Gavin was in a gay bar?”

“What? You thought he’s been celibate all this time?”

“No, at first I thought he’d been picking up girls occasionally once I left for the night, but after Austin I realized I hadn’t seen him with a woman in a really long time. He mentioned hooking up a few times, but I guess he went out to some gay club on his own when I wasn’t paying attention.”

“What’s the real problem, Toby? He loves you, you seem to feel something for him. Why not see where it goes?”

“I don’t want to have my whole rodeo career derailed by being something other than straight. And Gavin deserves to have someone who can love him completely without reservations. I don’t know if that can me.”

“I’m going to ask some questions to clarify things for both of us. In your heart of hearts, how do you define your sexuality?”

“I’m bisexual. I know that. I lean more towards women than men I think. But I’ve never done more than look at a guy before tonight, so I’m not absolutely sure.” The truth was easier to voice than Toby thought it would be.

“How do you feel about Gavin?”

“He’s my best friend and the most important person in my life. And after the kiss, it’s obvious I’m attracted to him too. Is that enough to be love? Is it enough to never have sex with another woman? What if I sleep with Gavin and discover sex with a man is nice, but I genuinely prefer women? This is where I get myself all twisted.”

“Hold on. Do me a favor and imagine... after a few drinks with the guys tonight, Pietro finally makes a move on Gavin. One thing leads to another and the next thing you know they are sitting in the truck making out... kissing, touching, the whole enchilada. It’s not outside the realm of possibility, they’re both single, gay and a relationship between them wouldn’t be quite so complicated. With you jumping to PBR, they could travel together without

anyone on the circuit being any the wiser." Val gave Toby a second to consider the scenario. "Now tell me how that makes you feel."

Rage started bubbling up in Toby's chest with a vehemence he didn't expect and it hurt. Gavin was his. End of discussion. Even as kids, Toby hated having to share Gavin with anyone even at recess. It took Toby a second to flip it around in his head and realize how much pain he'd caused Gavin every time he slept with some girl who didn't mean anything to him. "Awright. Point taken. I still can't be sure it's enough."

"There are no guarantees in life, Toby. The best you can do is be completely honest and find a way to talk about what you're feeling. If you can't do that you will be doomed from the start, no matter how much you care about one another."

"Well, we have three hours in the truck tomorrow where he can't run away from me. That's a start."

"Give him a break, Toby. None of this is easy. He finally comes out to you and admits he's in love with you. You kiss him but you can't even tell him if he even has a chance to be with you. Gavin is as hurt and overwhelmed as you are."

"It's not my fault his feelings got hurt. If he'd just listened to me, I could have made him understand where I was coming from. We needed to talk things out. I wasn't rejecting him or anything like it, but we can't fall into bed blindly either. It could ruin everything."

"True enough. You should talk to Matty sometime. He's mostly gay, but not completely. I have no idea what it's like to be ambidextrous. You guys should come out and see the new ranch for a few days before finals. We can talk about how to keep your relationship off the radar and keep yourselves sane. It's actually good that there have been rumors about you and Gavin for so long. It's old news, even if it wasn't true before now."

"You sound so sure we're gonna do this."

"I am. He loves you, you love him. You always have, even if you are too afraid to admit it. The only question is whether you'll let your fears overwhelm your love for one another. My guess is the bull rider in you won't let anything get in the way of what you want."

"I'm glad someone has faith in me." Toby finished his beer and was contemplating going back to their RV for some much needed sleep when Val's phone rang.

“Sorry. It’s Matty. Hold on...” Val turned his attention to his phone. “Hey. What? No... I don’t have to, he’s sitting here with me... Okay. We’ll be there in ten... Love you. Bye.” Val hung up and turned back to Toby. “Gavin turned up at Miss Kitty’s and proceeded to get very drunk, very, very quickly. Matty and Pietro are a little too buzzed to drive your truck back. Boone was supposed to be their designated driver, but there are now more drunk cowboys than will fit in Boone’s truck. We need to go pick them up. You have your keys?”

“Yeah. Let’s go. Gavin gets mouthy when he’s been drinking. Shit. I hope he doesn’t accidentally out himself or say anything else he’ll regret tomorrow.”

“Matty and P are watching out for him. They’ll keep him out of trouble.”

“I hope so. Today’s been hard enough on him as it is. Come on. The sooner we get them home, the sooner they sober up.”

\*\*\*\*\*



### Chapter 3

*Bang... BANG...* “Gavin! Get up. It’s time to go,” Toby called from outside the RV.

Gavin rolled over to check the time on his phone, but it wasn’t in the charger where it belonged. He grumbled to himself as he sat up on the side of the bed and took inventory. Shit. His head hurt and his stomach was grumbling along with him. “Hold on, dude. I’m moving... sort of,” he yelled back.

Standing was more of an adventure than Gavin was prepared for, but nevertheless he made his way into the small bathroom to pee and contemplate puking up any remnants of the Jack left in his stomach. With some effort, Gavin did his business, washed his face, and completely dismissed the idea of shaving. Back in the bedroom, he realized he must have showered and put on sweats and a tank sometime after returning to the RV last night, but he didn’t remember any of it. In fact, he didn’t remember anything after Toby told him to “get the fuck in the truck” outside Miss Kitty’s. Rummaging around his few remaining clean clothes, Gavin threw on a Rimrock Denim logo T-shirt and jeans. As he walked into the main room of the RV looking for his boots, Toby stepped through the door.

“Good morning, Rip Van Winkle. There’s aspirin, coffee and a huckleberry bagel with cinnamon cream cheese on the table for you. Eat now.” Toby moved around locking things down and getting ready to pull the slide-outs in. He stopped and turned back to the dinette where Gavin was nibbling on his bagel. “I put two melon Gatorades and a few dark chocolate-peanut butter protein bars in the truck for later. I got gas and hitched the truck. And I called Angie and told her we would be late for lunch.”

“You’ve been busy. What time is it anyway?” Gavin tried desperately to pretend there was nothing weird between them. He was only marginally successful.

“About nine-thirty. Sorry I didn’t wake you up sooner, but I went to help Matt and Pietro load Val’s horses. The new gelding was being a twit and it took longer than I thought. They promised to save us a spot next to them in the RV lot in Ellensburg, so we don’t end up getting stuck near the busy street again.” Toby stopped talking, seemingly to take a breath.

“You’re babbling, Tobes. We’re okay. We haven’t done anything irrevocable. We’ll talk and everything will go back to normal.”

“Things haven’t been normal since your wreck. I don’t think there’s anything we can say that will get that back, but we can figure out what we want a new normal to look like.”

“You sound very Zen this morning.” Gavin cocked his head like a curious puppy.

“I’m always pretty Zen, but I had a good talk with Val last night. He helped me see things a lot more clearly.”

“You outed me to Val?” Gavin readied himself for a fight but didn’t want to go ballistic unless he actually had a reason.

“Only after he outed himself, Matt and Pietro. He knew anyway. No damage done. Did you know Val and Matt have been together for four years without anyone spilling the beans? I don’t think he’s gonna out us to anyone.”

“I always wondered about Matt, but Val and Pietro threw me. I think it’s the Brazilian thing, they flirt with everyone, male or female. Wait. What do you mean out us?” Gavin’s brain could come online any time now.

“Us, as in you and me. You’re gay and I’m definitely not straight, bi probably, but that’s more of a discussion than we’re having now. You’d know if you’d stuck around and let me explain last night. It’s water under the bridge at this point. Eat up. We need to hustle. Maria Elena is making brisket sandwiches and broccoli salad for lunch. I don’t want to miss it.” Toby didn’t give him a chance to respond and dashed off to continue getting them ready to pull out.

Coffee and aspirin dealt with Gavin’s headache and the bagel disappeared quickly thereafter, settling his stomach. Double checking the RV was buttoned up only took a minute before Gavin went ahead and pulled in the sliders and locked them down. Within about twenty minutes, they were in the truck and pulling on to I-90 headed home. Toby drove the first leg, and would probably drive the whole trip, since it was only a little over three hours home.

Gavin attempted to feign sleep, but Toby knew better. “Awright... Ready to talk now? You didn’t give me a chance last night before you ran off and drank yourself stupid.”

“Fine. Talk.”

“Don’t make this harder than it has to be, Gav. I don’t deserve that. I was trying to be honest with you and you threw it in my face. I would have had this

conversation last night, but in the end it was probably better we cooled off before things went any further south.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t see what else there was to say right then, but I should have stayed and listened anyway.”

“Until you came out after your wreck in Austin, I had no idea you were gay. Yeah, I wondered a couple times, but never seriously. I was fighting my own sexuality enough I didn’t have the brain space to consider anyone else’s. I like women. I like their soft smooth skin and their sweet scent. And I genuinely enjoy having sex with them.” Gavin saw Toby register his twitching in his seat. “Hold on before you get all spun up. It wasn’t until we were in college that I realized most boys don’t notice some guys are sexier than others and I always did. I knew Dean Barlow was fucking hot and in exactly the same way I knew Angelina Jolie was too. Those feelings confused me until that night in New Mexico when I finally met Dean in person. We were standing at the bar and you thought my hard-on was for the girl Dean was dancing with, but it wasn’t. I was thrown so off kilter by having a hard-on for a guy, I slept with that girl just to prove I still liked women and I sort of binged on girls for a while after that night. Do you remember?”

“I remember. Keep talking.”

“Once the barn door was flung open by my attraction to Dean, I found myself attracted to men more and more. Not as much as women, but often enough to worry me. I couldn’t let myself be anything but straight so I buried it and stuck exclusively with women. Before you ask... No, I never thought of you that way back then. You were my best friend, my brother, and even if I had noticed, I would have stuffed it into the deepest, darkest part of my mind I could find. No good could come from that sort of thinking. I thought you were straight as a board anyway.

“Fast forward to your wreck. Suddenly being attracted to you wasn’t as taboo as it was before and I started seeing you differently. I began noticing your lips or the slope of your ass, things I never considered before. At first, I waited for you to talk to me once you were out of the hospital and not high on morphine, but you never did. It took me a while to realize you didn’t remember the conversation at all, so I took it as a sign and pretended I didn’t remember either. It was easier for both of us.”

“But it wasn’t easier for me. How do you think it felt for me to see you hook up with some bimbo you’d never see again when I genuinely love you? Especially when I was only getting laid about twice a year.”

“Val told me Pietro saw you at a gay bar in Reno a while back, but he made sure you didn't know he was there. If you weren't ready to come out, he wasn't going to force you.”

“Val was a fount of information. Jesus.”

“For what it's worth, once I saw how much it hurt you when I hooked up—I pretty much stopped a few months after Austin. I mean I still get laid occasionally, but not when you're around. I couldn't when I knew how you felt.”

“That's something, I guess.” Gavin appreciated the consideration, but in the face of everything else, it was a small thing.

“It's not like you were celibate.” Toby almost sounded jealous.

“Really, Toby? You're gonna go there? I get laid at most three times a year... Austin, Reno and Denver. And only if I could get away without you knowing I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I'd dance for a bit and then cruise for a one night stand. I hate it, but I still cling to those nights like a life raft 'cause they keep me sane enough to make it through another few months. Even if I have to stay locked in the rodeo closet, I can come out to my family and stop listening to Mom and Piper talk up every attractive, single woman they meet because they think I need to settle down. And maybe... maybe I can find a nice guy and finally have a real relationship with someone who loves me.”

“What happened to wanting to be with me?”

“Yeah, that's never gonna happen. Even if you loved me the way I want, you will never be with me for real. You'll say the right things and probably mean them, but I would always be your dirty little secret. You said yourself, you don't want to be anything but straight. There's nothing stopping you from finding a pretty wife, who makes you laugh, and raising a house full of cute little blond babies. I want you to be happy, Tobes, and I have to accept that will never be with me.”

“You have completely missed the point. Let me highlight a couple facts for you... One, I'm not straight which should have been perfectly clear after I kissed you senseless last night. Two, if I wanted a pretty wife and a minivan full of kids, I could have had that fifty times over by now. Somehow it has escaped your notice that no matter who I was with or how much I liked them, I always came home to you. How many times have you woken up in the morning and not found me asleep in my bed, either on the road or at home? The answer

is none. Not once in four years have I spent an entire night with one of my hook-ups. You're the person I plan my day and my entire future around, no one else. This morning, Matt said we have this epic bond between us. If he didn't know better, he'd think we've been married this whole time without ever realizing it."

"Just without sex." Gavin laughed.

"Without sex." Toby shifted around in his seat before smiling just crooked enough for Gavin to know that it was meant for him. "But maybe we could work on that."

Gavin grinned as he cocked his head to the side and looked at Toby through the corner of his eye. "Maybe."

They were pretty quiet for the next hour or so, talking a little about the rodeo and planning the few days they'd be on the farm this week. About halfway through the trip, Toby pulled the truck and fifth-wheel into a rest area so they could stretch their legs and use the facilities. Gavin, who had been drinking a lot of Gatorade to combat his hangover, went directly into the restrooms. Routine told Gavin that Toby would take a minute to stretch before ambling into the restroom.

After taking care of business, Gavin was washing his hands when Toby entered the empty men's room. Their eyes met in the mirror and the sexual heat instantly spiraled upwards. His heart tattooing frantically in his chest, Gavin stood there waiting. Both men took a moment to feel their way through their conflicting emotions.

Without much warning, Toby manhandled Gavin into the handicap stall. Gavin was already panting with need by the time he let himself be pushed up against the wall. Once again, Toby kissed him hard and fast, with the only hint of gentleness in his hands, which roamed Gavin's stomach and sides. They kissed until a need to breathe overrode their lust. Gavin could see the questions floating around Toby like clouds. "It's okay, Tobes. Kiss me. Take what you need."

Toby stepped slightly to the side and pushed his hard cock against Gavin's upper thigh before kissing him again. This was one of the rare occasions Gavin noticed the difference in their height. Pulling back, Toby whispered directly into his ear. "Not taking anything this time. This is for you." Grabbing the front hem of Gavin's T-shirt, Toby pulled up the front and hooked it behind Gavin's neck exposing his chest and abs. Toby groaned as he kissed his way across

Gavin's pecs and worried the closer nipple with his teeth and tongue. Gavin's knees nearly buckled as the pleasure washed over him. It was enough to motivate Gavin to pull Toby up for a kiss of his own.

One of Toby's hands wandered over his lower back and into the waistband of his jeans while the other explored the hard ridges of Gavin's abs. Gavin could tell Toby was marveling at how different a male body felt under his hands. Soft, smooth lips found their way to his neck and the hot spot below Gavin's ear. Shudders racked Gavin as he turned his head to capture Toby in another long kiss. This time, Toby put his hand on the fly of Gavin's jeans and moved along the hard length aching for more attention. When Toby looked up into his eyes silently asking for permission to open his zipper, Gavin nodded slightly before lolling his head back onto the tile. Toby returned his attention to nibbling at Gavin's collarbone while undoing Gavin's jeans and shoving his pants and underwear down, freeing Gavin's cock and balls. With shaking hands, Toby stroked the skin around Gavin's groin without approaching his dick.

It took all of Gavin's strength to still Toby's hand and get his best friend's attention. "You don't have to do this. If you're not ready, it's okay."

"I'm good. I'm just having trouble slowing myself down."

"Don't worry so much. I'm not some fragile flower." Gavin bit at Toby's ear and the tendons in his neck.

When Toby kissed him again, he boldly wrapped his hand around Gavin's dick. Gavin almost laughed at Toby's gasp when he got his first feel of another man's cock in his hand. The feeling was familiar, yet foreign and was always a huge turn on for Gavin. Watching Toby's face as he experienced that for the first time was a rush. Gavin couldn't help but thrust into Toby's hand a little, looking for more friction. It didn't take long for Toby to get the idea, and he began stroking at a firm, moderate pace, palming the head every few strokes. Remaining even relatively quiet was increasingly difficult for Gavin.

Gavin turned more toward him and reached out to stroke Toby's cock through the denim, but Toby shook his head and shifted his weight, rocking his dick into Gavin's leg. "No, Gav. I want to do this for you."

For a moment, Toby glanced at Gavin's hard penis and licked his lips. Gavin couldn't help but smile. He knew Toby was contemplating dropping to his knees and blowing him. Gavin didn't want that right now. "Not this time,

buddy. We're gonna be naked in a bed the first time you put your mouth on me. If you're not gonna let me play, let's speed this up before we get caught."

At that, Toby redoubled his efforts stroking Gavin off, alternately kissing him and gnawing at his neck. Silently, Gavin wondered if Toby was leaving marks on his skin but he wasn't sure he cared. As the end approached, goosebumps traveled down his thighs and the need to buck got even stronger. Gavin widened his stance a little to let Toby get more contact between his dick and Gavin's thigh which Toby seemed to appreciate. A blotchy red blush crept down Gavin's chest as his orgasm became inevitable. Toby's panting and the whispered words of encouragement in his ear only pushed him closer.

Finally, Gavin arched his back and sprayed thick ropes of come into Toby's hand. The heady scent of sex enveloped them. Toby looked down at his wet hand as he continued to gently stroke Gavin's cock before looking up into Gavin's face. He blushed as he gathered the last of the come from Gavin and lifted his hand to lick across his palm. If Gavin hadn't come a minute ago, he might have come again. With an embarrassed chuckle, Toby kissed Gavin gently with Gavin's come still on his lips. "That was hot as hell. I almost came the second I touched your dick the first time."

"You sure I can't return the favor? I'm feeling pretty selfish."

"Nope. That was for you. Think of it as proof I'm not confused and a promise I'm not playing you." Toby stood leaning on the wall beside Gavin, naked in his honesty.

"Thanks, but I didn't need proof. You'd never intentionally lie to me. I need to kiss you again." Gavin wrapped his muscled arms around Toby and settled them on his tight little cowboy ass. He raised Toby up slightly by his ass and sunk into a slow, wet kiss.

"Come on, Gav. We need to get going." They stopped to clean up a little at the sink before Toby slipped his hand into Gavin's and led him out of the restroom and didn't let go until they stepped out into the late August sun.

Maybe Toby wasn't ready for a pride parade, but he was trying. Gavin couldn't ask for anything more, he knew how hard this was. Lord knows, it had taken him this long to be ready and he wasn't attracted to girls at all. Gavin was still skeptical but less than before. Back in the truck, they continued towards home. It seemed the episode at the rest area had released some of the tension and let them settle back into something closer to normal. Some things had to unfold at their own pace. There weren't any shortcuts in moving their

relationship from friends to lovers. Moving too fast and demanding too much would derail things from the start. Gavin smiled to himself thinking perhaps the sex part could go faster than the relationship part. A quick hand job in a rest area bathroom gave him the best orgasm of his life, but that could have just been the idea that Toby was touching him. He barely managed to dream it was possible, but the reality was something altogether different, better and more intense.

“Hey... I’m gonna talk to my parents tonight after dinner. Would you be there as moral support? I think they will be disappointed, but I’m not worried about any major drama. In the worst case, I stay with you until we leave for Ellensburg.” Toby rented the small apartment over the garage from Gavin’s parents. He signed a lease, so they couldn’t kick him out even if they wanted to put him out on the street.

“Of course I’ll be there. It’ll be like the night we told them we were going to do rodeo full time the summer after our freshman year at Wazzu. Somehow I think you being gay will provoke less of a response than running away and joining the rodeo did.”

“You’re probably right. I don’t want them disappointed in me, like I did something wrong by being gay.”

“You know you didn’t, right? It’s the way you are and there’s nothing you could have done to change it.”

“I know.”

“Are you going to tell them about us?”

“I assumed you wouldn’t want me to tell them anything about you.”

“Tell them what you want. They are your family. Hell, they’re my family too.”

“Honestly, I hadn’t thought past coming out myself. This is all so new. I don’t even know how to define what we are to one another yet. Are you my boyfriend... lover... partner...? I think it’s too soon and too up in the air right now. We can ease them into it when you’re ready to tell your mom.”

In a move that shocked Gavin, Toby reached across the console and took Gavin’s hand in his. “You need to do whatever makes you the most comfortable. I will deal with whatever happens. What difference does it make if they find out now or six months from now? It doesn’t matter to me one way or another.”



“Really? Wait... Yesterday you didn’t even want to admit you were bi, and today you’re willing to come out to my family. What did I miss in between there?”

Toby’s grin was as crooked and wicked as Gavin had ever seen it. “I had my hand on your dick and tasted your come. I understand what I have to do to make sure that happens again. And I nearly had apoplexy when Val suggested you and Pietro would make sense as a couple... All I could think was ‘No, he’s mine!’ That was enough to start the dominoes falling and led me to accepting maybe you and I could build something amazing.”

“God, Toby. How did I ever doubt you?”

“You had reason. I didn’t handle things the way I should have.”

“Neither did I. I’ve been thinking...”

“Isn’t that how every trip to the ER started when we were kids?”

“Probably. Anyway, if I’m gonna be home more, I can’t live with my parents. I never bothered moving out before now, because, well, you’re fifty feet away over the garage and why pay for a place to store my stuff. What do you think about cleaning up the old Gorman homestead? It’s up the road from my folks. Dad put a new roof on the place when he bought it. Remember, they used it for some of the pickers before they built the bunkhouse. It’s been buttoned up for a few years but was in good condition the last time we inspected it. There’s a small barn with a decent corral with room to expand.”

“That’s the log house by Broad Creek, right? The barn’s gonna need a ton of work. It might be easier to tear it down and start over.”

“Yep. I’m hoping Mom and Dad will sell us maybe five acres around the house cheap so most of the expense will be in fixing it up. Building a new barn would mean we could set it up so we had enough room to breed a few horses on the side, maybe the light-colored tobianos you love so much.” Gavin smiled, knowing he’d sweetened the pot.

“You like them too. And what’s this ‘we’, you got a mouse in your pocket?” Gavin did like the pale paint horses. His horse at the farm was a palomino paint named Whiz that Toby and his dad picked out for him when he turned sixteen.

“I thought you’d want to live there with me and we could start building something that was ours for after we retire. Like Dad has his hard cider and Mom has the sheep. We could raise a few horses. I’m not talking about an

entire ranch, maybe four or five good breeding mares... Just think about it. You don't have to decide now. Like I said, I'm just thinking."

"Famous last words. Don't you think setting up house is moving a little fast?"

"First, would you have thought twice about it before you kissed me? Second, we've been best friends for fourteen years, how much slower can we go?"

"Point taken. I don't want to fuck this up before we can figure it out." Toby sighed and Gavin realized Toby was still holding his hand.

"I think there are three bedrooms. We can go as slow as you want." He squeezed Toby's hand gently.

"We should let your little announcement settle before we make those kinds of plans. If it doesn't go well, we could be looking for a ranch of our own soon enough. I know it's gonna be fine, but you hear so many horror stories. I can't help but consider the worst case scenario, which frankly isn't all that horrible."

"I'm still scared out of my mind. My family means a lot to me."

"It would suck for me too."

"Let's get home. There's no point in worrying about things we can't control." The rest of the drive went quickly. They'd done it so many times it was all routine.

Hazy Hill Farm was the only place Gavin had ever lived, except for the dorms during college. He loved this place. The farm was in the foothills of the Cascade Mountains close to the heart of apple country and was as much a part of him as his blood and bone. He was the fourth generation of Hayes to inhabit this corner of the world and Gavin was proud of that tradition. His great-grandfather bought the original forty acres in 1915. Gavin's grandfather and father bought adjacent properties over the years as they came available, expanding their operation to include fifty acres of apple orchards, twenty acres of cherries and more than four hundred acres of pasture, timber and hay. It was a large diversified operation with many moving parts, all of which required expertise and experience.

Gavin had always marveled at how his dad seemed to orchestrate the whole thing with relative ease and a lot of hard work. While his father was the true farmer in the family, his mother was the animal lover. Cattle, sheep, horses, dogs and chickens responded to her in an almost supernatural way; there was a

reason his father left all of the livestock in her capable hands. Toby always described Angie as Mother Nature personified. Gavin thought he was a good blend of both his parents. They teased his sister Piper that she had to be adopted because she didn't seem to get any of the Hazy Hill genes. Piper was a nurse anesthetist married to a financial analyst for one of the big local wineries. They lived near the river in a fancy condo, one town and an entire world away from the farm.

By the time they pulled up into the driveway, Gavin's family was waiting for them on the front porch. Toby backed the fifth-wheel into the garage and they disconnected it without any trouble. As they approached the house, his mother ran down the steps and into Gavin's arms.

Angie kissed his cheek. "I'm okay, baby. It was just a scare. Everything's okay."

"I needed to see for myself." Gavin was trying not to sound like a frightened child.

Toby anxiously waited his turn to hug Gavin's mother. "Angie, you sure you're feeling okay? I can help with the diet and supplement stuff. You should join Gavin and me for yoga when we're home..."

His mother smiled her gentlest smile at Toby. "Oh Toby... I think I scared you more than the rest of them. I'm fine. I need to change my lifestyle a little to stay that way. Don't worry about me. I'll be here for a long time yet."

"I know. I just... after my dad..." Toby's eyes went misty before he could beat the emotion back.

Angie hugged Toby again, holding him tighter and longer. Gavin hadn't even thought about the fact that Toby's father died of a heart attack. He should have been more sensitive when he told Toby about his mother's trip to the hospital.

Any kid would be traumatized by the loss of a parent even as a teenager, but for Toby losing his dad also meant losing his mother. Marianne Prescott was never maternal, his father Drew was definitely the more involved and affectionate of the pair, but after the death of her husband she turned savagely cold and distant to her only child. It was as if the death of his dad meant it was time for Toby to be grown up already. From the day after the funeral, Marianne went off and did her own thing and expected Toby to do his, without any guidance from his mother. Other than food and shelter, Toby paid his own way through high school and college.

Gavin also keenly felt the loss of Drew Prescott. While Gavin knew his father loved him and would kill rocks to protect him, he didn't have much time for many activities away from the farm. It was Drew who did those things with the boys. He was their soccer coach and the one who drove them to Seattle for Mariners games and that kind of stuff. Drew listened to all the high school drama and weighed in with his opinions without judging or dismissing their concerns. He was a good dad and great friend to Gavin. Drew was also the one who took the boys to the rodeo for the first time a few weeks before he died. To this day, Toby kept a photo of his dad tucked in the safety vest he wore when he was competing.

Piper and Gavin's dad hugged them as well before they all made their way into the kitchen. Angie busied herself heating up the sandwiches Maria Elena had saved for their lunch. Keith and Piper sat at the table with Gavin and Toby and talked about the rodeo and the drive back from Coeur d'Alene. It was their normal post-rodeo debriefing. They asked after their friends and how everyone was doing in the standings. Gavin was proud of the fact that his parents had taken the time to understand the rodeo world even if he didn't think they really appreciated it.

"Piper, I'm glad to see you, but I thought you were going home yesterday."

"I'm working day surgery this month, so I was able to switch shifts with Annete so I could be off today. After Mom's scare, I needed to touch base with you guys over dinner at least. Chad's coming after work. I also thought you might have some medical questions about Mom's condition."

"Dad explained pretty well. I think I'm okay. Mom, could you sit down and relax, please. Lunch can wait a few minutes."

Angie spun around with a fork in her hand gesturing aggressively at her family. "Oh no. Not you too. I am perfectly healthy right now. It was a bit of a wake-up call. I know I frightened you, but I'm not going to stop taking care of my family or this farm so you don't feel guilty."

"Okay, okay... I'm looking forward to the brisket sandwiches. Maria Elena is the best."

"She is. Just to prove I'm no slouch, I'm making a very healthy grilled chicken, rainbow chard and brown rice for dinner. There's also cherry crisp for dessert. I wanted to use up some of this year's cherries before the rest went in the freezer. I even bought vanilla frozen yogurt instead of ice cream."

Toby laughed. "Pretty soon you'll be eating like Gavin and me all the time."

“Son, I am never going to live on the grass and bark you two eat everyday.” Keith was a meat and potatoes guy. His dad was teasing, but one wheat grass smoothie and their entire diet was relegated to grass and bark.

“Where are the dogs?” Gavin realized their menagerie of dogs, most of whom had a purpose on the farm, were missing. Thistle and Briar were Australian cattle dogs who herded both cattle and sheep. His mother couldn't handle the livestock without them. Chico was his dad's dog, a German shorthaired pointer mix Keith used for hunting. And then there was Axel, a black Chihuahua-Papillon mix, who was mostly his mother's familiar. The little guy was rarely more than five feet away from her. He rode with her while she worked the farm, either on horseback or the ATV she used. Axel didn't seem to understand he topped out at eight pounds and tried to help Thistle and Briar herd sheep if you didn't catch him in time. Luckily, he was appropriately respectful of the cattle.

“Axel's in the laundry room and the others are out in the kennel runs. Reid, the farrier's new assistant, was here checking the abscess in Pedro's hoof again. We didn't get around to letting them out before you boys pulled in. I'll get them while you're eating your lunch.” The assistant was a nice kid, but the dogs made him nervous, so they penned them up when he was on the farm. Gavin was the first to admit they could be overwhelming. “What are you boys doing this afternoon?”

“We're gonna unload the trailer, do some laundry, and probably workout. After that, I was thinking we'd ride out and do the afternoon cattle check for you. I also wanted to swing by the Gorman place and take a look around while we were out there.”

Keith's eyebrow lifted quizzically. “You thinking about moving out there? It's a good spot and it's sitting there empty.”

“It's just an idea at this point. Figured I should go see how much work it would take to make it habitable.”

“Keys are in the lockbox. I'll get a home inspector out to evaluate the place, if you're serious. It's been empty a while. Someone's gonna need to test the septic and well, too. It could get expensive in a hurry. Worth looking at though.” His dad didn't bat an eye at the idea of Gavin moving out of the main house. “Building something new might be easier and cheaper in the long run. There's that spot with the great view of the mountains a little further up Broad Creek.”

“We'll ride around and take a look.”

Angie slid their lunches onto the table. "Make sure you have the new version of the iRanch app on your phones so you can make notes while you're out. Everyone's down in the middle pastures, except the bulls, who are still across the road."

"Easy enough."

"I have the picking crew getting started on the Galas in the south section. I could use some help mowing and moving picnic tables around down in the pick your own area. You boys up for some manual labor tomorrow?" Gavin could tell by the look on his father's face that while the request may have been phrased in the form a question, it was a thinly veiled command.

Gavin glanced at Toby to confirm before answering. "Absolutely. We're at your beck and call until Thursday." Hard work was always preferable to working out to stay in shape, and it wasn't like they didn't work for Keith whenever they were home.

Grinning evilly, his dad winked at him. "Good. We'll start cleaning out the cold storage shed Wednesday." The cold storage rooms were kept just above freezing to stop the fruit from ripening before it was shipped to the co-op for packing. Cleaning them was a cold, wet, miserable job. Gavin hoped his father was kidding.

They finished their lunch and set about cleaning and unloading the fifth-wheel. They had the work done in a couple hours and were just in time to saddle Whiz and Rowan, the bitchy chestnut mare Toby liked to ride, and head out to check the cattle. They bred Highland cattle on Hazy Hill to be sold as both breeding stock and beef. Highlands weren't as large as some other breeds, but they produced exceptional meat. With long shaggy coats and great horns, they looked cool and their gentle dispositions were endearing. As usual, the cattle all seemed fine, though Gavin did note that the big hairy beasts were messing with them by blocking the gate out of the pasture like annoying bovine roadblocks. Thistle and Briar took no time to clear the cattle for him. It was nice to be out on horseback for a few hours away from the rest of life. They came to the crest of a large hill where they could see most of the farm laid out in front of them. Gavin always felt closest to this land and the farm when he sat on horseback in this spot where he could see it all. He glanced over at Toby and smiled. Late afternoon sun illuminated Toby's handsome face under his ball cap and lit a fire in his pine green eyes as they took in the view. Toby loved this place almost as much as he did. It was home.

## Chapter 4

Dishes were done. Piper and Chad were on their way home, leaving Toby, Gavin, Angie and Keith sitting around the kitchen table drinking tea and talking about the farm. Toby was getting a little frustrated waiting for Gavin to spring his big announcement on his folks. He didn't think Gavin would chicken out, but this was one of those things you couldn't ever un-say. After another few minutes went by, Toby caught Gavin's gaze, urging him to get it over with. They often had entire conversations with just a series of facial expressions.

Angie, with Axel sitting quietly on her lap, stared across the table at Toby and then Gavin. "Okay, boys, what's got you so antsy? Tell us, maybe we can help."

With a long, shaky sigh, Gavin palmed his hands across his face. "It's nothing bad. I just have something I need to tell you. I've wanted to say something for a long time, but I don't want to disappoint you. I can't keep lying anymore." A fat, lonely tear slipped down Gavin's handsome face.

"It's okay, baby. Whatever it is, we'll deal with it." Angie knew. Toby could see it in her eyes.

"Mom, Dad, I'm gay." Another tear joined the first on Gavin's cheek.

Shoving back his chair, Keith stood and stormed around the table. "Gavin, stand up. Right now." Startled, Gavin complied with his dad's order. Keith reached out and pulled his son into a long, tight hug. He'd never admit it, but a tear matching his son's appeared on Keith's face. "We love you, son. It wouldn't matter if you were straight, gay, green, purple or a Huskies fan, we'd love you just the same. Although if you were a Huskies fan, we'd always hope you'd see the error of your ways and repent." They both chuckled a little through their tears.

Following her husband, Angie grabbed Gavin and held his face between her hands. "Baby, I love you more than anything. Did you honestly think who you love would matter to us?" Angie turned to Toby and hugged him too. "Thank you for supporting him through this. This isn't going to be an easy secret to live with while he's still riding. He's going to need you."

Before releasing her from the hug, Toby kissed her cheek. "You knew and you never said anything."

"Mothers always know and Gavin had to tell us when he was ready. We couldn't push him any more than we already were."

"You knew. You both knew. I nearly gave myself an ulcer worrying. Shit. I've known since junior high, when did you figure it out?"

"You haven't had a girlfriend since Jenna and we never saw a girl on your arm in any of the photos on the behind the scenes rodeo blogs. It wasn't that hard to puzzle out. So to answer your question, probably since your senior year at State."

"Jesus. Does Piper know?"

"Yes. Why do you think she pushes every single woman she comes across at you? She was hoping you'd come out just to shut her up."

"I never wanted to disappoint you. All parents have dreams for their kids and I haven't fulfilled any of them and probably never will. I'll never get married or give you grandchildren to spoil. There will never be another generation of Hayes kids to take over the farm. I'm a good saddle bronc rider, which I know is a disappointment in itself, but I'll never be world champion especially if I step back next year..." Gavin ran out of breath and hung his head.

Toby hadn't truly appreciated the burden Gavin had been carrying until now. He'd assumed Gavin's unease at coming out was about fear of the unknown, but it was more than that. Gavin felt like he'd failed his parents in every way, which was bullshit, but you can't fight fear with facts.

Keith roared in response. "What in holy hell are you talking about? I'm so damn proud of you, I don't know how to put it into words. No father could ask for more. You are a good man, Gavin. Honest, honorable, and hard working. You've followed your dreams so far and you could go so much further, but you're choosing to sacrifice that to support your family. You love this land with your whole heart and will be an amazing steward of this farm and family legacy one day. As long as you are happy, none of the rest matters." Keith put his hand on the back of Gavin's neck and looked him in the eyes.

"And who says you won't get married and have kids one day? Don't let who you love, dictate your future. It may look different than any of us imagined, but it's the same in all the ways that matter." Angie scooted around her husband and hugged Gavin again.

"I love you both so much." Gavin cried quietly in his mother's arms.

Toby sat back down at the table to watch the byplay between Gavin and his parents. This was the reaction he expected from Angie and Keith. They were



good people and loved their kids unconditionally. He wasn't as lucky in the parenting department; his mother was never going to be as accepting of his bisexuality or his nascent relationship with Gavin. She would come around, probably, as long as she kept receiving her check each month. Finally, Gavin stepped back from his mother's embrace and turned to beam at Toby with a smile so bright and wide open he could hardly look at it. Toby peered up at him and grinned right back, feeling this new connection between them flare to life. Never had Toby wanted to reach out and touch someone just to make a physical connection as tangible as their emotional one. He stole a glance at Angie and Keith, who were standing with their arms around each other leaning against the kitchen sink and saw their wise smiles. Whether he and Gavin said anything about their relationship or not, his parents already knew something had changed between their son and his best friend. "I told you it would be okay."

"You did." Gavin's eyes were still red, but they sparkled with a happiness Toby had never seen there before. If he was responsible for even a corner of that happiness, Toby thought they might be okay.

Angie cocked her head and asked, "How long have you known?"

Toby chuckled. "Ummm... For sure, since the hospital after his wreck in Austin. But Gavin doesn't remember telling me 'cause he was high on pain meds at the time. As far as he knows, he finally came out to me yesterday." Fuck. Had it only been twenty-four hours since his world turned upside down. It had been building for a year and a half but the last day had been a crazy ride.

"Apparently you're not the only one who wondered." Even Gavin's laugh sounded lighter.

They talked for a while about Gavin's experience and a little bit about how next year might work for everyone. "We'll talk more, but your dad and I are gonna go watch some TV before bed. What are you boys up to tonight?" Bedtime in the Hayes household was early, usually about nine as five am comes early on the farm.

"We were going to head over to Toby's to play video games for a bit, but I won't be late. I need to decompress a little."

"Okay. It's not like we're waiting up. Sleep fast, boys. Love you both." Angie and Keith moved toward the door to the family room.

"Mom, Dad, I love you too. Thank you. For everything. Good night."

They let themselves out of the house and jogged up the stairs to Toby's apartment. His place might be small, but it was all his. After graduating from

college, Gavin's folks knew as well as he did, there was no way Toby could live with his mother full time. One of them would have ended up in prison by the end of the first month. In any case, the Hayes family offered him a place to live and claimed him as one of their own.

They pulled off their boots and hung their ball caps on the pegs by the door. Gavin flopped onto the couch and picked the remote up off the coffee table to turn on the gaming system and television. Toby dropped down next to Gavin and grabbed his controller. "How you feeling, dude? That was intense."

"Honestly, I'm still a bit numb. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy I told them finally. I shouldn't have doubted they would be great about it. I feel stupid for wasting time with the shame and stupidity for nothing."

"You weren't ready. There's nothing stupid or shameful about it."

"I guess... I wasted a lot of time with you too."

"No. I was the one not ready until now. I'm still not sure I'm ready to own this thing between us, but I want you more than I want to hide. Somehow your parents figured out things have changed between us. I'm starting to wonder if I was ever able to hide anything from them."

"Unlikely. They won't push though."

"Yeah, we're gonna have to come clean soon though. Like before we get everyone excited about us moving out to the Gorman place..."

"We don't have to tell them anything. They can think whatever they want. As long as we know what we have, does it matter what anyone else knows? Not that we even have anything yet, but you know what I mean."

"We have something, even if it's still so new and nebulous we can't define it. I don't blame you for being scared, but that's a different tune than you were singing yesterday. What happened to not being my dirty little secret?"

"I dunno. Maybe we shouldn't make any big decisions until things settle out a little. The future might be clearer if we wait 'til the end of the season. Things could fizzle out and we'd have made a wreck of it all for nothing."

"Is that what you want? Really? Neither of us has any history with relationships, it's gonna feel like we're reinventing the wheel for a while, no matter what we do. And you know, this thing between us, it ain't gonna fizzle out. Either it's gonna fly us straight to forever or it's gonna explode in a huge fireball of regret."

“My vote’s for forever. But, I want to be with you, any way I can have you, for as long as you’ll let me. I am capable of compromise.”

“For what it’s worth, I think any chance we had of keeping our relationship on the down low with anyone who matters to us, like your family or Val and the boys, is long gone. If they don’t know already, they’ll figure it out soon enough. It’s my mother I’m not sure about. Part of me wants to tell her in hopes she disowns me and I can stop paying her twenty grand a year to pretend she loves me.”

“Fucking hell, Toby. I thought you stopped sending her money after Oscar moved in with her.”

“I was going to, but I started thinking about my dad. And I know he would want me to take care of her. It’s a man’s job to take care of his mother. I can’t be there to mow the lawn or fix a dripping faucet, but I can make sure she has enough money to live comfortably. I know she helps out Grandma Betty, too.”

“She’s not using your money for rent and groceries, Toby. Shit, dude, I’ll send money to Grandma Betty, if it will get you to stop funding your mother’s casino habit.” The rumor around town was that Toby’s mother and her boyfriend, Oscar, went out to one of the casinos on the Yakima Reservation almost every weekend to party.

“I want to do right by my dad and honor my parents.”

“Toby, you risk your life, day in and day out, to earn that money. She shouldn’t get to waste it on booze and slot machines. Your mom has a good job as a secretary for the high school and doesn’t need you to support her. We both know your dad wouldn’t approve of that crap.

“If anything, you should be putting money away so you can help Grandma Betty when she finally moves to an assisted living place. An extra twenty grand a year would get her into a much nicer place than she could afford on her own.” Gavin’s grandparents were all gone by the time they were twelve. Grandma Betty filled the void and he doted on her.

“You’re right. It needs to stop, but I don’t know how to make it happen without a huge messy scene. I don’t want the drama. It’s been easier to leave it alone.”

“Come here.” Gavin waved Toby over to his corner of the couch. When Toby shifted over, Gavin put his arm around Toby’s shoulders and pulled him into his side. “It’s gonna suck, but you can’t let her take advantage of your

guilt. She may be mad for a while but she'll get over it. She's still your mother." A gentle hand stroked Toby's hair at the back of his neck.

"That's never mattered before, but I hear you. I'll talk to her after this weekend." A sigh reaching all the way to the soles of his feet escaped Toby's control.

"Let's skip the video games and maybe we can find something else to occupy our time before I have to sneak across the yard and pretend I spent the night in my own bed."

"It wouldn't be the first time you slept on my couch." Toby grinned wickedly.

Gavin blushed as he looked at Toby out of the corner of his eye. "Not a chance in hell I'm sleeping on your couch."

Caught between treating Gavin like his girlfriend and like his best friend, Toby was unsure how to proceed. This part of being with a man always confused Toby. He wasn't sure what the expectations were. He wanted nothing more than to kiss Gavin and enjoy the simple comfort of being close, but he didn't know if Gavin would think it was too girly. Toby craved sharing that kind of intimacy and softness with Gavin in a way he never had with anyone else. With a quick glance at Gavin, he scooted even closer and dropped his head onto Gavin's shoulder, hoping he'd take the hint.

Somehow Gavin knew exactly what was percolating around in Toby's confuddled mind. He slid a finger under Toby's chin and lifted his head enough to plant a lingering kiss on Toby's lips. "Do what you want, Toby. If you want to sit here and make out for a while, I'm all for it. If you want to drag me into your bedroom like a caveman and claim the orgasm I owe you, more power to you. One of the best parts of being in a relationship with another man is that the roles aren't predefined. Top or bottom. Dominant or submissive. Rough or gentle. There aren't any rules and you can switch it up any time. Did you believe I'd think less of you for wanting to kiss and cuddle for a while after the day we've had?"

"No... sort of... I don't know. When I'm with a woman, I know what's expected of me. I'm supposed to be her cowboy fantasy. They want me to be the Marlboro Man or Tim McGraw. It's the take-charge, hard-partying, cowboy gigolo they want. They don't care about any part of me that doesn't fit the illusion. But you already know the real me. The one who doesn't fit the stereotype. The guy who does yoga and likes video games and hip-hop. I don't

know how to act or what you expect from me when it comes to being more than your best friend. I'm off balance and flailing to find purchase here."

"Be yourself. It's that simple. I don't want the cowboy, I want Tobias Bartholomew Prescott, the man, in all his amazing glory. Ask for what you need and if you ever wonder what I want, ask me. You never have to guess. And for the record, you can't be surprised those were the women you found for a one-night stand in a cowboy bar after a rodeo."

"I have never wanted to be soft and tender with someone. Historically, I've done the minimum after-sex canoodling I can get away with before I bolt. It's always felt clingy and uncomfortable. Here with you, right now, I crave the closeness almost more than the sex, tho I'll probably claim that orgasm you owe me later." Toby deflected the rawness he was feeling with a little humor. "You don't think I sound, I don't know, unmanly?"

"No, you sound human. Everyone craves touch and comfort, Toby. As much as you claim to like women, you don't trust them with any part of yourself, except your dick. With me, it's different. You feel safe and that opens up a level of intimacy that has never appealed to you before. So, no, it's not unmanly. I've always wanted to share that sort of intimacy with you. Do I seem effeminate to you?"

"Umm... No. You are definitely all man." Toby stretched up to kiss Gavin while patting his hard belly. The long strokes of Gavin's hand up and down his back he got in return were worth the self-examination. "How'd you know what was knotting me up?"

"I've belonged to an online support group for closeted gay men for a couple years. The things newbies worry about are pretty universal. The group moderator is a shrink in Seattle and he's the one who's been encouraging me to come out to at least a few of the people I trust most. John thinks having a relief valve will make a big difference for me. And so far, he seems to be right."

"Wow. You are part of this secret gay world I know nothing about."

"Like your yoga friends, who all seem to look like NFL cheerleaders, are any different." When they had a day off in some random city, Toby would hop online and an hour later some beautiful woman would pick him up and they would go off to some "yoga class" for half a day.

"I don't sleep with my yoga friends, you know that right? I belong to a sports performance yoga group and when I have a free afternoon, I go online

and ask if anyone knows of a good studio in the area. I don't want to leave you without transportation, so I barter a ride from the studio owner for a photo and an interview with a top twenty bull rider they can put in a press release. If you look at my clippings folder, half of the articles are *Nationally ranked bull rider, Toby Prescott, visits local yoga studio*. Did you think my week at the Sports Performance Institute was a sex-filled vacation in the desert?"

Gavin laughed. "It crossed my mind, but you came back all fired up and kicked my ass for the next month with all your new positions and movements."

"It was an intensive yoga instructor retreat with a bunch of trainers from some of the most elite sports teams in the world."

"Why didn't you tell me? You just said it was some yoga retreat in Arizona."

"I get enough crap for the yoga and mind-body fitness stuff. I don't talk to anybody about any of it unless they ask. Everyone comes to me when they have a problem, but they still call me downward dog and yoga boy all the fucking time. I know some people mean it as a teasing sign of respect, but from most of them it's insulting. Why didn't I tell you more about the retreat? You didn't ask. You never do."

"You're allowed parts of your life that don't involve me. I always figured, if you wanted me to know more about the yoga stuff, you'd tell me. It was never because I wasn't interested."

"Okay. Would you be willing to stay an extra day in Albuquerque to take a class with one of the women who taught at the intensive? I've wanted to take her mind-body seminar for a while, but I couldn't manage to schedule it."

"Am I good enough for a yoga class at that level? I wouldn't want to embarrass you or hold you back."

"You don't approach yoga as a spiritual practice, but your poses and movements are good. It'll be fine. I wouldn't suggest it if you weren't up to it."

"Then let's do it. Assuming we are both physically capable after this next stretch of events. Do you realize we have one off week in the next eight? We're in the RV for Ellensburg, Puyallup, and Pendleton, then we fly to Albuquerque, then a bye week, followed by Tulsa, Badlands, Billings and finally San Francisco. That's a full month of airports and hotels."

"The glamorous life of a rodeo cowboy. Tell me all of our rooms have a kitchenette... I can't live on Subway for that long without losing it."

“Everywhere but San Francisco. We’ve never been there and by then I thought we’d need a few days in a hotel with a gym and some good food.” Gavin squeezed Toby and kissed the side of his head. “We could also go out to one of the clubs and dance together without people caring. San Francisco is big enough we shouldn’t bump into anyone if we’re careful.”

“We’ll see. I don’t know if I’m ready for full on San Francisco gay. I’m not saying no, just give me time to process the idea.”

“Apparently, stereotypes aren’t just about cowboys. Ya know, most of the gay community is more like us than not. There’s more to it than drag queens and body glitter.”

“I know... just baby steps. Okay.”

“Sure. I get it. Take your time. Can we go to bed now? I want you see you naked.” Gavin dragged his T-shirt over his head and dropped it on the sofa.

“You’ve seen me naked hundreds of times.” Toby followed with his own shirt.

“Yeah, but your dick is hard this time.” Gavin laughed as Toby looked down and saw the obvious bulge in his jeans.

“So it is.” Toby rubbed his hands on Gavin’s bared sides, enjoying his smooth skin for a moment before brazenly rubbing his hard-on against Gavin’s. Sex was easier than all this complicated relationship stuff. “Yours is too.”

“Come on, dude. I remember something about owing you an orgasm.” Gavin led them into Toby’s bedroom.

By the time Toby grabbed a couple hand towels from the bathroom, he’d worked out for himself that gay sex could get a little messy, Gavin had pulled the sheets and blankets to the foot of the bed and was spread gloriously naked across his bed casually stroking his own cock.

Just a little too masculine to be classified as pretty, Gavin had never looked so unbelievably sexy to Toby before this moment. His silky skin seemed absolutely lustrous in the low light from the bedside table. You would think with his dark, almost black, hair and golden tan skin, Gavin would have more body hair, but he didn’t. In fact, he was nearly hairless, save the well-trimmed patch at his groin which framed his hard cock beautifully. As far as Toby could tell, Gavin’s cock was about average, maybe a little longer, but the remarkable part was the wide mushroom cap which would eventually stretch his ass wide

and scrape against his prostate on every pass. Toby may be a virgin in the area of man sex, but he knew he liked ass play and he thoroughly enjoyed the blue silicone butt plug he had hidden in a box under his bed.

“I found condoms in the nightstand, but we won't need them tonight. Got lube, babe?”

“In the plastic bin under my bed.” Toby prepared himself for the teasing he was sure to get when Gavin saw the plug. Wait... Babe? Really? Yeah, Toby wasn't going to let that continue much longer.

Diving over the side of the bed to look underneath, Gavin pulled out the green plastic shoe box. Toby actually groaned at the sight of Gavin's high, round ass wiggling as he stretched for the bin. If Toby did squats all day, he still wouldn't have the high, tight, bubble butt Gavin had without trying. Toby's ass, on the other hand, was small and hard muscled but it seemed a little flat and ordinary in comparison. Vanity made Toby acknowledge that he had the better arms.

“Well, well, well... What have we here? Two different lubes, a vibrating prostate wand, and a sweet silicone plug. Tobes, I didn't think you had it in you. We are going to have some fun with these. One day, you'll fuck me while wearing the plug and think your head's gonna explode. But for now, a little regular lube is more than enough.”

Hands on his hips, wearing only his jeans, Toby blushed and looked away. He knew there was no reason to be embarrassed, but he was. Gavin now knew all of his secrets, the sexual ones anyway. Toby would have felt naked even if he were fully dressed. A moment passed silently as Gavin waited Toby out. Finally, Toby looked him in the eye and gave him a crooked smile.

“It's all good, Tobes. I have my own little box of toys, though mine is better hidden as I don't want to risk Maria Elena discovering it while vacuuming.” Maria Elena was the wife of one of the orchard workers at Hazy Hill. To make a little extra money while her kids were in school, she kept the farmhouse clean and made a hot lunch for the family and farm employees during the week. Toby would marry her just for her Mexican chicken stew, if she weren't nearly fifty years old and already married to Arturo.

“Still hiding things in the baseball card box in the top of your closet?” It was where Gavin hid his porn and, rarely, pot when they were in high school. Toby stepped closer to the bed.

“Why mess with something that works? Get naked and come here.”



“You’re just going to sit there and watch?” Toby was a little uncomfortable not being in control.

“Yup.” Gavin put the lube on the bed and started tugging on his cock again as he leaned against the headboard.

Rolling his eyes, Toby undid the buttons of his fly and shoved his jeans to the floor before tossing them on to a chair in the corner of the room. “You expect me to dance too?”

“Not this time. Now hurry up before I finish without you.”

Toby laughed. “Don’t you fucking dare.” He quickly stripped off his underwear and socks. Finally naked, Toby hurried forward and leaped onto the bed, nearly bouncing Gavin off. More laughter filled the room. The blatant happiness on Gavin’s face pushed Toby into leaning over and kissing him deep and hard. Tongues wrestled and teeth clicked, but as the initial frenzy passed, the kiss became languid and sexy. The taste of Gavin’s kisses was quickly becoming addictive, and Toby couldn’t find a reason to fight it.

Soon Gavin lifted himself up and slid on top of Toby, settling comfortably between his legs. Kisses flowed from lips to jaw to neck to collarbone only to return and start again. All while the two men rocked together, cocks rubbing like they were aiming to start a fire with the friction. Toby arched his back as Gavin sucked at his nipples and nibbled at his pecs. Gavin’s hands were everywhere from his shoulders and arms to his hips and thighs in a pattern so random it made Toby’s head spin. Moving down Toby’s body, Gavin gave his abs and hips the same treatment.

Toby wasn’t stupid. Gavin was building up to a world-class blowjob. He’d had his share of oral sex since he lost his virginity at sixteen, but it had never been this kind of whole body experience. His heart pounded in the same crazy rhythm as his cock thrummed almost painfully. Gavin’s eyes never left Toby’s face. His best friend’s attention was singularly focused on him and it was intoxicating, but eventually the pleasure was too great as Toby’s head fell back and his body writhed with need. A tiny, coherent part of Toby’s now nearly primal brain prayed that he wouldn’t come the instant Gavin’s mouth touched his dick.

Raising himself onto his knees, Gavin knelt between Toby’s splayed legs. The loss of contact with Gavin made Toby lift his head. Gavin was looking at him with heavy, passion-drugged eyes and at the same time, he was practically strangling the base of his own cock, apparently trying to stave off his own

orgasm. It was the single hottest thing Toby had ever seen. After a few beats, Gavin resumed his tour of Toby's pelvis and groin without any direct contact to his dick or balls. Suddenly, Gavin grabbed him by the hips and pulled his ass up to rest high on Gavin's long thighs, practically rolling him onto his shoulders. Jesus, it was hot.

It didn't take long for Gavin's intent to become clear. Toby nearly began hyperventilating when Gavin started rubbing his hands over Toby's thighs and licking his taint and balls. But this was merely distraction while Gavin lubed up a finger and started gently stroking over his hole. It was awesome and maddening at the same time. Dizzy from the overwhelming sensations spinning around all over his body, Toby bent himself in half, pulling his knees practically to his ears. Gavin's unoccupied hand moved from his thighs to his abdomen, and his mouth seemed to be circling the vicinity of his cock, yet never touched his dick. It was the sweetest torture. "Gav, please. Have mercy. Shit... so good. Please..."

His begging was instantly rewarded. Gavin started licking the underside of his cock at the same time he slid his slippery finger into Toby's ass. Licking the head and slit of Toby's achingly hard dick, Gavin continued moving the finger in his ass to the same tempo. It wasn't long before Gavin added a second finger. There was a little discomfort, but the pleasure of having those fingers brush over his prostate drove any thought of pain from his head.

"So fucking hot. You taste so damn good. Could do this all night." Gavin resumed lapping at Toby's cock like it was the cream filling of an Oreo.

"Come on. Suck me. I can't take much more. Please, man." Toby was still begging.

"Awright. Here we go." Toby couldn't see it, but he heard and felt Gavin's sinful smile. Gavin backed off and lowered Toby's butt back to the bed and adjusted his legs to give him more room to work. Lips gently caressed the head of his cock without much pressure or purpose, but it was a promise of more to come. When Gavin finally took the crown of Toby's dick fully into his mouth and began to suck, Toby's hips thrust up without his consent.

"Whoa there, cowboy. I may ride bucking horses for a living, but I ain't ready for that yet." Gavin's laugh was light and almost airy. Toby focused on getting back control of his body while Gavin continued to suck and rub the underside of his cock with the breadth of his tongue. As his command of his body came back, Toby began to push back at Gavin's fingers trying to get them

deeper into his ass. "Toby, I would never have believed you were a greedy bottom if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes."

Instantly, Toby froze. His insecurities about being bi and less than masculine roared back to life. Gavin quickly stopped what he was doing to look up into Toby's face. "Hey. Easy... It wasn't an insult. You should take responsibility for your own pleasure. And there's no shame in bottoming. Accepting the receptive role makes you more of a man not less. Be yourself and enjoy." Gavin stretched up to kiss him while still pushing his fingers in and out of Toby.

It didn't take long for Toby to get his mojo back. The hot, wet mouth surrounding his cock helped immeasurably. At one point, Gavin was penetrating his ass with the fingers on one hand, rolling Toby's balls in the other all while he continued to bob his head and suck him deep. The hand on his balls returned to touching him pretty much everywhere Gavin could reach. Toby reached for Gavin, stroking his hair and touching the side of his face. Gavin gazed at him with such softness and heat, Toby felt their connection all the way to his soul. It was intense and it brought him closer to his orgasm. Still squirming and rocking his hips, Toby knew the end was near. Goosebumps raced across his thighs and up his back, and his balls tightened in their sacs as they drew up close to his body. "Just a little more. Jesus. So good... Coming... coming..."

At that, Toby erupted in an orgasm that knew no bounds. It swamped every one of his nerve endings and disrupted the functioning of his not-insignificant muscles. He dropped back onto the bed feeling boneless and replete. As the haze in his mind cleared, he saw Gavin kneeling between Toby's shaky thighs with one hand jacking himself off and the other rhythmically squeezing his balls. Toby could not believe how utterly gorgeous Gavin was as he approached his orgasm. Those stunning abs flexed, as his thigh muscles bunched and released. The unselfconscious, sensual moans and grunts Gavin made nearly had Toby's spent cock twitching to reinflate. Within a few moments, Gavin's cock sprayed Toby's neck, chest and abs with come.

Toby grabbed one of the towels and wiped himself off with a crooked grin splashed across his face. They shifted until they were again lying face to face, kissing softly and teasing skin with lazy fingertips. In all the years he'd been having sex, Toby never felt this completely satisfied in the aftermath. He'd had hot passionate sex with some of the women he was with, but once it was over he always felt vaguely uncomfortable and it made him a bit antsy. This was so

completely different. He could stay here with Gavin and bask in the easy affection all night.

“You’re quiet. You okay?”

“I’m great. Better than...” Toby’s smile and gentle kiss seemed to settle Gavin.

“Good. My phone is set to go off at three-thirty. Come get some sleep.” Gavin pulled Toby into his arms and tugged him to his side with Toby’s head on his chest and their legs tangled together. Gavin made a space against his body that Toby fit into perfectly. It was a wonderment. The last thing Toby was conscious of hearing was Gavin mumbling, “So much nicer than the damn couch.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 5

Grandma Betty still seemed pretty spry for eighty. Gavin studied the wedding portrait of Betty and Jimmy Foight hanging in the hallway of the home they shared for more than thirty years. She had always been a beautiful woman, but to Gavin's mind Grandma Betty seemed to get more so every year. Her hair may have gone from nutmeg to silver blonde and she might not be as thin as she once was, but none of that dimmed the light that was Toby's Grandma Betty. Gavin's grandparents were all dead before he was out of elementary school, so Grandma Betty and Grandpa Jimmy were the only grandparents Gavin had ever known.

As she ushered them into her living room, Gavin could see a stiffness in her gait as she tried to hide the pain in her hip. He also noticed clutter had accumulated on the hall table. It looked like unopened mail and a lot of it.

"I'm so happy my handsome boys could come see me today. The gossips at the cafe will think I'm one of those cougars with you two escorting me to lunch." Grandma Betty's green eyes, much like Toby's, twinkled with her teasing laugh.

Gavin kissed her cheek. "Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me..." Gavin stammered like Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*.

"A movie before your time." Toby's grandmother laughed and patted Gavin's arm.

"Maybe, but it's a classic. I like old movies." It was true. They were in hotel rooms so often, he watched a lot of old movies to pass the time.

"What can we do for you while we're here?" Toby looked around for anything obvious.

"Nothing right now. Helena was here yesterday." Helena was a neighbor who was paid to help with the heavier cleaning and drive Grandma Betty on her errands a couple afternoons a week.

"You sure? We may not be so bright, but our backs are strong." Toby grinned.

She reached over to pat Toby's shoulder. "Funny boy, run upstairs and grab my purse from the chair in my bedroom, please. It will take too long if I go."

"Sure, Grandma." Toby headed off to do his grandmother's bidding.

As Grandma Betty puttered about the kitchen getting ready to go, Gavin took the opportunity to look around for any more red flags. He didn't know why but something in the little bungalow felt off. The mail was one and it looked to be a lot of unopened bills and bank statements. The number of pharmacy pill bottles on the kitchen counter also seemed to be multiplying since the last time they visited about three weeks earlier. Returning to the kitchen, Gavin hugged Toby's grandmother again. Grandma Betty gave the best hugs. "We thought we'd take your car this time. Toby's truck is high and I know you have a hard time climbing in and out."

"Thank you, Gavin. Getting old isn't for sissies, don't let anyone tell you different."

"Nothing about you is old, sweetheart, except maybe in years. How many of your friends have a tablet computer and know how to video chat? I love talking with you when we're on the road. Keeps me grounded."

"You don't need me for that, but it's nice to hear."

"Tell me about the hip. Has the doctor said anything about doing a replacement?"

"I have good days and bad, like everyone else and Dr. Anderson says a lot of things. The hip is better when I take a good walk every day, but the rain this month got me off schedule and... It doesn't matter. It'll get better. It always does."

Toby walked back into the kitchen. "You need to do whatever the doctor tells you to do, Grandma."

"No, I don't. I'm not leaving my house just so I don't have to climb stairs. Jimmy told me he loved me and kissed me goodbye for the last time right in this kitchen the morning he had his stroke. I can't walk away from my last memory of him."

"You don't have to walk away from anything, but you could still move somewhere without stairs and take the memories with you. Do you think Grandpa would want you suffering because of him?"

"No, he wouldn't. He would think I was being stubborn and sentimental which would be accurate. We were married fifty-six years, he knew me better than anyone."

"He did. Grandpa Jimmy loved you more than his own life. He wouldn't want you to hurt if it could be prevented. Just think about it."

“Mrs. Vohlick from my parents’ church is living over in an assisted living center off Cottonwood Avenue. She loves it. She doesn’t have to cook for herself every day, she takes exercise classes at the community center and there is always someone available if she has a problem. Plus, there’s absolutely no upkeep or yard work to worry over.”

“Let’s go get some lunch. We can talk more and maybe you’ll let me schedule a couple tours, just to see what’s available.” Toby flashed her a look that would make the most pathetic, begging puppy proud. Gavin couldn’t help but laugh.

Sonrisa Cafe was one of the few places in town that served good food and had options that wouldn’t blow their diet. The Latin-inspired food was some of Gavin’s favorite. Settling into their normal pattern, they talked about Toby’s extended family who were scattered around the country and the farm. Grandma Betty poked them about finding nice girls and settling down to give her great-grandchildren. Gavin glanced at Toby and almost choked at the slight blush Toby was fighting.

Toby was nearly dancing in his seat waiting for his vegan tacos with the rubbery cashew cheese he liked. Gavin, as usual, ordered the grilled salmon sandwich with mango salsa and avocado, and Grandma Betty chose the roast chicken and salad. Lunch was fun and easy, but not without some unpleasant discoveries. Grandma Betty confessed there were nights she slept on the recliner in the den because she couldn’t face climbing the stairs. Later, when they were nearly finished with their lunch, she also admitted she hadn’t seen Toby’s mother in almost two weeks and hadn’t spoken to her daughter in more than five days. Toby’s face told him that his best friend was close to losing his shit. Gavin did his best to walk Toby back into the land of the marginally sane before Toby raced out of the restaurant and did something he’d regret to his mother.

They spent another hour with Grandma Betty before heading back to the farm. Without even discussing what Toby was going to do, Gavin knew. After a call to make sure his mother was home, Toby was going to go yell at his mother and cut off her allowance so he could focus on getting his grandmother the extra help she needed. Before getting out of the truck and going back to work, Gavin had to remind Toby of the reality he faced. “Tobes, you gotta listen. You can’t go off on your mother. Focus on Grandma Betty and what she needs. Your mother could make things incredibly difficult for you. Eyes on the prize.”

"I know. I'll calm down before I get there. It's just... The last time I got concerned about Grandma Betty, Mom promised me she checked in with Grandma Betty every day and saw her at least once a week. Ignoring me is one thing, but I can't let Mom get away with neglecting her mother."

"You won't, but you need Marianne as an ally not an adversary. Keep your cool and it'll be okay."

"I know. I got this." Toby's small tight smile told the whole story.

"You do." The urge to kiss Toby good-bye before he got out of the truck struck him hard. To be safe, nobody could know what they meant to each other and that meant no reassuring kisses good-bye. Not that he was sure about what they meant to each other at this point. Gavin got out of Toby's truck and went straight back to work.

\*\*\*\*

Spending the next couple hours playing musical pastures with the cattle helped keep him from worrying for a bit. Thistle and Bramble scrambled around herding the last of the cattle through the gate into fresh pasture while Gavin sat on horseback and supervised. Gavin's mother raised grass-fed, pasture-raised beef because the quality was superior and it was by far the healthiest diet for the cattle, so the complicated ins and outs of rotational grazing were an essential part of daily life on Hazy Hill. Gavin noted in the ranching app on his phone that this group of young mothers with calves had been successfully moved to the east pasture closer to the cherry orchards. After closing the gate, Gavin whistled for the dogs and headed home. Along the way, he pulled his phone back out and sent Toby a text message.

*You got this. Have a killer reward planned. Call me. <3 G.*

Spending time with his mother always left Toby aggravated and on edge. He knew when the call finally came, it would be to get Gavin to meet him at The Bullpen, a local dive bar with cheap beer and great scratch-made food including Hazy Hill steaks and hamburgers. If it was a normal conversation between Toby and his mother, they'd have a few beers and be home in time for dinner, but if Toby and Marianne fought, it would be Jack and bar food for dinner. Gavin was definitely hoping for the former.

The next day's drive to Ellensburg was only two hours, but they also had sponsors to schmooze at the rodeo kick-off event that evening. For most people, even casual competitors, rodeos were all for fun, but for professionals like Gavin and Toby, they were work. Yes, they loved what they did, but they only



made money if they rode well and maintained their sponsorships. Events like the rodeo kick-off gave them the opportunity to market themselves to the public and sponsors which was especially important to Toby who was making the jump to the more celebrity-driven PBR next season. Cultivating fans and courting media attention were the way to attract more and bigger sponsors; doing that with a hangover was less than optimal.

Gavin took some extra time grooming Whiz. He hadn't had much time to spend with the horse lately. The palomino paint was probably Gavin's best friend, save Toby. They'd been buddies since Gavin's sixteenth birthday when Toby and his dad brought him home from a horse show in Oregon. He didn't think he would be a saddle bronc rider today if it wasn't for Whiz.

But what he was really doing was keeping busy so he wasn't fretting about Toby. It had been more than two hours since Toby had driven off to see his mother. Just as he sent Whiz into the pasture with the rest of the farm horses, Toby's ringtone sounded from his front pocket. Gavin quickly answered. "Hey, dude."

"Hey."

"How'd it go?"

"My mom is a narcissistic bitch."

"In other news, the sky is blue... Did you expect something else?"

"Yes. Grandma Betty is struggling to get through the day and all my mom worries about is how it all affects her. I don't get it. I don't understand how she could be married to my dad and have no sense of family. I don't get it."

"It is what it is, Tobes. Where are you?"

"Halfway to The Bullpen. Come meet me."

"Are we drinking beer or whiskey? I need to let my folks know if we're gonna miss dinner."

"Just beer. Angie's making a vegetarian lasagna recipe she found in one of the cookbooks from the healthy hearts program at the hospital. We need to support her efforts to stay well. If you leave now, we'll be home in time to sit down for dinner."

"On my way. See you in fifteen." Gavin disconnected the call. He managed to change his shirt and get off the farm in time to make it into town with two minutes to spare.

The Bullpen had been a fixture in town for the last decade. The owner was a retired minor league pitcher and a high school classmate of Gavin's dad. It was primarily a locals bar as it was too far from anything to attract tourists, except during the fall apple-picking season. When Gavin walked in, Toby was already sitting in a booth in the back corner with a pitcher of beer and two glasses, one of which was already half empty. Gavin slipped into the booth with him and poured himself a beer.

"What happened?" It wasn't hard for Gavin to guess it wasn't good from Toby's tight jaw.

Toby shrugged. "You know what happened."

"Tell me anyway."

"Same old crap mostly. She was harping on why I live at the farm when I could afford to live somewhere 'nice'. Hazy Hill is my home and my family lives there. Why would I live anywhere else? She can't comprehend valuing anything beyond money. Anyway, when I finally got her to focus on Grandma Betty, she accused me of wanting to stick my grandmother in a home."

"Can't she see her mother needs more help?"

"She doesn't want to see it. When I told her I couldn't afford to send her money every month and take care of Grandma Betty, too, she tried to play the poor widowed mother card and make me out to be the bad guy. Jesus, Gav. Why does she treat me like this?"

"I don't know, but it's been the same since your dad died so I don't understand why you thought it would be different."

"Because it's Grandma Betty... I genuinely believed she would want what's best for her mother."

"Yeah well... that was never gonna happen."

"Hey. You didn't come out unscathed either... My mom thinks you are poisoning me against my family."

"Not news to me. I think I was eighteen the first time she said it." Gavin remembered the conversation well. Toby didn't know half of the horrible things his mother had said about Gavin and his family over the years.

"Anyway. I accused her of being ungrateful and spoiled and she hinted she would freeze me out of helping take care of Grandma Betty. I told her if I was

footing part of the bill, I had every right to participate in the decision making and I would take her to court if she did anything stupid. It's not like my grandmother doesn't know how her daughter is."

"Shit, Toby. This could get ugly. She can't mean to push you that far." Marianne was Toby's mother. Taking her to court would kill something in Toby. But Gavin knew Toby would do whatever he had to in order to protect his grandmother.

"I gave her a check for three grand and told her it was the last one. No matter what happens, she's not getting another fucking dime from me. I'm done."

"Good. It's about time."

"Even now, I'd still give her anything she needed but I can't let Grandma Betty suffer for my mother's selfishness."

"I know. No one would expect you to turn your back on your family, but she shouldn't have been taking advantage of you all this time."

"Hey, I voluntarily kept sending her cash after I moved out."

"Because she made you feel guilty about not being there to split the rent and utilities with her. She convinced you it's normal for a son to pay his mother room and board when he's home from college. You know my folks still won't charge me rent."

"Yeah, well we both work the farm for free when we're home. I think it all comes out in the wash, don't you?"

"It does. I sometimes wish they'd ask more of me, but they won't. I've tried and they won't accept any money from me. It's part of why I want to buy the Gorman homestead from them. It's time to grow up and build the life I want."

"Finish your beer. We need to get home. I promised Angie I'd bring her a couple beginner yoga DVDs and some articles on supplements she might want to consider. Besides, I seem to remember something about a reward for not murdering my mother..."

"Yeah, we won't have time before dinner. Your reward is going to take some time for us to ummm... thoroughly experience."

"Come on. Let's go home."

\*\*\*\*

Settled on the sofa in Toby's apartment, Gavin had his stocking feet on Toby's lap where Toby was absently massaging his left foot. "I'm glad you told my folks everything going on with your mom and Grandma Betty. They want to help and they'll find a good lawyer if you need it. You okay?"

"More or less. Every time I think this time my mother's going to be different and every single time I'm disappointed. She isn't going to change. I don't know why I think she will. My mom doesn't love me, she doesn't even like me. She never has."

"She's your mom and you love her. It isn't good enough and you deserve more, but I do think she loves you in her own way." Gavin groaned in pleasure as Toby worked a knot out of the arch of his foot. "Damn, that feels good."

"Hold still. It's supposed to feel good. I'm glad I have a family who has, for reasons which defy understanding, made me one of their own."

"You've been a part of my family since the day I brought you home from school and introduced you to my mom..."

"I was so upset to leave Spokane, but from the very first day of the school year, you took it on yourself to befriend the short, pudgy new kid. Sometimes I can't believe how lucky I was that my dad got laid off and we moved in with my grandparents for a while. It felt like my world was imploding at the time, but it worked out okay. I got you out of the deal." Toby's crooked smile was almost flirty.

"It was fate. You were this force of nature who held my attention from the moment I saw you in the hallway outside Mr. Donohue's classroom before school. And nothing has changed in fourteen years." Gavin leaned over and kissed Toby.

"Can I have my reward now?" Toby broke out the puppy face again.

"Does that face work on women? It makes me want to swat you on the nose with a newspaper. Let's go. It's time for bed anyway. And we need to actually get to sleep at some point because the rodeo kickoff event is gonna run long after our bedtime tomorrow."

"Okay. You gonna let me share the big bed with you in the trailer? I'd kinda like to see what it's like to wake up with you in the morning. It turns out I don't like you sneaking out of my bed in the middle of the night like a trick."

"Well, it's your secret I'm keeping. Come out to my parents and I'll wake up with you every day."

"I know... I didn't think I'd ever want to share my bed with anyone, but with you I do. I really do. After we get home from Ellensburg, I'll talk to them."

"No. We'll talk with them. Together."

"Together. Like everything else." The smile crossing Toby's face was crooked and a little shy.

"Come to bed. I owe you a reward and I think you're gonna like it."

"Your naked body plus my naked body... what's not to like?"

"I thought you'd be more resistant to us being together like this."

"Why? Have I ever shown any reluctance to go after anything I want?"

"No, but I thought you were straight, mostly. I never knew I could be one of the things you'd want." Gavin looked into Toby's pine green eyes, studying the flecks of brown and gold like there would be a test later.

"Mostly?"

"I thought I saw you staring at my lips a couple times last year... and I know I saw you checking out my ass running up the steps at the Cody Stampede this year."

"You were wearing those little blue and orange split shorts and nothing else but your running shoes. Even a straight guy would look."

"I'm sorry sweetheart, no straight guy would have noticed my ass. And, you had me running stairs in eighty-five degree heat; I'd have run naked if it weren't for the chafing."

Toby stood up and walked toward the bedroom. "Fine, but you still have a nicer ass than most of the girls I've slept with."

It took Gavin a second to think about that before he shook his head, got up and followed Toby. This time it was Toby who was naked and stretched out on the bed like some sort of offering to the gods. He watched Gavin stalk closer to the bed before Toby wrapped his large square hand around his own cock waiting for Gavin to join him. As he undressed, Gavin cleared his mind of everything but Toby. Staring at Toby's rampant erection was enough for Gavin to forget his own name let alone anything else going on in the world. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say Gavin had daydreamed about Toby's cock. Average in length but thick and in the most amazing shade of dusky plum,

Toby's cock was this fat tusk of a thing with a blunt knob head and slight upward curve.

When he'd finally withdrawn from his reverie about Toby's dick, he looked up at his best friend's amused grin and the lube and condoms on the bed beside him. Out of his clothes, Gavin stood at the foot of the bed stroking his own member. "Turn your ass over onto your hands and knees."

Toby hesitated for a moment and Gavin wasn't sure what to make of it. He raised an eyebrow and waited for Toby to say something or comply with his command. Reaching some sort of conclusion in his own mind, Toby flipped over, presenting his tight little cowboy ass for Gavin to admire. Gavin climbed up on the bed behind Toby, pressing his hard dick against Toby's ass before covering Toby's back with his chest and whispering in Toby's ear. "Stop fretting, Tobes. I won't fuck you until you ask me for it. Only you can decide when you're ready. Once you cross that Rubicon and enjoy it, there won't be any way to claim you're straight and what happened between us was an experiment. Bottoming will change the way you see me and more importantly yourself. When you're ready, I'll be there and until then there's plenty for us to do, so relax."

With a snap of his head, Toby turned to glare at Gavin. "This is real, Gav. I'm not fucking with you, well I am, but you know what I mean. Do you need me to tattoo it on my forehead for you to believe me? God, you feel good over me."

Gavin rocked his hips, sliding his erection down the cleft of Toby's ass and nudging his balls. "I believe you. I want you to be sure." Kissing along Toby's neck and spine, Gavin pushed down gently on Toby's shoulders. Toby obliged Gavin and lowered his shoulders to the bed and spread his knees further, lifting his ass. Between Toby's thighs, Gavin grabbed his cock and flipped it backward so he could suck him from behind. A steadying hand on his ass kept Toby from bucking hard enough to pull his dick out of Gavin's mouth. Groans and moans from Toby were so wickedly hot Gavin was nearly humping air. Licking from the slit all the way past Toby's balls, Gavin grinned as Toby pushed back against his tongue. Gavin went back to the head of Toby's cock and sucked gently while stroking his thumb across his hole.

"Come on, Gav. Don't tease." Hips pushed back harder against Gavin's thumb, hoping to push it inside.

Gavin sat back on his heels and watched Toby buck for a moment before leaning forward and biting Toby's ass hard enough to sting.

“Holy fuck. Give me something. Please. Feels so good.” Toby lifted his ass even higher, presenting it to Gavin.

With a chuckle, Gavin pulled Toby's ass open so he could press his lips to Toby's fluttering hole, making sure he rubbed the stubble on his chin against the skin of Toby's ass. Moving to lick all the way up and down Toby's crack, Gavin reveled in the musky masculine scent he already associated with Toby. Gavin went back to licking the underside of Toby's cock only this time he ended by sucking on Toby's balls in turn. It was fun to blow Toby's ever-loving mind. Releasing Toby's testicle from his mouth, Gavin quickly began to lap at Toby's pink hole before plunging his tongue in deep enough to make Toby cry out at the pleasure of it.

Rimming was one of Gavin's favorite parts of sex. It was so intensely intimate and right on the edge of raunchy that it made the whole experience even hotter. Toby responded with the surprise and joy Gavin had expected. He doubted any of Toby's hook-ups would dare do something so risqué, at least relative to straight sex. Gavin pushed his face between Toby's cheeks and continued to lick and fuck Toby's hole with his tongue. Each moment that passed drove Toby closer and closer to losing it. Finally, Gavin once again grabbed Toby's cock from behind and pulled on it in time with his tongue. Toby seemed to be torn between thrusting into Gavin's hand and pushing Gavin's tongue deeper into his ass. It wasn't long before he found a rhythm that worked for him. Gavin slapped Toby's ass with his free hand and saw the goosebumps emerge on Toby's thighs and butt. The end was nigh, cliché but true. In one final twist, Gavin lubed two fingers before flipping onto his back and shoving his head under Toby and sucking his cock all the way to the root. Once Toby started to shallowly fuck his mouth, Gavin stabbed two fingers into Toby's ass, targeting his prostate. Toby screamed his release as pulse after pulse of hot come filled Gavin's mouth. Eventually, Toby's cock became oversensitive, and Gavin pulled off to crawl up and lie beside Toby for a carnal kiss with the flavor of Toby's semen still in his mouth.

Toby instantly wiggled his thigh between Gavin's legs and grabbed Gavin's ass to heave him closer to Toby's body. Gavin thrust against Toby's thigh and hip as they continued to kiss. Within a few minutes, Gavin groaned as he painted Toby's body with his release and continued to grind against Toby until they were both covered in his come. Unexpectedly, Toby pushed Gavin onto his back and proceeded to lick Gavin's come from his skin. They kissed again and again until Gavin dragged them to the shower to clean up.

Once they were back in bed, Gavin laid there and looked at Toby, still edged with disbelief that this man he'd loved for so long might love him back. Toby had felt so out of reach for so long Gavin sometimes wondered if he were dreaming. He knew whatever happened in the future, he couldn't and wouldn't regret what was happening now. It could still blow up in their faces, but at the moment, it felt right and safe. "What'd you think of your reward?"

"We have got to do that again, but I want a turn next time. So fucking hot. Jesus..."

"Mission accomplished." Gavin laughed deep in his chest.

Toby chuckled and rolled closer to Gavin. "I didn't know sex could be like this."

"Like what?"

"Easy, fun... emotional. Sex makes me feel closer to you, not more distant. I don't have to impress you or worry you'll get the wrong idea... It's nice to be able to be just me and enjoy what happens between us. I want you to fuck me, Gavin. Not tonight, but soon. I may be new to the ways of man-sex, but I know I'm going to prefer bottoming. I mean I want to fuck you silly too, but I am so rigidly in control of so much of my life, I like being able to let go and allow you to drive the sex train. Does the perception that I'm weak or effeminate bother me? Some, but everything you've done to me and with me has felt so amazing and none of it has made me feel anything but empowered. I'm working on reconciling all that, and as the great philosopher, Kurt Cobain once said... 'I'd rather be hated for who I am than loved for who I am not'.

"But I have to live in the real world and in order to keep doing what I love, a piece of me has been locked in the dark and has to stay there. As much as I want to be able to walk into the light with you and not be afraid of the consequences, that's not possible. Things are a lot better than they've ever been, but mainstream rodeo fans still won't support a gay or even a bi cowboy, maybe someday soon, but not yet. I don't know how to do this without living a lie."

"I understand better than anyone and I've come to one conclusion. Compromise isn't cowardice. I do have to live in the real world and I'm not meant to be some gay rights trailblazer either. I need my sponsors and fan support to make this life I love work. So in order to have both you and my rodeo career, I need to carve out safe spaces where I can be as authentically me as possible. That's why I came out to my folks and I'm hoping you will too.



Being a real couple on the farm would go a long way towards lifting that burden. Our closest friends know already and will help too. We don't have to scurry around in the shadows in order to be together all the time."

"Come here." Toby lifted his arm and gestured for Gavin to cuddle up, resting his head on Toby's shoulder. "You think we can do this and not ruin everything?"

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't. It's going to be hard, especially when you're on the road without me. We're gonna have a conversation about monogamy and the temptations on the road. But, yeah, I think if we're both willing to work at it and we're careful, we'll be okay. Generations of gay cowboys rode the circuit without detection, I don't see why we can't too."

"What's to discuss about monogamy? I'd never cheat on you, Gavin. Ever."

"That's easy to say here in bed with me, but out there on the road and lonely... I wouldn't blame you if you slipped, especially with women, who obviously have attributes I don't. As long as you don't keep secrets from me and aren't emotionally attached to someone else, I can accept the occasional one night stand. What we have is worth more to me than some unrealistic notion that sexual fidelity is the most important commitment in a relationship."

"Not going to happen. I wouldn't hurt you that way. Remember, we weren't even in the neighborhood of a relationship and I couldn't sleep with random women once I saw the pain on your face when I did."

"Okay. I'm not giving you permission to cheat. I'm saying it won't be the end of the world if you do. There's a difference."

"Fine, but it won't happen and I know you won't either. It's not who we are, Gav. It's just not. And for the record, I'm bisexual, not a dog, and while I may be attracted to both genders, I don't need both to be happy. I will never lie in bed with you wishing you had tits. That's not how it works, at least not for me."

"I hear you. I... I want you to be happy. Being in a relationship is new for you and I don't want you to feel like I'm tying you down."

"You don't have a string of long-term relationships behind you either."

"Nope. Just the one and it's still going strong after fourteen years."

"You weren't in love with me from the beginning."

"Yeah, pretty much was, though I didn't realize it was more than friendship for a couple years."

“You are amazing.”

“I love you, Toby and I don't see that changing now. Go to sleep. We have a shit ton of stuff to get done tomorrow.”

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 6

God, he loved this.

Toby roamed around the arena taking in the atmosphere. The crowd was big and really loud which always brought great energy to a ride. But it was the smell of the rodeo that always got him... leather, earth, sweat and a little manure. As he walked back to the contestants' area, he could also smell a mix of food from the concessions: popcorn, cotton candy, and fried whatever, belonging to the people in the stands. He didn't have to ride until the *Pulling Rank* season finale event that would be broadcast live on one of the cable sports networks during prime-time. The idea of the event was to get the best bull riders on the circuit and the best bulls in the sport together to compete on a regular basis in front of TV cameras. That is to say, they wanted to ride on the coattails of the PBR for advertising dollars and public attention with an elite bull riding competition. The fact that they did it at the expense of all the other disciplines didn't seem to bother the organizers one bit. Toby knew they would argue that more money in the pockets of the association benefited all of rodeo, but it rankled a lot of the bull riders, though not enough to turn their noses up at the huge purses at the *Pulling Rank* events.

Gavin was riding in a less than an hour. Their merry band of not-quite-straight cowboys had already started off well. Matt had placed second in bareback for the day, and Val had finished third in steer roping and was in good shape for the all-around going into tie-down roping. Gavin was off doing his warm up before he settled down for his visualization and relaxation exercises. They'd learned early that preparing their mind for the ride was probably more important than preparing the body on the day of the rodeo. Gavin always needed the relaxation more than the visualization, but the two went hand in hand.

Saddle bronc riding was different from the other roughstock events, mostly because you actually have to saddle the bronc which made timing your pre-ride routine critical. A lot of saddle bronc riders liked to saddle alone so any mistakes in set-up were their own, but like in all things, Gavin and Toby were more of a team. Gavin was definitely the boss when it came to his chute procedure, but Toby knew his role was mostly keeping his best friend calm and confident.

The horse Gavin had drawn for today's ride was Hard Cheeze, a huge buckskin, who was relatively new to the circuit and had been racking up points

this year. Rumor had it, he had been ridden exactly once in his rodeo career. In any case, Hard Cheeze was the kind of horse Gavin loved, big and fast with a high buck. Exactly like Major Tom, the horse who nearly killed Gavin the year before. It was funny, Gavin had put the wreck behind him before he was even cleared to compete again, but for Toby the fear and panic still lingered after more than a year. Since the wreck, every time he watched Gavin compete, Toby chewed his lip and ignored the fighter jets swooping around in his belly as he stood on the rails praying Gavin wouldn't wreck again.

When he finally got over to the contestants' area, he found Gavin leaning on the wall drinking a bottle of water. The day was warm for Labor Day weekend; Toby had been pushing water on everyone who would listen. It was easy to forget to drink in the business of getting ready to compete. "You okay, buddy?"

"Yeah. I'll do the rest of my warm up after we saddle, same as every other rodeo." Gavin rolled his eyes and smiled warmly.

"I know. Sometimes you need to be reminded that all is right with your world."

"All *is* right in my world. If it got any better, I might start dancing in the aisles."

"I'd pay to see that."

"You'll get your chance in San Francisco and maybe Las Vegas. Come on, Cody wanted to talk to you about his shoulder. The PT and the docs say he's all better, but the shoulder still doesn't feel right, I told him to find a massage therapist who specializes in rehab, but he doesn't want to hear it from me. So, I promised him yoga boy would straighten him out. You should think about opening a little rodeo performance clinic and charging people."

"I've thought about something like that, but probably not until after I retire." His idea was to hook-up with some of the big rodeo schools and teach people about rodeo-specific training, stretching and nutrition. He also wanted to finally get certified as a yoga instructor so he could teach for real. One day, he thought they might start their own rodeo school, running just a couple sessions a year, maybe with Val and Matty so all the roughstock events would be covered. "It was an idea I have noodling around." They walked toward the crowd of cowboys bullshitting and passing the time until their event.

"I like it. Maybe more like part of a bigger rodeo school... I bet we could start our own and maybe do it at Val and Matt's ranch... They already have an indoor arena. We should put a bug in their brains about it at lunch tomorrow."

Somehow Gavin got it without his having to spell it all out. Toby was always amazed with how in sync they were.

As they approached the group of cowboys, Toby moved off toward Cody, the reigning saddle bronc world champion from last year. They talked for a while about Cody's shoulder and his rehabilitation. Toby reiterated what Gavin had said about finding a massage therapist. After a bit they moved on to talk about the rodeo and who'd drawn which horse, typical rodeo chatter.

"I pulled Raw Sienna, that nasty, little bay mare. She's super quick and throws her head to the side when she hits her front feet and just dumps off the side."

"She's a good draw for you though, prolly the money horse today. Gavin drew Hard Cheeze. That horse is so bloody big, I don't know if anyone can stick him."

"My brother Jesse covered him last year. It was his second or third outing but they were in Florida and Jesse thought the horse didn't like the humidity much. Couldn't have picked a better horse for Gavin though. When I saw the day sheet I told Dusty that Gavin was a shoe in to win the day. He's strong and his long legs give him so much leverage in the stirrups he kills it on the behemoths."

"Cody, I'm surprised you spend much time scouting the competition."

"I pay attention to the folks who can beat me on any given day. He keeps goin' like he's been, Gavin'll be in the mix for world champion soon enough. His body is so fluid nowadays, he might be the prettiest rider on the circuit to watch. Don't tell my brothers I said that."

"Pretty doesn't always score."

"No, it doesn't. He should go spend a month in Alberta next year so he sees some consistently better horses for a stretch. It'll polish him up a little and he'll jump in the standings afterward. I told him that last year, but he ignored me, so I'm telling you now."

"Did you even want to talk to me about your shoulder?"

"Yes, but I knew Gavin already gave me the same answer you would. I've been in this business a lot longer than you, he could be the future of saddle bronc if he wants it bad enough. He won't listen to me, but maybe he will listen to you."

"I'll try. I've always wanted to compete in Canada more."

"While you're there, seek out a stock contractor by the name of Alger Leclerc. Ask him to watch Gavin ride and tell him it's a favor for me. He'll invite you out to his ranch between rodeos and he'll put you on as many bulls and horses as your bodies can handle. Listen to his mystical French mumbo-jumbo and I promise you'll both feel a difference in just a couple days."

"Why would you do this for us? I mean we're friends, but you're a hall of fame cowboy... and we're not..."

Cody ignored his question. "You're both stuck in the in-between. You've both gotten this far on talent and hard work. Gavin needs someone, like Alger, to help him focus on the final details that will make him a superstar. You're gonna be a star no matter what happens, especially once you move up to the PBR."

"How does everyone know that?"

"Cowboys gossip worse than chickens in a henhouse... But in this case, you share an agent with Dakota Haskell who happens to be married to my sister, Lindsey."

"Well, shit... I'm gonna split my time between circuits, at least enough that I qualify for finals, but yeah I'm switching." Toby was always surprised how fast rumors spread.

"It's the right move. Once you're on the big tour, you'll make three times what you do now."

"I know. Fewer rodeos, more money, and opportunities I can't even dream about now... what's not to like?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'm up fourth, I've gotta finish getting ready. Thanks for the advice on the shoulder."

"Happy to help. I'll talk to you after." Toby wandered away to find Gavin. It didn't take him long. He was talking with Matt and one of the stock contractors. They were laughing and kidding around about something Toby couldn't hear. He almost stopped dead in his tracks when he took in the entirety of Gavin Hayes. Standing there in his jeans, black and royal chaps, black safety vest, blue shirt and his pale straw Stetson, Gavin was a picture-perfect modern rodeo cowboy, and he took Toby's breath away. Gavin looked up and smiled broadly, Toby caught a glimpse of the bright denim-blue eyes he knew so well

and returned the smile. Matt stepped in front of him and pulled him aside, well out of hearing range of the others.

“What the hell, Matt?” Toby wanted to talk to Gavin. Dammit.

“You gotta stop ogling Gavin like that. Jesus. Just seeing you look at him gave me a boner. Lesson one in managing the cowboy closet: No looking at your guy with all that naked emotion. Keep your poker face on. There’s plenty of time for flirting and sexy smiles back in your RV after you ride.”

“Fuck. I didn’t even realize it was happening. He looked over at me and it lit me up like a damn Christmas tree.”

“Aww... New love. I remember the honeymoon rush. Hell, it still happens with Val now and then four years later. But, you gotta be more discreet, man, or you’re gonna get yourself in trouble.” Matt’s teasing went serious at the end.

Toby’s brain was stuck on the *new love* part. Was he in love with Gavin? Toby didn’t know, and he didn’t even know how to figure it out. The question had been swimming around in the depths of his consciousness for a while, probably since Gavin’s wreck, but now it was starting to percolate to the surface more and more. He hoped the answer would reveal itself in time because Toby didn’t think it was something you could think your way through. You had to feel it and those kinds of emotions weren’t amenable to rational thought. “I hear you. This is all so new, I was caught off guard.”

“I know. That’s why Val sent me to supervise...”

Gavin strolled up beside them. “You guys okay?”

“We’re good. Loverboy here was about to melt the hardtop just looking at you and get y’all outed on the first day.” Matt shook his head and shrugged. “Val asked me to chaperone and it’s a good thing too. Fucking amateurs.”

“I saw you making eyes at me. I liked it... a lot. Just not here, okay?” Gavin smiled at him with promises in his sparkling blue eyes.

“I know. I’ll be more careful.” Toby blushed weakly. He was normally a tough guy to embarrass, but somehow with Gavin he’d turned into a big pile of sensitivity and girly emotions.

“You fix Cody up?”

“Yeah. I told him exactly what you did and explained how to find a clinical massage therapist near his house, but mostly we chatted. He’s already heard I’m going to PBR next season, so it’s out there.”

Matt piped in. "All anyone's gonna say is about time. You're too good to be making shit money out here with us, even if it's still more than what the rest of us earn per rodeo."

"You could ride bulls, I'll even offer to teach you, mostly so I can watch you get your ass kicked."

"Shut up. Bull riders are crazy bastards. That's something you should think about when it comes from a bareback guy."

Toby leaned in close and whispered to Matt. "Don't you snicker every time someone says bareback in polite company? I'm not gonna be able to keep a straight face anymore." They all cracked up.

Matt slapped Toby on the back as he kept laughing. "Kid, you don't have a straight face or anything else for that matter. You can't fool me."

"I fooled you for years there, dude."

"Not in your wildest dreams. I pegged you as bi within ten minutes of meeting you. Shit, Gavin took me longer to suss out than you."

"How?" Toby genuinely didn't know.

"I watched you pick up enough girls that I could tell you weren't faking it. But at the same time your compass always pointed at Gavin instead of north. He's where you look for reassurance and stability plus you protect him like you're his fucking *Patronus*."

"Harry Potter, really? You are a renaissance man, Matty." Gavin laughed at the reference.

"Hey... Don't dis J.K. Rowling." Matt pretended to scowl.

"Not dissing her... I'm dissing you." Gavin laughed again.

"Enough." Toby wasn't appreciating the tenor of this conversation.

"Plus, Val pointed out how you nearly slobbered yourself when you met Dean Barlow. But, overall, you were actually pretty good at covering your tracks from anyone who didn't know what they were seeing."

"That's something, I guess." Toby thought he'd been so careful, but apparently he'd been oblivious once again. "Gavin, Jake's headed out to the chutes. Time to go grab your gear. I'll meet you out there."

"Yes, sir." Gavin smiled before he trotted off to get his stuff.



Toby and Matt watched him go. Gavin's hips swayed gracefully with every step forward. Toby couldn't help but appreciate what those Rimrock jeans did for his ass. It was almost enough to elicit an audible moan, but he managed to protect his dignity and hold back the sound.

Matt shook his head as Gavin turned the corner at the end of the aisle. "Is it me or has his ass gotten rounder in the last few months?"

"Why are you paying attention to Gavin's ass?" Toby wasn't used to the rush of jealousy.

"Easy, man. I'm in a relationship, not dead. You know Gavin is hot enough to get a dead man's attention."

"The answer is yes and no. Since we increased his cardio time at the beginning of the season, he's down to about eight or nine percent body fat. But his metabolism seems to take the fat from anywhere but his ass. It makes him a little crazy. He thinks he looks like J.Lo from behind. It's pretty funny."

"There ain't one scrap of woman or swish in him... other than the fact he's worried his ass is too big. Most of us have these little cowboy butts... his is a work of art in comparison."

"If you say much more about Gavin's ass, I will take a swing at you. Fair warning."

"I hear you. Hard to believe you've been together for less than a week."

"No, you were right the other day, we've been together for more than a decade. We just didn't see it for what it was. Now, we do."

"Come on. We better catch up or Gavin's gonna wonder where you are." Matt turned and walked down the corridor to the bucking chutes. Toby followed, pausing to grab a couple more bottles of water and an energy bar from the stack of cases outside the medical room.

Once they found Gavin, Toby handed him the energy bar and a bottle of water. "Half the bar and half the water."

"I know. Geez. You'd think we hadn't done this a thousand times by now."

"Yeah, well... You don't think it makes a difference this close to competing. I know better. Eat."

"Yes, sir." Gavin smiled a little weakly before he started nibbling on the energy bar.

Matt laughed. "You two bicker like my grandparents."

The next twenty minutes went by quickly as he and Gavin were busy saddling and going through the final pre-ride warmups. It was all routine and not colored by any of the recent developments in their relationship. Cody moved into first place with a solid eighty-four point ride, and Jake was right behind him with an eighty-two, but there was plenty of room for Gavin to move to the top with a good ride. Hard Cheeze seemed to be raring to go and had a bit of a fit when they tightened the back cinch and that boded well for his ride.

Measuring the rein was sort of a mystical thing for saddle bronc riders. An old cowboy adage said "you don't measure the rein to get it right, you measure it so it's close". Too short and you'll pull yourself up out of the saddle and get bucked off and too long and you have no leverage to right yourself after the buck. Saddle bronc riders were constantly kibitzing about how much rein an individual bronc takes and everyone has their own theories. Gavin took all three of the common measurements and averaged them out. He pulled the rein snug to the base of the mane, then up over the bronc's head to his eye on the far side and finally to the midpoint on the swell of his saddle. Usually, all three measurements came out about the same, but sometimes not. Guesstimating the average, Gavin added the width of his hand to the measurement and marked his rein with a braided piece of yarn made from wool grown on Hazy Hill. His mother made them in all sorts of bright colors, and he used them like the favors ladies of the court would give to the knights for luck before a joust.

Gavin climbed across the bronc's back, chattering the whole way as to not startle the horse. It didn't seem to work. As Gavin dropped into the saddle and started getting his feet in the stirrups, the horse started bobbing his head and stomping his feet a bit, but Toby didn't see fear in the horse's eyes, he saw a whole lotta mad. A soft hand on the horse's neck seemed to pull him back from the red zone and he settled in the chute some.

Toby shifted to his spot near the corner of the chute where he could see Gavin's face. "You're set, buddy. Clear your head and don't try to anticipate. Remember, you gotta dance with the one who brung ya..." A wry smile from Gavin told him everything he needed to know. Gavin was ready and if the horse cooperated, this was going to be a hell of a ride. After setting his feet and getting in position, Gavin nodded to the gate man.

Hard Cheeze bolted out of the chute more like a bull than a bronc without a single stride before the first leap and buck. Gavin kept his hips in front of his shoulders as the horse tried to cut right then left to buck him off. The bucks

were dramatic, almost vertical and Toby knew if Gavin stuck the score would be huge. Smooth and graceful, Gavin moved with the horse, responding to each buck and change of direction. His ride had an elegance that gave Toby goosebumps. If Gavin won the day, this was a ride people would be talking about for years to come.

At about five seconds into Gavin's ride, Toby bit the inside of his lip hard enough to draw blood. His nerves watching Gavin were getting the better of him. Eight seconds doesn't seem so long until you're watching someone you care about risking everything at the rodeo. Toby forced himself to pull back on the fear. Gavin looked like he was in complete control of the bronc. Part of Toby wanted to search out Gavin's family in the stands, but he didn't dare look away. Once the pickup men moved into position, Toby knew he had witnessed something special.

The buzzer sounded and the pickup horse moved parallel to Gavin. He leaped onto the back of the pickup horse and vaulted over him and stood in the middle of the arena pumping his fist and hollering his joy. Toby and Matt were standing on the rails screaming with the rest of the crowd and their hands in the air. Gavin waited close to the gate to receive his score. The stock contractor and a few rodeo officials shook Gavin's hand before the score went up on the board. Ninety-two points, a new arena record and a personal best for Gavin.

Toby raced to the contestants' gate. Gavin was already being congratulated by the saddle bronc riders loitering there watching the rest of the competition and even though there were still six riders left to go and anything could happen, they all knew this was the winning ride. Not only would Gavin win the three grand for the first place finish today, he'd also go home with another six thousand in bonus money for breaking the rodeo record.

Gavin spied Toby trying to make his way through the sea of well-wishers and sprinted toward him. Toby barely got out a "Holy fuck, man. Congratulations," before Gavin was hugging him. It felt so right, Toby tried not to revel in it, but it was tough.

Gavin whispered in Toby's ear. "That was for you, Tobes. All for you."

Toby stepped back and exchanged a look with Gavin that said so much more than the words. Suddenly, Val, Pietro and Matt were crowding around trying to hug Gavin too. Soon, Gavin was on the move, climbing rails and racing up into the stands trying to get to his family. Toby watched from the arena floor as Gavin got more quick hugs and congratulations. After a minute,

Toby waved his arm to get Gavin's attention. He needed to get back to the floor for some media interviews. Gavin climbed back down, Toby handed him the other half of the energy bar and another bottle of water. Gavin downed them both before heading to the media corral.

Toby watched from a distance as Gavin gave a great television interview with the Real American Country network and answered a bunch of questions for the local press. They headed back to watch the end of the saddle bronc competition with rest of the riders. It got pretty exciting when some nineteen-year-old kid from Central Washington University scored an eighty-three, moving into third place in his second pro rodeo. In the end, Gavin won the day handily; no one even came close to touching him. He had to do another round of interviews and take about a thousand photos with rodeo organizers, sponsors, local politicians, the rodeo queen and her court and more.

Toby and Gavin had won their share of events along the way and the frenzy afterward was the last thing they wanted to face when it was over. By the time the second round of interviews was done and they had watched Val kick ass in tie-down roping, there were only a few hours before Toby had to start his pre-game for the evening event. Toby knew Gavin's sister, Piper, had seen his mother and Oscar at the hotel but they hadn't come to the rodeo that afternoon. He couldn't help but wonder if they would show up at the restaurant to have an early dinner with everyone or if she would just show up at the arena where she'd have a chance at getting on television again. The television people always asked for the seat numbers of any family in the audience, mostly so they could get reaction shots if anyone wrecked. Every time the camera landed on his mother, she always looked like the perfect doting mother cheering on her son from the stands and every time she left an event without so much as speaking to him, Toby was left hurt and annoyed. Anyway, Toby didn't have time to dwell on it now. He needed to shepherd Gavin out of the arena and back to the trailer so they could change before meeting at the restaurant. More than that, Toby needed a moment alone with Gavin.

They got back to the RV without much of a delay. There were still a lot of people who wanted to congratulate Gavin on his ride. Once inside the trailer, Toby slammed the door closed with his foot before hauling Gavin into his arms and kissing him breathless. "So proud of you. All those people want a piece of you, but we walk through this door and you are all mine. I spent the whole rodeo half-hard. Every time I looked at you, all I could see was you naked in my bed. So hot. Even Matty commented on how good your ass looks these days." Toby dove in for another kiss. He could feel Gavin smile against his lips.

“Happens to me all the time, watching you. My ride was all about you, Tobes. All the work to increase my strength and flexibility, nagging me about what I eat, pushing me to run and run and run... It all came together today. My body felt powerful and my spirit invincible. You made it happen by sheer force of will. I couldn't have achieved half of it on my own. Thank you for making me a better athlete and a better person. I love you so much.”

Gavin leaned in to kiss him as Toby whispered, “I love you too.” Where those words came from Toby would never know, but they were true. God, they were so true. Toby looked up at him with such wonder and disbelief. “I mean it, Gav. I love you. I think I always have.”

Tears welled up in Gavin's eyes but did not fall. “Oh, Toby. I never thought I'd ever hear you say it. I never thought this could be real. But it is.” Gavin dropped his head to Toby's shoulder and hugged him tight.

Toby slipped his hands in to the back pockets of Gavin's jeans and pulled their hips impossibly closer together. He could feel Gavin's erection hard against him. Gavin spread his legs a little and reached down and lifted Toby up a bit by the swell of his ass to bring their cocks into better alignment. They kissed and rubbed together in an erotic dance promising so much more for later when they had time. At the sound of a loud click, Toby whipped his head towards the door where he noticed two things. One, the door was slightly ajar. It must have sprung back when he kicked it closed. And two, Marianne's boyfriend Oscar was standing outside the door and had just snapped a picture of them kissing with his phone.

“Oscar.” Toby blinked trying to process what he was seeing. His mother's boyfriend stepped into the RV and stood there staring for a moment. They were too stunned to even move out of the embrace that had been so safe and comforting a few seconds ago.

For a middle-aged guy with a little beer belly, Oscar Flores was still surprisingly attractive. Half Native American, half Mexican, Oscar grew up the hard way on the local reservation, but he'd finished school and had a good job as a foreman at one of the local fruit packing plants. Toby always thought he was the kind of man his mother needed to make her happy, and he always seemed to treat her like she was the center of his universe. The sneer on Oscar's face told Toby this was a different guy than the one he'd had brunch with on Mother's Day.

“Well, this is a surprise. Your mother sent me to get directions to the restaurant 'cause the GPS in her car can't seem to find a satellite. I went to

knock on the door and I coulda puked when I saw Gavin playing tonsil hockey with some fag in the middle of your trailer. Took a picture so you'd know what a pervert your friend is and then I realized the fag was you."

Gavin stepped out in front of Toby, protecting him from himself mostly. Toby knew Gavin was preventing him from taking a swing at Oscar. "Get out of my trailer or I'm gonna call the cops. We've done nothing wrong."

"You do that and this picture is gonna get emailed to every rodeo news site in North America. And I know you don't want that to happen. You'd both lose everything." Oscar's laugh was dark and without humor.

Toby stepped out from behind Gavin. "No, we actually wouldn't... All we'd lose is our rodeo careers, but it doesn't matter right now." More truth spilled out of Toby unbidden. Rodeo wasn't everything, Gavin was everything. He was suddenly a lot more confident about the world. "What the fuck do you want, Oscar?"

"You and your little boyfriend over there are gonna tell Marianne you've decided to keep supporting your poor widowed mother the same way you have been all this time. It's what your father would want. And when I propose to your mother next month, you are going to give her your blessing and offer to pay for the big, fancy wedding she's always wanted. That's all for now, but if I think of anything else I'll let you know."

"You're blackmailing us? Really?" Gavin was indignant.

"You're the one with the dirty secret. You don't have to decide now. We're staying at the hotel... in the room next to your parents... until the end of the rodeo. Just think, by Wednesday morning you could be the next gay power couple, I'm sure there will be plenty of national press willing to run the photo."

"Oscar, you can't do this. We haven't done anything wrong. I love Gavin and that's nobody's business but our own." Toby's words kept surprising him.

"Well, the way I see it, I love your mother and I'll do anything to make her happy and if that means I have to shake down a couple pillow-biters, that's what I'm gonna do. If you love him like you say, all you gotta do to protect him is open your wallet. Think about it and let me know what you're gonna do. Don't worry about the directions; I'll get them from one of the parking attendants. See you boys at dinner." Oscar heaved himself back out the door and off into the overheated afternoon.

Gavin dropped onto the couch and rubbed his hands over his face and hair. "What are we going to do?"

“We’re going to give him what he wants. I’ll be making more money next year and I have enough in savings for the rest. Don’t worry, cowboy. I won’t let this touch you.”

“The hell you will. We are in this together. I’m not gonna let you deal with this alone. You know it will never stop... This year it’s a wedding, next year it will be a car, then a trip to Europe... He will bleed us dry if you start this.”

“What else is there? You want to come out like Michael Sam or Jason Collins? Can you handle that kind of attention? If you want to know what the seventh circle of hell feels like, come out as a gay rodeo cowboy. What about Val, Matt and Pietro? You don’t think they’ll be outed too? It is a giant mess with only one solution I can see. I open my checkbook again and again until I retire.” Defeated, Toby collapsed onto the steps up to the double bunk beds.

“There has to be another way. We need help and I know where to get it. Here’s what’s going to happen, dude. We’re going to get ready for dinner and pick-up Val and the boys like we planned. After dinner, we’re having a family meeting with everyone who will be affected by this fiasco... and I mean everyone. My parents, Piper and Chad, Val and Matt, Pietro, you and me. We’ll lay everything out and see if we can’t find another way out of this. We’re not alone and we don’t need to have any more secrets from our family. There have been too many already.”

“Gavin... We can’t... I can’t...”

“Shut up. You might not be able to alone, but we can together. This is not up for debate. If you don’t do this with me, I’m going to do it without you. No one threatens my family. I won’t stand for it. Oscar thinks we’re weak, but he’s going to find out that this fag fights back. Get in the damn shower. We have to leave in twenty minutes.”

“But...”

“No buts. We’re going to dinner, having a meeting and then you are going to ride your ass off tonight. Lord knows, we may need the money.” Gavin managed a light laugh and Toby couldn’t help but follow along.

“Yes, sir.” Toby smiled before he moved to stand in front of Gavin. “I do love you, Gavin Hayes.” He reached out to stroke the side of Gavin’s head.

“I love you too, Toby Prescott. C’mere...” With a tug on Toby’s arm, Gavin pulled him into a quick kiss. “I will never get tired of hearing that. Now go shower... nineteen minutes.”

Toby scurried off to the shower. They were ushering Val and the boys into Toby's truck fifteen minutes later. They had briefly discussed cluing their friends in on what was going on before dinner, but decided not to trust anyone's acting skills but their own.

The dinner itself was okay. Lots of congratulations and toasts for Gavin's amazing ride. Toby was glad that hadn't gotten lost in the drama. The owner of the restaurant even comped them dessert when he heard why they were celebrating. Ellensburg fancies itself as Rodeo City, USA and it carries over to all the local business owners. It was nice. Oscar was smug but mercifully quiet throughout dinner, Toby had been worried he would bait them throughout the meal. Marianne didn't seem to be aware anything was out of the ordinary. Gavin and Toby tried to behave normally, but they both caught a couple looks from Piper and Matt which told them they hadn't been wholly successful.

Keith cheated and slipped his credit card to the waiter after they ordered so he could pick up the check for dinner. Toby grumbled a bit but accepted he'd been bested with his own trick. Gavin's dad liked providing for his family and paying for dinner was part of that for him. The friendly cat and mouse they played was as much for show as a contest of wills between them. Oscar and Toby's mother were the first to leave the restaurant. Marianne was tired from the long drive and her excursion to the county fair which was host to the rodeo.

As soon as he was sure they had left the building, Gavin announced they needed to have a family meeting back at the hotel, but he and Toby needed a few minutes with Angie and Keith first. Everyone staying at the hotel had suites, so Piper volunteered their room for the meeting, leaving her parents' room free for the time being.

Val, Matt and Pietro were a little confused about their role at a family meeting. Toby smiled as he looked at his friends who all seemed so worried and confused. "Boys, accept that you're important to us and we want you there. I'll explain better later and you'll understand. We don't have much time. I still have to get ready to ride and it's already going to be a miracle if I manage to cover my bull tonight, never mind making the short-go."

\*\*\*\*\*



## Chapter 7

Gavin watched Toby fidget. He wished Toby didn't have to come out this way, but Oscar forced their hand. No one should be forced out before they are ready. It was hard enough in the best of circumstances. Once Gavin's parents were settled in the sitting room of their suite, Gavin sat on the small sofa beside Toby.

Toby's fists were clenched tight on his lap, Gavin wondered if he was having the same trouble not reaching out and holding the other's hand. Shaking his head to clear his mind, Toby sighed before looking up at Gavin's mom and dad. "Angie, Keith... something happened today after Gavin's ride and you guys are too important to me... Shit. I don't know how to do this. There hasn't been any time for me to figure out what I wanted to say."

Angie smiled gently at him. "Toby, whatever it is we'll figure it out. Together. That's what family does. We're going to love you no matter what. Just tell us what's going on and why Marianne and Oscar weren't invited to the meeting."

Gavin laughed bitterly. "Yeah, therein lies the problem... It's okay, Tobes, tell them. I know you're not ready. I wish it could be different, but this is where we are. I promise you, it will feel so much better on the other side."

"I know. This is hard for me." Toby looked at Gavin, begging him to understand the reticence had nothing to do with him. Gavin did understand and he wished there was a way to make this easier.

Angie stared at her son and his best friend for a moment. "Toby, are you trying to tell us you're gay too? Because we already know."

Toby looked at her and cocked his head like a confused puppy. Gavin felt some of the tension leave Toby's body as he leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees. "I'm bi, not gay, but mostly... yes, that's what I'm trying ineffectively to say."

"Does that mean you're going to keep dating women along with men now?"

"Umm... in other circumstances it might, but no. I'm hoping I'm not going to have to date anyone ever again." Toby glanced sideways at Gavin before reaching over with a shaky hand and interlocking his fingers with Gavin's.

Gavin did not expect his mother to laugh and slap her husband's arm. "Oh, thank God! I thought I was gonna have to make Keith take you out to the

parking lot and beat some sense into you.” They all laughed as much to release some of the anxiety they were all feeling than real amusement.

Keith leaned back in his chair and appraised the boys. “We weren’t sure you two would ever figure things out at the rate you were going. We’ve been waiting for this conversation for almost as long as we’ve known Gavin was gay.” Keith looked at Toby for another moment before standing. “Toby, stand up. Right now.” In a repeat of Gavin’s coming out, his dad hugged Toby tight and kissed the top of his head like he did to Gavin when he was little. “Did you think we would react any different to you than we did to Gavin?”

“You’re not my parents and I’m the guy in love with your son, the one who makes Gavin’s homosexuality something other than theoretical.”

“Listen hard, Toby, and don’t ever forget what I’m about to say. You may not bear our DNA but you’ve been as much our son as Gavin for a long time now. Even if you and Gavin don’t make it to forever, Hazy Hill will always be your home. No matter how angry we may be or how disappointed we become, we will never, ever, turn you away. We love you, Piper loves you. You belong to us as we belong to you. That’s family.”

“Thank you.” Toby wiped the tears from his eyes. Knowing he had somewhere he belonged, no matter what, meant the world to Toby. Gavin understood how untethered Toby had felt since his father died. His parents had always tried to make Toby feel welcome and part of the family, but never had it been stated so plainly.

Angie leapt from her chair for her turn to hug Toby and kiss his cheek. “Don’t thank us yet. There’s responsibility that comes with being a full member of the Hayes clan, but we’ll talk about that another day. I love you, Toby. I know you already have a mother who loves you, but I love you just the same.”

“Yeah, the jury is still out on whether my mother loves me right now. We don’t have a lot of time. If it’s okay, can we explain today’s drama one time with everyone before I have to get back to the rodeo grounds?”

Keith nodded his head. “That’s fine. I have to admit you have us worried. Let’s get to the part where we fix this.” Toby and his mom walked arm in arm out the door and turned toward Piper and Chad’s suite.

Gavin smiled. “Your mouth to God’s ear, Dad.” Gavin hugged his dad. “Thank you for accepting Toby so readily. He didn’t want to lose his place in our family.”

"I meant what I said, Gavin. He's one of us, more than ever now, and he will always have a home at the farm. We're gonna have to talk about what this means for the future sometime soon."

"You're leaving him part of Hazy Hill in your will, I assume. I'm good with that. If I have my way, we'll be living together on the farm for the rest of our lives."

"Your mouth to God's ear, son. It's a little more complicated, but that's the gist of it. Let's go get this over with." Gavin and Keith walked to the other suite where they found Toby standing in the hallway. His dad made his way into the room leaving Gavin with Toby.

Toby once again took Gavin's hand as they walked into Piper's suite, but instead of leading him to the main room, where they could hear everyone chattering, he pulled him into the bathroom. Gavin laughed and hugged Toby. "What's with you and bathrooms?"

"Temporary privacy... I need you for a second." Toby held on to Gavin like he was his only lifeline. Burrowing his face into Gavin's neck, Toby breathed deeply for a moment. Gavin knew they needed to reconnect before they went into the other room. "Thanks for sharing your family with me."

"You're very, very welcome. Feel better? I told you they'd be okay with it."

"I know. It feels like I'm stuck on some crazy amusement park ride. We need to hurry this along. I need to do some yoga before I start my pre-game warm ups. I'm gonna ride for shit if I don't get out of my head."

"Don't worry. I'll get you there. You'll have two full hours to focus on rodeo. I promise. Let's go agitate the natives on our behalf..." Gavin took Toby's hand and led him into the sitting room. Piper, who was sitting on Chad's lap, took one look at them holding hands and squealed like a sugar-addicted five-year-old, though Gavin thought that might be an insult to five-year-olds. She looked squarely at her husband. "You owe me a hundred bucks. I told you they were together." She turned to the rest of the people. "He didn't think it would happen until they both retired, but I saw how much things changed after Gavin's wreck and last weekend they were even weirder. I told Chad in the car on the way home you two were doing the horizontal mambo. He didn't believe me."

"Good Lord, Toby. Can we keep a secret from anybody?" Gavin leaned into Toby's shoulder and Toby wrapped his arm around Gavin's back.

In unison, the rest of the room said, "No!"

Val raised his hand. "Will you please tell us what's going on?"

"Tell them, Gav. It's your meeting. I still don't know how anyone can help us." Toby sighed and leaned a little harder on Gavin.

"Fine. In the smallest nutshell... After we got back to the RV, Oscar apparently stopped by to ask us a question about dinner and caught us kissing in the living area of the trailer. He managed to snap a photo on his phone before we even knew he was there." Everyone erupted with all due anger at Marianne's boyfriend.

"What a douchebag!" Chad wasn't a hotheaded guy and even he looked ready to lynch Oscar.

Toby laughed at Chad's outburst, it was so out of character. "If only that were the bottom of Oscar's barrel. Okay, I have to back up a little. Some of you don't know all the history. When I moved to the farm, my mother made some noise about losing the rent I paid being a hardship, so I kept sending her money."

"You were what, twenty-one? Why would she expect you to pay her rent when you were still in college?" Piper looked completely perplexed.

"Once I turned eighteen she expected me to help out with the bills and that morphed into rent when I was away at school. It doesn't matter. My dad would have expected me to take care of my mother for as long as she needed. Anyway, I've been worried about my grandmother for a while and last week while we were home, we found out that Grandma Betty is struggling with all the stairs in her home and after a little digging I found out that she can't afford to live in any of the really nice assisted living facilities in the area without some financial help. I can't afford to help her and send my mother money every month. So, I stopped by my mother's townhouse to talk about what we should do. Let's just say it definitely didn't go the way I expected. So I basically gave her one last check and cut her off. Fast forward to this afternoon. Oscar caught us in a clinch and proceeded to blackmail us..."

Gavin shook his head as all holy hell exploded around them. He raised his hand and whistled to get everyone to settle down. "And in order for him not to out us to every sports media outlet in the known universe, he wants Toby to resume sending money to his mother and... you're gonna love this... After Oscar proposes next month, Toby is also supposed to finance the big, fancy wedding Marianne's always wanted."

“You have got to be shitting me?” Matt’s face was red with embarrassment when he realized the language he’d used in front of Gavin’s mother and sister.

“Relax, Matt. I raise cattle for a living and am surrounded by farmers and cowboys every day. I think Piper and I have grown immune to swearing. Besides, have you met my husband and sons? Dinner conversation at our house wouldn’t exactly be out of place at your average truck stop.” Angie had given up trying to police their language a long time ago. They tried to keep it clean, but it didn’t always work so well. Gavin glanced over at Toby, who was smiling broadly and looking at his mother with such adoration. It was sweet. When Gavin realized what made Toby so happy, he couldn’t help but smile himself. The casual reference to her sons, plural, was all it took to make Toby’s afternoon.

Val shifted in his seat. “Okay, we get that Oscar is a douchebag, to quote Chad. And Matty, P and I will do whatever we can to help, but I don’t see what we can do except be supportive of whatever you decide to do.”

Toby stepped away from Gavin to get a better look at Val. “I was recently reminded I had better friends than I knew and was admonished for not letting them in more. Do you recall anything about that, Val?” Val had the good sense to blush before Toby continued. “We seem to only have two options... Either I start writing checks and get caught in a never-ending cycle of demands for more until we’re bled dry, or we come out publicly, and take all of Oscar’s ammunition away. I have to consult with my agent on the best way, but most likely, we’ll lose most of our sponsors immediately and our careers eventually, but we’ll keep our self-respect and be able to be honest about our relationship. We might even help some gay kids see being gay isn’t about the stereotypes. I guess there’s a third choice, we could walk away from rodeo without saying anything, but it seems pretty cowardly to me.” Toby stepped back and took Gavin’s hand again.

Gavin gave Toby’s hand a tight squeeze. “I would rather come out than give Oscar and Marianne one fat nickel of the money Toby makes on the back of a bull. But one of the major problems with coming out is that we wouldn’t just be outing ourselves. You’ve said yourself Val that your relationship with Matt is an open secret on the circuit and because you guys are close to us... gay by association will follow. We don’t want being friends with us to wreck your lives.”

Leaning into his partner, Val peeked at Matt before speaking again. “Don’t worry about us. Matty and I are ready for whatever happens. We have the ranch

and are prepared for a life after rodeo. Pietro, what do you want to do? You're the least likely of us to get skewered, especially if we leave the circuit at the end of the season, but you're going to be in a hell of an awkward position."

Pietro had been so quiet all afternoon, Gavin wondered if his family was overwhelming for the Brazilian so far from his own family. "Nobody should worry about me. I won't lie, but I won't answer personal questions about my friends either. Paul Kazchek is looking for a travel partner for next season. His brother's gay so he shouldn't have an issue with me or the cloud of dust following me around for a while. It'll settle as soon as the next scandal comes around. You all do what you have to do. Make decisions based on what's best for you and your family, I'll be fine."

"Mom, I don't think P is understanding why he's here or why we're worried about how this will affect him. Could you please explain it to him, like you and Dad did for Toby a little while ago." Gavin knew his mother would get it.

"Sure." Angie smiled at Pietro. "What the boys are trying to say is while you may not share a name or blood, they consider you family. They have chosen to claim the three of you as their own and therefore what affects you, affects them. They want your input in the decision making and support for whatever decision they come to at the end of the day, even if you don't necessarily agree with them."

Pietro looked at Val and Matt, who both shrugged, then Gavin and Toby who just nodded. "If those are really the only options, you should come out. But this is your mamá, Toby. Your mamá... Are you sure she would go along with Oscar blackmailing you?"

Toby stared at his boots for a beat before he answered. "I don't know. I wish I could say she'd never hurt me that way, but I don't know."

"We've known your mother for a lot of years, Toby. She may not be the most loving person, but I never got the impression she was evil or even spiteful, just sort of self-centered. Maybe you should talk to her, before you decide what you should do." Keith had always been kind to Marianne especially right after Toby's dad passed away.

"See Pietro, this is why we need you in this patchwork family. No one else even thought to question whether Marianne would go along with Oscar's plan. She clearly had no idea anything was going on at supper..." Gavin always had trouble giving Toby's mother the benefit of the doubt. He was glad someone did. Maybe they could avoid this whole mess by going around Oscar. It was worth a try, in Gavin's opinion.

Toby was back, half-leaning on Gavin and holding his hand. It was surreal. Gavin had wanted this for so long, he'd stopped believing it was possible, but Toby was Toby... defier of gravity, practitioner of yoga and lover of Gavin... To have Toby claim him so openly was a marvel. He'd always thought being together would be a slow evolutionary process building gradually over time, but the reality of it was more like their romantic relationship seemingly burst fully formed from the friendship and physical attraction that had been there all along. Gavin had his family around him and Toby in his arms. Everything else would work itself out, one way or another.

"So, I guess I talk to my mother sometime tomorrow. I'm only competing in *Pulling Rank* this weekend, so I'll find some time to get her alone. Possibly during the football game tomorrow... maybe Oscar will go to mass..." Toby squinched up his face trying to decide on a strategy.

"Hey, boy-o. There is no way I'm letting you do this without me in the room. If we have to go to the police, you're going to need someone who can corroborate what was said." Gavin put his hands on his hips almost defiantly.

"Oscar can rot in prison for all I care, but we're not putting my mother in jail." Toby was shocked that Gavin had gone there.

Outraged on Toby's behalf, Pietro scowled at Gavin. "Did you forget who you're talking about? You don't talk bad about someone's mamá like that. It's not right." The Brazilian came out more when Pietro was upset.

"You're right, P. I'm sorry, Toby. I was talking about Oscar, not Marianne. But in any case, we can't count on Marianne being loyal to Toby in this. She could side with Oscar. I don't want anyone going to jail if we can help it, but I won't stand by and let them hurt you, Tobes. I can't." Gavin didn't know how he was going to accomplish that since almost any outcome was going to hurt. A quick look at his watch told Gavin it was time to get this show on the road. "Okay, we're out of time. We need to get back, Toby still has to ride tonight. So, if you're going to the rodeo grounds, saddle up..."

"Mom, Dad... I'm sorry for the drama. We'll see you guys at the arena. Matt and Val have been together four years and have managed to stay off most people's radar the whole time. We didn't last one day before getting outed. It's fucking ridiculous. Dammit. Don't forget we're hosting the post-rodeo fiesta for the family. We have beer and yes, relatively healthy snacks ready to go at the RVs. We invited Marianne and Oscar, but they already had plans, so no worries there. Come on, Tobes."

Toby put an arm around Gavin's waist. "Wait. Before we all rush off, I want to say thank you. Thank you for loving us unconditionally, even though we love one another. Thank you for helping us find an option that comes before nuking our careers. Thank you for supporting us even when being friends with us may torch your own careers. I'm normally a pretty independent guy and it's not easy for me to admit when I can't do something on my own." Toby elbowed Gavin playfully. "And sometimes I need to be reminded forcibly I have family and friends who will be there for me when I need them. Just... thank you."

Keith stood up and shook Toby's hand before the hugs-go-round started as they tried to get out the door. It didn't take long, but Gavin could feel how frazzled and uncentered Toby was getting. Every minute out of his routine might as well have been an hour. The drive back to the arena was largely silent. Val, Matt and Pietro retreated to their trailer as soon as they got back.

Gavin lead Toby into the RV and made a show of closing all the blinds and locking the door before dropping onto the sofa and patting the spot next to him. "C'mere. You have ten minutes for us to adjust before you start your warm-up."

With a deep sigh, Toby slid onto the couch and almost instantly snuggled into Gavin's side and dropped his head on Gavin's chest. Moving his hand slowly up and down Toby's back, Gavin let him be for a few minutes. It said a lot that Toby felt safe enough to let Gavin comfort him this way. "God, Gav, I never thought I could need a hug so badly. It's a little unnerving."

"Hey, you've had a bit of a day. Give yourself a break. You came out today. How does it feel?"

"Anti-climactic. I had it built up to be this big thing and it is, I guess, but it doesn't change anything. I am still the same guy I was yesterday and I'm good with that. The people I care about accepted what I was before I was even sure. At least it's over. Time to get back to living and forget this drama-filled parody of our lives we're in right now."

"I'm with you, man, but you gotta understand... Coming out never ends. Whenever someone new comes into your life you have to decide if you're going risk telling them. Sometimes it's like being pecked to death by a duck. Come on, you need to get moving."

"I know. I needed this, you, before I lost my mind. I'm just going to add twenty minutes of relaxation yoga to my regular routine. I need you to do me a favor though."



“Anything.” Gavin meant that more than Toby probably realized.

“I can’t deal with anymore discussions of Oscar or my mother tonight. I want to get back to focusing on rodeo. We need to celebrate your amazing ride with the family at our after-party tonight. Piper already found the video on YouTube, we can all watch it again with you, which is always fun. Anyway, I need normal for a little while. We can talk and stuff in the morning, but tonight I need this.”

“Done. Now go put on your old gray sweats and a tank top so I can enjoy watching you do your yoga.” Gavin laughed at Toby’s incredulous expression. “What? I like looking at you. I ogle your sexy little body every time I catch you doing your yoga thing. I like the sweats because you usually go commando and I get a peek at your dick, but the bike shorts are pretty awesome too.”

“Have you always been incorrigible or is this a new development?”

“Always. I usually hide my horndog, but I don’t have to anymore.” Gavin gave Toby a cheeky smile as he walked away.

\*\*\*\*

An ice-cold beer wasn’t the worst way to end the day. Gavin fished another freezing bottle of Corona out of the cooler and sat back in his camp chair between Toby and Piper. Chad was somewhere helping Pietro and Val take bags of trash over to the dumpsters, but everyone else was gone finally. Somehow their little family after-party had morphed into something bigger as people wandered over to congratulate Gavin again and commiserate with Toby over his tough break. Overall, Toby’d ridden well, he covered both bulls and tied fifth in the first round on a mean little bull named Letter Bee and finished second in the short-go on a big, ugly Brahma named Mustachio. He missed winning second place in the event by half a point. Gavin thought the judges scored Toby’s bull low in the first round because he was small, but even so, Toby cleared five grand in prize money. The cash they won this weekend would go a long way toward paying for plane tickets and hotels over the last two months of the season.

Gavin crossed his ankle over his knee, sipped his beer and half-listened to the conversation Piper and Toby were having. He was feeling pretty mellow, this wasn’t his first beer of the evening, but he wasn’t to the point of even being a little buzzed either. It wasn’t unusual for Gavin’s mind to fixate on how gorgeous Toby was. Some people might think he was a little short, but all bull riders were, and for Gavin, all that power in a pint-size package really turned

his crank. He could see the strain Toby was feeling under his bright smile and easy laugh. So many things were clearer now than they had ever been.

Piper smacked Gavin's arm. "Gavin... Are you listening to us?"

"No. I'm prioritizing the list of crap I have to get done before I can go to bed. What did you ask me?"

"What time for brunch tomorrow?"

"Not brunch, lunch... like twelve-thirty, one o'clock... here at the bistro. I need to stick as close to my normal routine. I'm distracted enough as it is."

"I hear you. I'll let Mom and Dad know. They want to spend some time at the fair looking at the cattle and sheep anyway, so that'll be easy enough."

Gavin saw Val and P stepping into their RV. Matt must still be settling the horses for the night. It wasn't long before Chad pulled his wife out of her chair and kissed her briefly, but what Gavin noticed was his hand slid gently across her stomach as he did so. A happy light bulb went off over Gavin's head. "So Chad... Piper... Have you told Mom and Dad yet?" The smile on Gavin's face couldn't get any brighter. His sister and brother-in-law both looked confused then guilty. Toby raised an eyebrow to Gavin who looked from Chad's hand to Piper's face and back again. That's when Toby got it.

"We were supposed to tell everyone at supper, but with your big ride, we didn't want to steal your thunder and then all the crap with Oscar... It hasn't seemed like the right time."

Toby leaned over and kissed Gavin's cheek like it was the most natural thing in the world. "We're gonna be uncles. How cool is that?"

Chad laughed. "Damn straight." It was funny to see Chad blush at the worst gay pun in the world. "Or not... but someone's going to need to teach the little guy—" Piper elbowed him, hard. "—or girl... how to ride a horse and to love the land and the pride in growing things that nourish people. Piper and I may understand those things intellectually but it's not an essential part of us. We're gonna need you for that. Mom and Dad will help, but it's gonna be you. You both are also the best role models I know for following your dreams and living the life you want, not the one that's expected of you."

Toby palmed his eyes hiding the wetness gathering there as he stood. "I'm honored. We're honored you think of us that way. You guys are going to be great parents. Congratulations."

Still sitting in his chair, Gavin decided to lighten the mood with some smartass. "Yeah, what he said. But, ya know, I think you're buttering us up for a whole lot of free babysitting." Gavin stood up and hugged Chad and Piper. "It's great news. Tell Mom and Dad at breakfast tomorrow. They could use some happy."

"You sure you don't want to be there?"

"I got to know before they do. It's all good."

"Mom suspects something already. I have a feeling she's known for a few weeks already."

A chuckle bubbled out of Toby. "I swear that woman is a witch, absolutely nothing gets by her."

"Here's to hoping it's a genetic mom thing. I'm gonna need it." Piper leaned into Chad and laughed.

"You feeling okay, sis?"

"Most days. I got nauseated in the surgical suite a few times, but it hasn't been bad. The mood swings might kill Chad before it's over. I'm due in the middle of March, so you both better plan accordingly."

"Just don't pop until after Austin and we'll be fine." Gavin stared at his sister for a second. "You look so happy... content even."

"I have everything I've ever wanted, well soon anyway." She put her hand on Chad's which was still sitting protectively on her belly.

"Good. You guys deserve it. Now go home to the hotel and get some rest. Let Chad pamper you a little. You've only got seven months to bank enough sleep for the next eighteen years." Toby kissed Piper's cheek and shook Chad's hand. Gavin hugged them both before walking them to their car. Along the way, Toby and Piper chattered about prenatal yoga and something about ginger tea while Gavin and Chad talked about the rodeo and the horse he'd drawn for the next day. More hugs and good nights finished off the evening. It was a nice end to the day and their impromptu party.

Toby and Gavin spent another half hour cleaning up and packing chairs and tiki torches back into the storage compartment under the trailer. By the time they made it to bed, it was one-thirty in the morning.

Feeling vulnerable after the run in with Oscar, both men checked and double-checked the blinds were all closed and the door was locked tight before

they crawled naked into the queen-size bed that had historically been Gavin's. It wasn't surprising Toby was still wide awake and a little wired. The adrenaline rush of riding bulls took a long time to wear off. Sleeping was not going to be possible until he crashed hard. Gavin thought maybe he could speed the process up a little. Shifting onto his side, Gavin tucked his body under Toby's arm, resting his head on his boyfriend's shoulder. Running a hand over Toby's hard abs, feeling the soft hair and skin, Gavin tilted his head up, looking for a kiss. That innocent, almost chaste, kiss grew and grew into a passionate and frenetic devouring of one another. They both had a mountain of unresolved emotion and anxiety that needed an outlet, and sex was a pretty healthy one. Gavin's tongue sought its mate, tasting the fruity toothpaste Toby liked. The kiss went on and on with bodies sliding together and hands wandering wherever they could reach.

Toby's hands settled in Gavin's hair, gently gripping and occasionally tugging Gavin's head into a different position. Rhythmically squeezing Toby's ass, Gavin encouraged him to rock harder against his leg. A long, calloused middle finger slipped between Toby's cheeks to tease his puckered opening. Toby groaned and pushed back into the sensation. "Gav, need you... please... I'm ready, so ready. Fuck me, please..."

Gavin grinned as he bit at one of Toby's nipples. The arching of Toby's back and canting of his hips would have made Toby's desires perfectly clear even without the words, but Gavin needed every last syllable. More importantly, Toby needed to say it so there was no doubt in his mind this was what he wanted. God, he was so beautiful. Gavin's heart raced as he watched Toby's body respond to every touch, every kiss, every nibble. It was intoxicating. "I got you, man. Relax. I'll take good care of you, body and soul."

"Always do... Love you, so much. Didn't know that's what it was... do now though... Please, Gav..."

"Got you... promise. As much as I want to watch your face, it's going to be easier on your side unless you want to ride me."

In a New York nanosecond, Toby maneuvered himself to have his back against Gavin and pulled his top leg up to his chest. Gavin reached up onto the shelf built into the headboard and grabbed the lube and wet two fingers. For what felt like hours, Gavin played with the outside of Toby's anus, in reality it was about five minutes. He could feel Toby opening up as they both relaxed a little. After reapplying a little more lube, Gavin worked first one then two fingers into Toby's passage. Knowing what was coming, Toby moaned and

pushed Gavin's fingers deeper and harder against his prostate. Three fingers had Toby panting and making a whole symphony of sounds as Gavin continued to stretch his ass. Gavin's dick ached, it was so hard. Toby reached back to stroke Gavin as best he could in the awkward position. Twisting his shoulder, Toby stretched his neck to kiss Gavin some more.

Gavin kept kissing as he removed his fingers and backed off enough to get a condom on and slick himself up with more lube. Back in position on his side behind Toby, Gavin slipped his cock back and forth over Toby's hole. It was an amazing moment of anticipation as he started kissing Toby again. Frustrated, Toby rocked his hips into Gavin trying to get more contact or more urgency from Gavin. But Gavin was having none of it. He was going at his own pace so he could be sure Toby was ready.

Poised with the head of his cock in position against Toby's hole, Gavin nudged gently, waiting for Toby to invite him in. Toby slid his hand between his legs and back to where he could touch his own pucker but Gavin's dick as well. He was finally frustrated enough to grab Gavin's cock and thrust his ass back to take Gavin inside. Gavin gasped at the warm tightness as he slid slowly deeper until he was in as far as he could go. A strangled groan escaped Toby as he accepted the sweet fullness of being penetrated by another man for the first time. For a few heartbeats, both men held perfectly still, enjoying their physical and emotional connection.

Gavin's breathing picked up in pace as he began to struggle to remain motionless with the onslaught of overwhelming pleasure. "So good, Tobes. Please tell me I can move..."

With a soft grunt as he wiggled his hips, Toby smiled. "Tear it up, dude."

Rolling his eyes, Gavin chuckled as he slowly pulled out, applied more lube, and slid back in. After a few gentle thrusts, instinct swamped intellect and Gavin began fucking Toby harder and faster. Once they found a rhythm, Gavin wrapped his arms around Toby's chest and started kissing and sucking at Toby's neck and shoulder. It didn't take long for Toby to take the hint and bend around so their mouths could reach one another.

The drugging kisses and the enveloping warmth of Toby's body did their job bringing both men closer to the edge. Gavin needed a little more, so he pulled out of Toby completely. An out-of-character whimper was Gavin's first clue Toby wasn't happy about having Gavin's dick taken from him. Rising up on his knees, Gavin moved to straddle Toby's bottom leg and encouraged Toby

to move his top leg further up against his chest. More lube and Gavin slowly moved back into Toby, but now he felt like he could go harder and deeper.

Watching Toby's face as they came together was a bonus. The new position also gave Gavin more ability to hit Toby's prostate. Not long after, Toby's keening and hip motion began to get more frantic. Gavin grabbed Toby's dick and began stroking. The upward spiral of their lust was rapidly approaching its peak. He was so close to his own orgasm that Gavin had to fight it back in order to give Toby time to come first. Feeling the telltale flush of goosebumps racing up his thighs, arms, ass and back, Gavin was never so happy to feel his partner come around his cock. Once he felt Toby go off, Gavin plunged over the edge right behind him. They were both out of breath with their hearts still pounding when Gavin collapsed onto Toby and kissed him, hard. His hands moved around Toby's back and sides as they returned to reality.

Still panting, Gavin kissed Toby's hard pecs in a few places. "You okay, Tobes? I should have gone a little easier on you, but I got so swept up in how good it felt..."

"It was perfect. I didn't want you to baby me. You fuck like a god, man."

"Thanks... I guess." Gavin climbed out of bed to dispose of the condom and clean-up. He brought back a cloth for Toby. "Do you feel any different?"

"Not the way you mean. Sex with you is a camel of another color— better than I've ever had before and it's not because you're a man either or at least not just that. It's like all the emotion and sensation between us is set on this feedback loop that grows and grows until the pleasure of it explodes all around us. So much more than getting each other off."

"Yeah... We'll have to try the other way around soon. I want to watch you come inside me. It's a whole different thing. It's fun to see you experience all this for the first time with me, but this is all new for me too. I've never loved the person I'm sleeping with before either and it is different. Then again everything is different than it was a week ago."

"It's like one moment to the next, we were both changed. It wasn't anything dramatic, just a few words and all I thought I knew about myself was different, better, more at peace. That was the moment we crossed the Rubicon, not this one. I don't know what's going to happen with Oscar or my mother or moving to the PBR or our careers in general, but I do know I will never regret acknowledging how I feel about you or making love with you tonight."

Gavin had reached the end of his post-sex energy. "Love you. Sleep now. Talk later."

"Okay, caveman." The covers got pulled up from the foot of the bed and they squiggled around to find a position where they were both comfortable. Sleeping together was still so new, there was a little trial and error before they settled and fell into the darkness together.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 8

Sitting at the dinette, Toby listened to the sounds of people going about their business getting ready for another day of rodeo. He may not have to compete today, but Gavin did, so they'd do their best to keep them in their normal routine which right now meant breakfast. A few sips from his vat of green tea with honey was just the thing to get him moving. Toby had left Gavin in bed sleeping, but that wouldn't last much longer. He rummaged around the fridge for stuff to make egg white omelets. By the time he heard Gavin in the bathroom, the food was about ready to go on the table. Toby grabbed his cell from the counter and thumbed out a text to his mother asking her when they could get together for a few minutes. No point in putting it off.

Gavin walked in from the bedroom and paused to kiss Toby. "Didn't like waking up without you." He moved off to set the table for breakfast.

"I always get up before you. Breakfast is ready when you get out of the shower every single morning. How do you think that happens? The breakfast fairy?"

"Sorry. I just had plans this morning. And I thank you for feeding me every day. I'd be living on toaster pastry and frozen pizza if you didn't."

"What plans?"

"I wanted to wake you up with a sleepy morning blow job, but that got shot to hell when I woke up alone. Anyway, what's for breakfast? Smells good."

"Our menu this morning is egg white omelets with mushrooms and spinach, whole wheat toast, and your own cask of green tea... which means stay away from mine." Gavin had a habit of misplacing his extra-large Day-Glo orange travel mug and sneaking sips of tea from Toby's.

"No turkey bacon? Not even the vegan bacon that tastes like smoky, salty plastic?"

"Nope. Too much salt lately, you don't need to be retaining water before you ride." Toby was the boss when it came to nutrition.

"Okay... I miss real bacon... Come sit with me. I hate it when you eat standing at the counter."

"You can have all the bacon you want... as long as it's at a restaurant with waiters and printed menus." Toby thought it was a brilliant rule to keep Gavin



from feeling deprived. Two plates of breakfast in hand, Toby crossed the small space and slid them onto the table before sitting across from Gavin.

“Thanks, man.” Gavin took two bites of omelet before looking up at Toby. “This is great. What’s the plan for today?”

“I texted my mother to arrange a meeting, but she hasn’t replied yet. I’m hoping Oscar will go off to mass or somewhere and we can get this over with before it messes with the schedule. I need to get in some yoga and a run today or I’m going to be a cranky boy later. Plus, John Dobrowski from the national PR team called me this morning because you didn’t answer your phone last night. They want you at the *Tough Enough to Wear Pink* event visiting breast cancer patients after lunch. A van will pick you up outside the rodeo ticket office at two-thirty. You should be back by five at the latest. It’s all in your voicemail.”

“Hard as they are, I like doing hospital visits. But they don’t usually ask me to do those PR photo things.”

“Breaking the arena saddle bronc record made you the local celebrity of the day. Check out the local paper online... There are some great photos of your ride and a really cozy picture of you and Cody behind the chutes.”

“Aww... Baby, you jealous? ’Cause we’ve both met Cody’s wife. He’s no threat to you.”

“I’m not jealous, just feeling a little territorial where you’re concerned this morning.” Toby reached across the table to touch Gavin’s hand. “It’ll pass. You’re mine and I know that. Sex seems to have brought out my alpha male today.”

“Piper calls it testosterone poisoning, but whatever. I am yours. I’ve always been yours for the taking and will be for as long as you want me. There is no one on Earth who is a threat to you, at least where I’m concerned. Well... except maybe David Beckham... Yeah, he’d give you a run for your money...”

“Jackass... Eat. We gotta be ready for my mom to call back. Do I need to pull out the ironing board or are your pink shirts ready for later?” Part of *Tough Enough to Wear Pink* day at the rodeo was, unsurprisingly, that almost all of the men and women competing wore pink shirts to help raise awareness and money for breast cancer screening, treatment and research.

“I’m good. I got all my ironing done before we left home.” Gavin frowned at the Marine Corps T-shirt he’d been given when they visited injured soldiers

in Texas and the gray cargo pants he was wearing. "I'll change after we have lunch with the family. I don't want to get my clothes sweaty and wrinkled before I have to be at the hospital."

"And somehow I doubted you were gay..."

"Now who's the jackass?" Gavin laughed with Toby as they finished up breakfast. It didn't take long for them to do the dishes and get everything put away. They were about to grab their yoga mats and head outside to run through their morning routine when the ding of Toby's cell phone receiving a text message sounded.

"Oscar's going out at eleven; we can go see her then."

"It's gonna be okay. We'll be okay."

"She's never going to accept any of this, but I gotta try to put this genie back in the bottle. I shouldn't have to lose my career because we're together."

"No, you shouldn't. No one should be faced with this kind of choice. Unfortunately, that's not the world we live in. People are fired or passed over for promotion or not hired in the first place because they're gay every single day. There's nothing special about us. We don't get a pass because we're being blackmailed."

"Part of me wants to come out and get it over with. There will be a bunch of noise and a whole lot of hate pointed in our direction, but if it made things easier for the next guy or if one gay high school kid could see he can still do anything, be anything... even a rodeo cowboy... I would gladly make that sacrifice. The problem is rodeo isn't ready. Public opinion is changing but not enough, not yet. We come out now and we'll be forced out of rodeo before it could make any difference at all, like generations of gay cowboys before us."

"So what do we do?"

"We hope Marianne has Oscar on a short leash and she's willing to help."

"Grab the mats. We have plenty of time to get through our morning yoga routine before we have to go. In any case, Starbucks is on the way back from the hotel... We can get those strawberry protein smoothie things as a reward when it's over."

"Deal."

Toby approached the hotel room door with Gavin just behind him and stood there. He raised his hand to knock and couldn't make himself do it. Their last meeting hadn't gone well and Toby was worried she wouldn't even talk to him about Oscar. Finally, Gavin rolled his eyes and knocked.

Marianne Prescott opened the door and invited them into the suite. She seemed surprised to see Gavin with him, but Toby couldn't do this without him and Gavin wasn't going to let him come alone. His mother was an attractive woman even in her late fifties. While Toby shared the same eye color as Marianne, that's where the resemblance ended. If Toby favored anyone, it was really his dad. Sometimes Toby wondered if that's why his mother had pushed him away after his father died.

He could remember how much in love his parents were. When he was about eight, he came downstairs long after his bedtime and found his parents listening to the radio and slow dancing in the living room. He sat on the stairs and watched them for a while as they danced completely unaware of him. They looked so happy and Toby thought they might be the most beautiful people in the world. Eventually, his mom saw him and shooed him back to bed with a giggle and a blush he didn't understand then, but did now. It was one of his favorite memories. No, she had never been a particularly affectionate or involved mother, but he always thought she loved him in her own way. It sucked he wasn't sure of that anymore. The feeling of being adrift in the world without a family was palpable even knowing he had Grandma Betty and Gavin's family to fall back on.

"Hi, Mom. Sorry for the cloak-and-dagger text this morning, but we needed to talk to you... alone... Shit, I don't even know where to start." Toby scrubbed his hair with his hands.

Gavin stepped in to give Toby a second to get his head together. "Let's sit down and talk. Nothing irrevocable has happened yet and we can still work all this out." They moved further into the sitting area and sat on the loveseat.

His mom sat on the side chair with her leg folded under her. "What's up, Toby? You've got me worried and you've brought Gavin into our family business. I'm not sure what to make of all this."

"I guess I should start at the beginning..." Toby looked at Gavin. "There's no graceful way to do this, is there?"

"None whatsoever." Gavin smiled and winked at him. The gesture warmed Toby and gave him confidence he couldn't have found anywhere else.

“Mom, I know this may be upsetting, but I hope not... I’m bisexual.” There he said it again and didn’t get struck by lightning.

“So what? You’ll find a nice girl to marry and break her heart screwing around with men on the side?”

“Jesus, Mom... I’m bisexual, not a man-whore. You should know me better than that. Maybe some bi people need to be with both genders, but that’s not how it is for me. While I am attracted to both men and women, I am perfectly capable of being honest and forthright. You really think that little of me?” Toby leaped to his feet and stomped over to the window. “Gavin, this is never going to work. We should go.”

“We need to try. We’re not the only ones who are going to get screwed if we don’t find a way to fix this.”

“Fine. Your turn.”

“Okay then...” Gavin looked at Toby’s mother calculating what to say next, but he ended up just blurting it out. “I, on the other hand, am full-on gay and in love with your son.” Marianne sputtered, but Gavin raised his hand to stop her from speaking. “In case you’re wondering, he loves me too.”

“It figures. He and his hippie-dippy parents made you think you are that way, but you can still find a girl and have a normal family. You don’t have to be like that because he is.”

“Mom, I’ve been this way since before I even met Gavin. It doesn’t matter anyway because Gavin and I are together and that isn’t going to change. You need to think carefully about what you say next because I am about one syllable away from walking out the door and never coming back.”

“Why are you here, Toby? Do you want my approval? You never needed it before and you’re not going to get it now. You have the option of finding a woman and living a normal life. Choosing to be with Gavin and ruining your life is ridiculous.”

That was the moment when Toby started losing it. “Fucking hell. I’m twenty-six years old, I don’t need your approval. I hoped I’d receive something other than contempt, but I will not stand for you disrespecting Gavin or my relationship with him. It’s exactly the same as what you and Dad had together.”

“This travesty isn’t anything like my marriage to your dad. Tell me why you’re here and get to the point.”

“Fine. Oscar showed up at our trailer yesterday and stumbled on me kissing Gavin. He managed to take a picture with his phone before we even realized he was there. We confronted him about it and he informed us that either I continue to send you money and pay for the wedding you always wanted or he was going to out us. I came here today to try and talk with you before we considered going to the police and having Oscar arrested for blackmailing us, but whatever. You want to play this like we’re strangers, fine. I thought you might love me enough to stop your boyfriend from torpedoing my career, but you don’t and never have. We’re wasting our time.”

“Both of you stop! Jesus. You’re not even fighting about Toby being bi or being with me or even Oscar’s crap... I’m sorry your husband and your dad died. More sorry than you know... but there’s going to be a lot of collateral damage from your unresolved bullshit if you don’t find a way past this... Toby, you need to control your temper and remember what’s important here. Marianne, you have to decide if you are willing to lose your son over this. And I promise you, if Toby loses his rodeo career because you sided with Oscar, you will lose him.”

“You never liked Oscar. How do I know you’re not punishing me for last week?”

“Jesus, Mom... Listen to yourself... You think I’d come here and tell you about something I’ve kept private all this time just to get back at you for fighting with me about Grandma Betty? I came here to be honest and let you know I’ve fallen in love for the first time in my life, but like always you want to make this about you.”

“That’s crap, Toby. You’re here to save your precious career, like sitting on the back of a dirty bull is somehow noble.”

“No, that’s not true or at least not completely true. I wanted to tell you last week before I got so worried about Grandma Betty. I knew you wouldn’t react well to me being with Gavin and I didn’t want that clouding the issues.”

Marianne pointed sharply at Gavin. “It’s always about him. It’s always been about him. Your father drops dead of a heart attack and you don’t turn to your own family, you run to Gavin and his perfect parents... I told your father this would happen. I warned him if we didn’t get you away from that damn farm, you’d turn gay for that boy.”

“And you wonder why I turned to Angie and Keith... The first thing you said to me after telling me my father was dead wasn’t that you loved me or that

we'd be okay... You told me I needed to stop crying and grow up, I was a man now and needed to act like it. I was barely fifteen.

"When I finally got to Hazy Hill, Angie hugged me and let me cry then she fed me grilled cheese and tomato soup, I think. Later Angie, Keith, Gavin and Piper curled up on the couch with me and watched stupid action movies one after the other until I thought I could sleep. Sometime near dawn, Keith found me crying on the bathroom floor because I didn't want to wake up Gavin, he sat down beside me leaning against the tub with his arm around my shoulder and cried with me and for me. He told me I'd be alright, that he and Angie would help any way they could... that I was loved. They gave me the solace that should have come from you, but never did."

"Bullshit. I was never good enough for you... You belonged to your father, I was always a distant second. Once Gavin showed up, I fell further and further down the list until I lost you completely when Drew died. Now you tell me you're going to kick me out of your life, that's rich. I haven't been a part of your life since you left for college."

"Since the day Dad died, you haven't shown any interest in me or what I'm doing at all. Tell me... What was my college major? How'd I do in my first rodeo? How many times have I been injured this season? Can you answer even one of those questions?" Toby paused dramatically. "I didn't think so."

"You were hurt?" His mother seemed genuinely concerned, but it was much more of an indicator that she had no idea what his life was like.

"I ride bulls for a living, I'm always hurt, but not badly so far this year. I've had a sprained wrist, two sprained ankles, a gash in my calf took thirty-two stitches to close, a couple broken fingers, and a slight ACL tear that's still not great, but I have a good brace now so..."

"You haven't missed much time. I sometimes look at the rankings and you've only been moving up."

"I rode the next weekend after most of those injuries but I missed three weeks of competition with the knee. But none of that is the point... You were the parent. It was your job to stay involved in my life, but you didn't. I was forced to grow-up fast which was okay but you weren't even there to back me up."

"Yeah. I was working two jobs in order to keep a roof over your head. It was almost two years before I got my job at the high school. You always were ungrateful."

“No, I wasn’t. For what it’s worth, I cooked and cleaned and did anything I could think of to help without being asked to do any of it. All I wanted was for us to be a team. I was trying to find a way to get closer to you without Dad there to be a bridge between us. And you never saw any of it. This isn’t getting us anywhere. Come on, Gav. We’re leaving.” Toby started toward the door with Gavin following. He stopped and looked back at his mother. “There was a time when the tiniest bit of affection and attention from you made me the happiest kid in school. I should have given up a long time ago, but part of me believed you loved me and didn’t know how to show it without Dad around. I’m sorry for wasting your time. Tell Oscar he’s never going to see a dime from us and as long as we never hear from him again, we won’t go to the cops. Make sure you watch for us in the news. We’re gonna make history as the first openly gay or bi professional rodeo cowboys... Your friends are going to be full of questions, I hope you’re ready. You know the saddest part? I would have been honored to pay for your wedding. I was so glad you found someone who loves you and makes you happy again after Dad...” Toby shook his head and turned back to the door before he whispered, “Good-bye, Mom.”

Gavin didn’t say a word as they walked through the hotel; he just kept a steady hand on Toby’s back. Toby could feel the sadness and disappointment rolling off Gavin, and he knew it didn’t have a damn thing to do with his own rodeo career. His mother’s lack of care and empathy had always been a sore spot for Gavin, but Gavin had grown up with the most loving, touchy-feely parents imaginable and couldn’t imagine not having that in his life. Once they were back in the truck, Toby couldn’t hold back his anger another second. He roared as loud as he could and banged his hand on the steering wheel so hard he felt the reverberation all the way into his shoulder.

“Maybe you shouldn’t drive, dude. Slide over, I’m coming around.” While Toby slid across the bench seat, Gavin got out and dashed around to the driver’s side. “You need to relax before you take a swing at someone, probably me. Use your Pranayama meditation. Clear your mind and put one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Breathe deeply, feel the air move all the way into your lower belly. Concentrate on the hand rising and falling on your abdomen...”

“Thanks. You really do listen to me yakking away about the yoga stuff.”

“I do. Always. It may not be spiritual for me, but it is important and has definitely improved my bronc riding. It’s getting to where I crave the yoga more than even the running when I miss a few days. Come on. Sit up straight,

hands in place and breathe deeply. Inhale all the peace and love from the world and exhale all the anger and negative thoughts..." Gavin went back to being quiet as he drove the few minutes back to the rodeo grounds, only pausing to pick up the strawberry smoothies he'd promised. They both needed the reward. Toby felt his ragged emotions come back under some semblance of control before they even made it back to the RV.

By the time they got to the Cowboy Bistro for lunch, they were the last ones to arrive. Everyone at the table looked up at them expectantly, and it crushed Toby to disappoint them. He'd lost his temper and the whole conversation went off the rails. All of these good people were going to suffer because he couldn't keep his shit together. It wasn't fair, but there was nothing he could do now. "No joy on our mission. I got distracted and screwed it up. Gavin tried to get us back on point but... my mother and I in the same room with something more important than the weather on the agenda rarely ends well. I'm sorry." Toby tried to move toward the food line, when Angie stepped into his path and hugged him tight. He ignored the pressure behind his eyes as he hugged her back.

"It'll be okay. We're all here for you whatever happens." Angie kissed him on the cheek before she turned to Gavin and repeated the maneuver. Toby wasn't sure but he thought he heard Angie say something about talking mother to mother. He hoped she didn't mean what he thought she did, but he knew better than to tell Angie what she could or couldn't do.

They grabbed plates of delicious roast turkey and a variety of side dishes before sitting down with the family. Toby was kind of glad they were in a public place and couldn't really talk about what was going on. He needed some time to sit with the fact that he'd shut his mother out of his life for good. Lunch conversation moved around them even when some of the cowboys and their families stopped by to congratulate Gavin on his ride and catch up with people who they hadn't seen in a while. In a small, dark and bitter place in Toby's mind, he wondered how many of these good people would turn hateful once they knew he loved Gavin. How many of them would shield their children from even looking at them? Toby shook his head trying to displace the entire line of thinking.

With a sad smile, Gavin leaned over to him. "It wasn't your fault. I don't think this could have gone any other way. She could still call Oscar off. Try and have a little faith."



"I don't have the luxury of having faith in someone who has been disappointing me over and over for eleven years." Toby sighed as his shoulders slumped. He looked up at Gavin begging for understanding. "I can't do this now. Cover for me. I'll see you back at the trailer." He needed to think for a while and Toby didn't want anyone to hear the conversation he was about to have with his agent. Jerry was a great advocate, but he wasn't the most sensitive soul and he was definitely going to explode when Toby explained his predicament.

"I'll come with you. Give me two minutes to finish my lunch."

"No, stay here and be with your family. I'll be there when you're done."

"They're your family too." Gavin looked down the table encouraging Toby to do the same. "No one thinks this was your fault, especially not me."

"I know. Promise. I need a little space. Eat your lunch. It's gonna be okay." Toby would keep saying it until he believed it. As he walked away, he couldn't help but look back and watch them all talking and laughing. He wished he could do something to stop the chaos bearing down on them, especially Valentín and Matt, who didn't deserve any of this.

Once he got back to the RV, Toby turned on the AC and sprawled on the sofa trying to get his equilibrium back. After a while, Toby hit the speed dial for his agent and waited for the call to connect. His conversation with Jerry went exactly how he expected. There was some yelling and some "what the hell were you two thinking?" and a whole lot of demands for anatomically impossible things to happen to Oscar. All his bluster was followed by Jerry's sincere statement that Toby's sexuality didn't matter to him or his agency. They spent a few minutes formulating a first sketch of a plan for what to do next, but Jerry knew the sports agents for a couple of the professional athletes who had come out recently and he wanted to touch base with them before they went too much further. In the end, Toby felt slightly more in control of the situation and what his options were, but he still felt like he'd been thrown by the rankest bull on the tour.

He needed to run, needed to burn off all the conflicting emotions surging around his head and body. Mile after mile, Toby would use the steady rhythm of his stride to clear his head and let him focus on punishing his body without Gavin to pull him back from the edge. After he changed into his workout gear and running shoes, he went out and sat beneath the trailer's awning and began stretching.

It wasn't long before Gavin returned looking pretty grim. Toby was genuinely glad to see him and smiled crookedly as Gavin approached. "Hey. What happened?"

"You ran out on me, worried my parents and confused our friends with an exit that would make Speedy Gonzales proud. I know you're feeling guilty and need some space to deal with it, but I'm leaving in half an hour and you'll have the whole campsite to yourself for a few hours. Jesus, Tobes. What could possibly be so important it couldn't wait an hour?"

"Inside. I'll explain where no one will hear over the air conditioning." Toby lead Gavin into the RV. "I couldn't justify putting off calling Jerry another minute. As it is, he's pissed I waited this long to tell him what's going on."

"What's his plan?"

"He thinks an in-depth interview with a smaller outlet will work to our advantage... something online like OutSports or Huffinton Post. It will let us control the story longer and hopefully minimize the amount of a circus it will cause. Jerry's convinced Oscar won't carry out his threat for at least a few days after the deadline. He wants the money and he won't get it without another attempt at blackmailing us. So, Jerry wants us to do an interview at Hazy Hill with a reporter who will probably spend a couple days following us around, asking questions and taking pictures, probably right around Pendleton. He's gone off to talk to some agents he knows who have managed high-profile athletes coming out, not that we're high profile or anything, but we are medium- size fish in this little pond. We need a solid plan and then we need to let the commissioner's office know what's coming. Leaks are inevitable once that happens. So we're still in a holding pattern for now, but wheels are in motion."

"Good. That's pretty much what I expected. Shit, I have to get in the shower right now if I want a prayer of being on time." Gavin kissed him briefly. "Go finish stretching. I'll be out in fifteen."

And that's what Toby did. Gavin managed to say good-bye before Toby ran off into the late afternoon heat. When he got back to the RV, there was a small cooler on the picnic table with bottles of water and sports drinks on ice inside and beside the cooler were two dark chocolate-peanut butter protein bars. The cooler had a sticky note on it that said "Drink Me" and the protein bars had a note which read "Eat Me". A bright laugh came over Toby as he read the notes.

He did feel a little like *Alice in Wonderland*. Did that make Gavin the Cheshire Cat? Toby thought it might.

As he moved to sit down in the shade and drink the bright orange liquid Gavin left for him, Val ambled up to the RV. Toby didn't realize how dizzy he was until he tried to sit and he pretty much collapsed onto the bench of the picnic table. Sweat beaded on his forehead as his heart rate started to climb. "Fuck."

Val raced over once he saw the condition Toby was in. "Dammit Toby. How far did you run? It's over eighty fucking degrees. Gimme your keys. Don't move a muscle." It didn't take long for Val to return with a pitcher of cool water, a washcloth and a towel. "What the hell were you thinking?" Every rodeo cowboy had the symptoms of heat exhaustion drilled into them by the medical teams. Toby should have known better.

"I wasn't thinking, that was the whole point of the run. What time is it anyway?"

"Almost four. You need to wet yourself down and cool off. I switched the AC on inside, but if you go in there now you'll cramp up." Val grabbed Toby's wrist to check his heart rate.

He wet the cloth and started wiping the water across his overheated skin, but it wasn't fast enough so he dumped the pitcher of water over his head and down his arms and legs. "I ran for almost an hour and a half so I'm guessing it was somewhere around eleven miles."

"You're lucky you didn't pass out on the side of the road somewhere. If your heart rate doesn't come down in the next five minutes I'm taking you to the sports medicine truck for an IV. This is nuts. Gavin's going to flip out, he's already close to the edge worrying about you. Jesus, man. Are you trying to kill him?"

"What did he say?"

"Absolutely nothing. But you didn't see his face when you skipped out in the middle of lunch. Everything okay between you guys? This is a lot of stress on something so new."

"He's worried, but handling it better than I am. I buckled under the guilt sitting there at lunch like nothing was wrong, like my mother's boyfriend wasn't going to hurt everyone I care about. I had to call my agent anyway, so I

bolted. I wanted a little time to get my shit together, but when that didn't work I needed to run hard enough to get to the place where my mind is quiet. I guess I over did it."

"Ya think... Keep drinking, *tolo*. You have to finish that crap and then a bottle of water before I let you stand up."

From experience with Val and Pietro, Toby knew *tolo* was the Portuguese word for fool. "Okay, okay... I'm a little overheated... Relax will you."

"No. I won't relax. Your heart rate was well over one hundred beats a minute. I'm going to get ice packs from the freezer." Val came back with another sports drink and a couple ice packs and dish towels. "These can go in your armpit, groin, or the back of your neck. Pick your poison."

After wrapping the ice packs in towels, he stuck one under his arm and the other he pressed to the side of his neck. He wasn't about to freeze his junk; he had plans for later. "Feel better?"

"Yes. But do you?"

"Yeah. I'm okay. I'm sorry. I seem to be fucking up everything I touch right now. Gavin and I find our way to something great and because I can't close a door properly we get outed the first day back on the tour. Oscar tries to blackmail us and my own mother won't help me stop it. I flip out at lunch and manage to hurt Gavin and who knows who else in the process. I need to run off all that and I end up with heat exhaustion because I wasn't paying attention to my body. I honestly don't know how much more Gavin or I can take, Val. I really don't."

"Have you talked with Gavin or anyone about this crap? Really talked about how overwhelmed you're feeling?"

"Gavin knows. He always knows."

"If you guys are going to make it, you can't go all cowboy and protect him from how you're feeling. Even if he knows, it will help to talk it through, you might even stumble on some truth you hadn't considered before. And it's just as true in reverse. Sometimes you have to make Gavin talk, especially when he doesn't want to burden you. He was devastated when you walked out of lunch. He thinks you're going to decide being with him is too much trouble and you'll go back to hooking up with every buckle bunny west of the Mississippi until you find one you're willing to keep."

“Not gonna happen. Even before things got physical between us, he was my whole world even if I didn't see it for what it was. It might be different if I hadn't sat in that ICU room holding his hand and staring at the monitors for hours just so I knew he was still alive. If he died that night, I would have crawled into his grave right behind him. Just a tiny glimpse of a world without him at my side was nearly enough to break me.”

“I remember, but what Gavin remembers is his heart breaking every time he watched you hook-up with some girl you'd never see again. I know it changed after Austin, but he endured that for a lot of years before then. You have ground to make up before he can be confident this thing between you is gonna last. Pushing him away and being secretive isn't going to help his confidence any. Give me your wrist.” Val checked his heart rate again. “Better. Flip the ice around and keep drinking.”

Toby switched the ice packs around and finished off the bottle of sports drink. A bottle of water appeared in front of him. He took it and opened the sport top on the water. “Thanks Val. I should start calling you Doctor Val. You could be the Brazilian Doctor Phil.” It felt good for Toby to laugh a little.

“No way. I've just been where Gavin is right now. Matty was a player before we got our shit together, I almost lost out on the best thing in my life because I didn't want to get hurt. It took a long time for me to be sure he and I were solid enough to build on.”

“How'd you get past it?”

“Time, and Matty being willing to be a completely open book to me. I still get a little sideways if I think he's hiding something from me. You should have let Gavin be there when you talked to your agent because I'm sure he expected Jerry's first advice to be for you to break up with Gavin and run far, far away.”

“Shit.”

“Not the end of the world, but you have to understand that his insecurity is riding him. I refer you back to... you guys have to talk, even when you don't want to. Anyway, Matty's making grilled tacos for dinner. You guys should come over when Gavin gets back.”

“He should be here soon. I'm gonna go lie down in the air conditioning and wait for him. We'll be over. Tell Matt... no cayenne in the pickled cabbage this time.” Last time the cabbage had enough heat to double as culinary napalm.

Val laughed. "I'll remind him. Get some rest. I know it seems like the end of the world, but one day soon this will all be in the rear-view mirror."

"Thanks, Val. I seem to be saying that a lot lately. I am so sorry my family drama is going to screw life up for you."

"Honestly, it's not screwing anything up. We accepted we would inevitably get outed a long time ago. We've had plans in place since almost the beginning. This isn't your fault and we don't blame you for anything. Besides, it could still all work out the way we hope. It's too soon to start the funeral march." With a wave, Val took his leave and walked around to the front of his trailer.

\*\*\*\*

Toby woke up on the sofa, cold with a roaring headache and a warm, squishy ice pack under his arm. A quiet groan rumbled from his chest as he sat up trying to discern why he was awake. He soon heard Gavin fumbling at the door. The events of the last couple days had Toby paranoid enough to lock the door before his nap. Even as crappy as he felt, Toby couldn't help but smile as Gavin walked through the door. "Hey. How was the hospital?" The instant he asked the question he saw Gavin's red-rimmed, bloodshot eyes matched the color of his pink on pink paisley shirt with the retro mother-of-pearl snaps. Gavin had gotten his big, soft heart bruised again.

"It was good, I guess. You've done hospital visits. I met some nice women fighting breast cancer. Some of them asked interesting questions about rodeo, a few even knew about my ride. A sweet old lady, who reminded me of Grandma Betty a little, flirted wildly and asked to try on my hat. It was cute. But it was the last woman I visited that got to me... Lisa's a single mom with two kids. Joey is fourteen and Sarah is eleven." Gavin started to tear up a little. "She told me the cancer was bad, a lot worse than originally thought but she hadn't told anyone yet. She knew she was dying even if the doctors hadn't made it official. Lisa's terrified her kids are going to end up in the system. Her ex-husband is a good guy but he lives back east somewhere and her mother has it under control for now but she isn't a permanent answer either.

"After a while, she asked me if I was ever afraid to get on the back of a bucking horse. I told her I was scared every time I rode, but part of the thrill was in overcoming the fear and doing it anyway. When she asked me how I did it, all I could tell her was fear is only paralyzing when you don't have a plan, so I control the things I can and leave the rest to God. My answer seemed to

comfort her a little, but it didn't feel like enough especially when she hugged me hard and thanked me for coming to see her.

"In the van on the way back, I felt like such an asshole. I'm worried about losing my rodeo career when people like Lisa have real monsters under their bed. If rodeo goes poof today, I still have an amazing life. Running the farm with my dad isn't any less of a dream than rodeo, it's just not that time sensitive. I can only ride broncs for so long at this level before my body betrays me either through injury or age. It was this huge reminder of how blessed we are and how little we have to lose by coming out. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to come out publicly, especially this way, but if it's gonna happen, my world isn't going to come to an end. It's harder for you, I get that, but we both know where our future lies after rodeo. My parents are leaving you a share of the farm in their wills for goodness sake. You're as tied to that land as I am."

"They are?"

"Yeah. My dad said something yesterday. He meant it when he said you'd always have a home at Hazy Hill. You can't be completely surprised."

"I didn't... They shouldn't do that, it's yours... and Piper's."

"Yeah well, my parents found a way to make sure you have some skin in the game for the long haul. And for the record, you don't get to shit on their gift. You're only answer when my dad talks to you about it will be 'thank you' or I'll kick your ass."

"Yes, sir." Toby smiled wickedly. He liked Gavin's bossy side.

Gavin laughed as he sat on the sofa beside Toby. "You look like crap. What happened or do I have to guess?"

"I'm fine, more or less. I ran too far, too fast in the heat. Val saw me stumble over here and got me cooled down and made me drink before I got in any real trouble. My head hurts so I'm guessing I'm still a little dehydrated, but I'll be right as rain after a shower and some more water. I'm happy you're home though." Toby rubbed his hands on his thighs, squared his shoulders and grabbed Gavin's hand. "I need to apologize. I should have waited for you to call Jerry. It wasn't right when all this affects you as much as me. I wasn't keeping secrets from you, I know how Jerry is and I wanted to protect you from his bullshit until he'd blown out all his bluster. I'm so sorry Gavin. I never meant to hurt you, I don't know how to do this yet and I'm gonna fuck it up sometimes. Just to ease your mind, he never once suggested we break-up. It

wouldn't have mattered if he did. The only thing that could get me to leave you is for you to ask me to go and even then you'll have a hard time shaking me loose. I may have been late to the party, but I'm here now. I love you, Gavin Robert Hayes. You are my forever."

"As you are mine. There's a romantic hiding somewhere inside you." Gavin smirked before kissing Toby with enough heat to melt glass.

"News to me. I need to shower. We're having tacos with Val, Matt and Pietro whenever we get over there. You think I can wear my pink plaid shirt to dinner without spilling anything on myself?"

"You'll be fine. Go now or we're going to be really, really late." Gavin leaned in and kissed Toby again, slipping a hand under his shirt.

In the end, they were only a little bit late.

\*\*\*\*



## Chapter 9

Gavin sat on the picnic table he was supposed to be folding up and putting away and thinking about the Labor Day weekend that was now behind them. He ended up getting bucked off in the finals so he had to be satisfied with the two good rides he'd managed in the earlier rounds. The cremello gelding, Vino Bianco, pitched a fit in the chute and almost bucked him off before he even rode. If it weren't for Toby spotting for him, he might have ended up under the horse in the chute. When he saw the day sheet, Gavin was optimistic; he'd ridden the bronc twice before with decent results, but on the fourth leap, Bianco surprised Gavin by dropping his shoulder and rolling to the left, dumping him into the dirt. In the end, Val won the all-around, Matt came in fourth in bareback, and Pietro, who didn't qualify for *Pulling Rank* came in fifth in the regular bull riding competition. Everyone made money so the rodeo was a resounding success even with the sword of Damocles hanging over all their necks.

There had been no contact from Marianne and Oscar since he and Toby walked out of their hotel room. Plans were moving ahead for coming out, but Gavin wasn't comfortable sitting on his hands and waiting. He wanted to be doing something, anything at this point, which is why he was supposed to be packing up and getting the fifth-wheel ready to pull out. But the late afternoon sun felt nice on his skin. He'd changed into shorts and a tank top after he showered the arena dirt off his back. It wouldn't be long before it was entirely too cold to be sitting out, but it was a nice way to celebrate the unofficial end of summer. He adjusted his baseball cap and leaned back on his elbows taking it all in.

They had convinced Val and Matt to spend a couple days at the farm before they all had to head over to Puyallup and then down to Pendleton before coming home. Pietro opted to travel with Franco, who was from Argentina, and Tyler, a third-generation rodeo cowboy from Texas. The rookies were both right around twenty years old and seemed to have a hard time staying out of trouble without adult supervision. Toby thought P might be recruiting for the rainbow rodeo coalition they were unofficially building, but Gavin didn't think so. Pietro always looked out for the new kids, especially the ones from Latin America. Although for all he knew, they could both be right.

Gavin was about to get back to work when Toby strolled up to him looking like a cowboy superstar wearing a snug PRCA T-shirt and jeans with his

fashion-over-function straw cowboy hat and sunglasses. It was hot and Gavin could feel his dick perk up with interest. The crooked smile Toby couldn't hide told Gavin that Toby knew what kind of effect he was having on Gavin.

"Hey, dude. Val get the horses loaded okay?"

"Yeah. Feller, Squeak and Clemens are easy, and without Dizzy flipping out every ten seconds, it went quick. Whenever I help Val out with the horses, I thank God I didn't become a roper. Traveling with horses two hundred days a year would get old in a hurry. Anyway, they're loaded. Val plans to hit the road soon. We should catch up with them in time for dinner."

"I talked to my mom. She'll have someone move our horses out of the closest corral and run a power cable and hose over to the trees between the garage and barn. That way they have easy access to the horses and your place. Dad offered the guest room, but I think they'd rather sleep in their own space. I'll ask, but you know, the trailer becomes home after a while." Gavin was glad they agreed to visit the farm; it didn't make sense for them to drive five hours home to Montana only to reverse the same trip plus another two hours to Puyallup two days from now. Besides, Matt and Val had both worked construction in the off season before they made enough money to bridge the gap from October to January. Gavin hoped they would be able to give an educated opinion of the Gorman homestead and how much it would cost to renovate. "Speaking of home... Have you given any more thought to the Gorman place? I was thinking..."

Their conversation interrupted by the sound of a car close by. They both turned and watched as a silver Tahoe pulled into the space where Val and Matt's trailer had been. As soon as he saw the SUV, he knew it was Oscar's. A confrontation in front of all the rodeo contestants packing up to go home was not on Gavin's list of desired activities for the day. Gavin couldn't hold back the sigh when he saw Marianne and Oscar get out of the truck. Oscar didn't approach them; he just stood sheepishly beside his SUV leaning on the passenger side door.

Marianne, on the other hand, marched right up with determined purpose. Toby stepped forward to greet her and at the same time, cut off her approach to Gavin. "Hi Mom. I didn't expect to see you this afternoon."

Gavin almost laughed at Toby's false chipperness at seeing his mother. Her coming to them gave him a glimmer of hope that maybe this could all be resolved without bloodshed, metaphorical or otherwise. If they pulled this off,

he had a bottle of Single Barrel Jack he won at a rodeo in Tennessee a couple years ago that was finally going to get cracked open. Knowing he was only there for moral support, Gavin hopped off the table and settled in to watch the byplay between mother and son.

“I needed to talk to you and you weren’t about to come to me.” Marianne’s eyes darted around like she expected something to leap out of the shadows and attack.

“You’re probably right. Come on over into the shade under the awning and, please, keep your voice down. This isn’t the easiest place to keep things quiet in the best of circumstances.”

“I don’t want to fight, Toby, but somehow that’s where we always end up. It’s like we speak different languages, and without your father here to translate, stuff gets lost in between. I never meant for you to think I don’t love you. I know I can be self-centered and bitchy, but I’m your mother and we’re stuck with one another. Can we sit, please? There’s some ancient history that might help you understand things better.”

“Sure, but Gavin stays. Are you going to invite Oscar to sit with us?”

“No, he’s heard this story and he’s still in the doghouse so he can stand there and wait. This shouldn’t take long.” Awkwardly, they sat across from each other while Gavin hopped off the table.

“I’m gonna grab some water from inside. Anyone else want one?” Gavin waited and both Toby and his mother nodded. It didn’t take long to grab the water bottles from the case and return to the picnic table. He and Toby hated relying on the bottled water, but reusable cups and bottles were not practical in rodeo life. Passing out the water, Gavin set an extra on the table. “I grabbed one for Oscar too.” It was an olive branch, of sorts.

This wasn’t easy for Marianne. She wasn’t someone who shared much with the world, especially painful and emotional memories. “I came out of college a good-time girl. I worked as a waitress and then a bartender at a biker bar in Spokane where I got to party every night and get paid for it. I went through a long string of boyfriends, but had absolutely no interest in settling down. All in all, I was pretty happy. Then one night your dad comes into the bar... He’d just bought his first motorcycle, a gorgeous, vintage Harley, and the guy he bought it from told him my bar was the place to show it off, and it was. We got to talking about the bike and a lot of things. He seemed so out of place in a dive bar on the wrong side of town. Drew was a software engineer in a polo shirt

and khakis wearing his very new leather motorcycle jacket and boots. A couple of the regulars figured out that while green, he knew what he was talking about, and they helped Drew make some friends. Over the next month, Drew came in twice a week and sat at the bar chatting with me about nothing... and everything... After a while, he finally got around to asking me out and took me on a real date. You know where we went?"

"The big cat sanctuary out in Mead. I love that place. We went there all the time when we were living in Spokane. Dad told me the G-rated version of the story more than a few times."

"We dated casually for a couple months; I was still drinking and sleeping around some, but less than before. The longer I dated your dad, the less I was interested in any of my extra-curricular activities and along the way, he made me want to be a better person, someone he could be proud to have on his arm. Much to the dismay of my employers, I stopped partying and got my life together. Two years later on a whim, we took off on the Harley and eloped in Las Vegas."

"I always wished he'd kept the bike. He used to let me ride with him sometimes once I got big enough. It was as close to flying as I could imagine."

"Unfortunately, it was one of the first things to go after he got laid off. I told him not to sell it, but he had it in his head that it was an extravagance when he wasn't working to support his family. Anyway, Drew always wanted a house full of kids and I was okay with the idea of having one or two in the future sometime, but I wasn't so keen on having to share Drew's time and attention. A couple years after we got married, I found myself pregnant. It wasn't unplanned exactly, but it wasn't planned either. It just sort of happened and your dad was thoroughly delighted. His happiness was everything to me so if having a baby accomplished that, I was happy too.

"But when you were born, it all changed. The term postpartum depression sounds so neat and clinical, but the reality is more of an evil blackness sucking the life out of everything in its path. Beginning the week you were born, I didn't eat or sleep. I didn't get out of bed unless I had to. I resented you for making me deal with something, anything, that wasn't the blackness pressing down on me like too much gravity. Drew took over almost all of your care but after two months, he had to go back to work, so Grandma Betty came to take care of us both. By then I knew I was in deep trouble. I was having thoughts of suicide and I was starting to worry I could hurt you, just to be left alone. The doctor prescribed antidepressants but they weren't helping enough.

“A few days after Mom arrived, Drew scooped me up out of bed, put me in the car and drove me to the ER. I was hospitalized in the psych unit for almost a week and as much as I hated it, the doctors there saved my life. For the next three months, I was so wrapped up in getting better, I wasn't capable of caring for you or anyone else and after Grandma Betty went home, I took a job as bar manager at one of the hotels so I could feel normal again and have a break from baby duty. I was so disconnected from you, I felt like I was your babysitter instead of mother. But, in time, it got better. My hormones and serotonin levels stabilized and I was able to wean off the antidepressants, but my doctors made it perfectly clear that having another child would be dangerous for me. Drew was crushed, but hid it well. He just threw himself into being the best dad in town.”

“He was the best dad. I miss him every day. I don't know what to say about the rest. I'm sorry my birth caused you so much suffering. It sounds like a nightmare.” Toby's eyes misted. Gavin stroked Toby's back for a second in support.

“Your dad loved you more than anything in this world. The day you were born was the best day of our lives. You were so beautiful and already so active and engaged with the world. I swear your dad and I spent three hours sitting there watching you sleep. It wasn't your fault I got depressed, it was purely a biological reaction, my brain just misfired. Anyway, once I got better, we did okay until your dad got laid off. I resented becoming the sole breadwinner. I hated having to work so much and still not being able to keep up with the bills. Your dad sold the bike and a lot of other stuff and took some day labor work to help, but it wasn't enough. Moving home to live with my parents felt like such a failure. Drew did his best and found the job at Gunderson a few months later, but at a much lower salary than before. I had to take an office job I hated to make up the difference. It felt like prison.”

“Mom, I watched it all happen right in front of me. Ask Gavin. I'd hear you fighting and worry you guys were going to get a divorce all through middle school. But what does any of this have to do with now?”

“I'm trying to show you that there were things going on in our lives you couldn't possibly understand as a child. Our relationship was handicapped from the start and not because I didn't love you. I'm not a huggy person, I never have been. Your dad was able to get around it somehow and I think you might have too if we'd had a normal beginning. By the time, I was ready to build that bond, you were already so independent and wanted nothing to do with holding still

and cuddling up to your mother. It wasn't anyone's fault, it's just the way it was."

"And after Dad died... what then? How was that not your responsibility?" Toby was getting frustrated with his mother playing the martyr.

"Your dad died so unexpectedly we were completely unprepared. There was so much credit card debt and not enough savings or life insurance to carry us. Trouble followed almost immediately. I had to pick up bartending shifts at night to keep our heads above water. I thought you would be happy I trusted you to take care of yourself, but in hindsight it backfired and forced you further and further away from me. I assumed you would come to me if you needed anything, like you did with your dad, but you never did. Not once.

"There is no excuse for me not noticing until it was already way too late, but I was so overwhelmed by my own grief and so tired all the time... I didn't see it. Once I got the job at the high school, we were like roommates more than parent and child. It took almost five years for me to pay off the debt. Every penny of the money you gave me over those years went to paying off the credit card companies. After that, I admit I got used to having money left over at the end of the month, but I actually put a lot of the extra cash into savings and my retirement fund plus I bought enough life insurance to pay off the mortgage on the townhouse. I can't let myself get back into the hole Drew left me in when he died. It wasn't all wasted on frivolous things. But that's not the point either."

"What is the point?" Toby seemed to genuinely want to understand.

"Your money is your own, I understand that. Doesn't take a genius to see you work hard for it and I have no claim on it whatsoever. But I still get scared that with one mistake I'm going to be back working two jobs just to survive never mind live, so I tried to cling to the cushion you provided. That's my baggage, not yours. I always wanted to shield you from how dire things were so you could grow up without worrying about whether we were going to end up homeless or not.

"As for Oscar, he's not going to cause you any trouble. I made him delete the photo from his phone and he knows what he did was wrong once I explained things to him, but... he knew I was upset by our last fight and saw blackmailing you as a misguided way to make me happy. Oscar is a good man. I love him with all my heart, but he's a little more brawn than brains if you know what I mean. He honestly didn't think he was really hurting you and never actually intended to out you. He assumed you'd pay up and we'd all go

back to normal. And for what it's worth, we're not having a big, fancy wedding; we've decided to have a small, quiet one sometime in the spring. We hope both of you will come and, Toby, I would be honored if you would consider walking me down the aisle... I understand it's too soon for you to decide. I wanted to put it out there. I'm trying to get back to being the better woman I became when I fell in love with your father. It isn't easy for me without him here to be an example for me to follow."

Toby remained silent, considering his mother's words, but there was obviously only minimal alignment between Marianne's actions and the things she was saying. Her story was definitely the part of the truth that made her look like a victim and not a villain. "Mom, I'm still not sure what to say. Thank you for getting Oscar to back off his threats, but if you're waiting for me to weep with gratitude, you are going to be bitterly disappointed. You said a lot of hurtful things to me and to Gavin. I haven't heard a single apology from you today, for anything. Don't worry. I'm not asking you to apologize now, so don't bother. We still have to talk about what I experienced over the years and how damaging it was for me. But that's for another day. I need to reiterate that I am Gavin's boyfriend or partner or whatever word we decide on until we are free to get married. Having a relationship with me, means having a relationship with him, same as Oscar. You can either accept that, or not."

"I will never understand why you're with Gavin when you have the option of being with a woman and having a real family. This thing with Oscar certainly shows how difficult your life is going to be while you're with him. I understand that being gay is an inborn predisposition, like being left-handed, and not a choice, but being bisexual, is all about choice. You could choose to have a relationship with a woman and yet you choose to be with this man. It's irrational."

Gavin always enjoyed the conversations where Marianne completely ignored the fact that he was in the room. As Toby's neck turned red in anger, Gavin shook his head and sighed. Toby turned to Gavin and put a hand on the back of his neck. "If loving you is a choice, then it's one I'd make every day of the week and twice on Sundays. I'm not with you because it's easy, I'm with you because you make me whole. Love you." Toby glanced around before he leaned over and very quickly kissed Gavin's temple.

The brief but heartfelt peck warmed Gavin's soul. "I feel the same. You're my forever, Tobes. Love you too." Gavin turned back to Marianne. "I'm willing to put the past behind us and start fresh if you are. Relationships aren't

built in a day and they certainly aren't fixed in a day. I would suggest you and Toby consider getting some family counseling to help sort out all the miscommunication and hurt feelings." He could feel Marianne bristle at his words, but Gavin didn't care. She needed to get over it.

A grateful smile crossed Toby's face. "We can talk about it. Couldn't hurt, might help... One last thing about my sexuality... it's not up for debate. There is no reason for us to ever discuss it again. You don't get to use it as a bludgeon against me."

"Fine. Your sex life isn't something I wanted to contemplate when I thought you were straight, never mind now. Gavin's been around long enough I don't question how important he is to you. Are we done?" She was anxious to have the uncomfortable conversation over with and Gavin couldn't blame her.

"For now. We'll talk to you in about three weeks when we get back after Pendleton. You know how to reach me if you or Grandma Betty need anything. I do love you, Mom."

"Okay, kid. I'll talk to you soon. Be safe." Marianne surprised everyone, including herself, by gently kissing Toby's cheek when she stood up to leave. All in all, Gavin thought it might be the start of a long overdue thaw between Toby and his mother, but it could also be the start of the next ice age. There was no way to tell.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jesus, it felt good to be home. Turning onto the driveway and passing by the Hazy Hill Farm sign made Gavin smile as he reached across the console to put his hand on Toby's thigh. They were only going to be there for two days, but they were still home. Gavin and Toby managed to catch up with Val and Matt at their favorite barbeque place about forty minutes from the farm. The place was a dump with ugly linoleum floors and chipped Formica tables, but the food was so good no one dared complain about the décor. Dinner was quick because they were behind schedule and the horses needed to get turned out for the night.

Toby had called everyone while Gavin drove, letting them know the crisis had been averted. No one liked the fact that Oscar wasn't going to be punished for blackmailing them, but he'd take that trade to preserve their privacy. Jerry seemed resigned to the fact they would have to come out eventually. He was probably right. Once Toby went to the PBR there would be a lot of additional scrutiny by both the fan base and the media, eventually someone would figure out he and Toby were living together. Still, what he'd said to Lisa was right,



fear was only paralyzing when you didn't have a plan... He didn't want to come out publicly if he didn't have to, but if it happened, it wouldn't be the catastrophe he'd once anticipated.

Life wasn't going to stay this easy; it never did. There were challenges on the horizon. He and Toby were going to be separated a lot this coming year as Gavin took on a larger role at the farm and Toby switched rodeo venues. Angie's health was still a concern as was Grandma Betty's. Toby and Marianne had a lot of work to do if they wanted a better relationship. It was all going to be messy and difficult to navigate, but with Toby by his side and their friends and family supporting them, he liked their odds at finding their way.

They backed the trailer into its space in the garage and unhitched while Angie and Keith helped direct Val and Matt's huge rig into position with a complexity that could only be rivaled by docking an aircraft carrier or maybe the USS Enterprise. Gavin and Toby's fifth wheel was big, about thirty-five feet tip to tush, but Val and Matt's four-horse, gooseneck trailer was almost ten feet longer. With the larger size plus the weight of the horses, Val and Matty spent almost fifty percent more in gas than Gavin and Toby. It also meant Val always had to drive to wherever he was competing. More reasons Gavin was happy he didn't have to travel with horses to compete.

Once Val's horses were fed and settled into the corral, they all congregated in the backyard around the large fire pit and talked for a while, winding down from the rodeo and the relatively short drive home. Angie and Keith rocked gently in the glider while Matty sat in one of the Adirondack chairs with Val sitting on the ground between his legs. Gavin was surprised Val wasn't purring as Matt carded his fingers through his hair, he looked so content. When he planted himself on one of the two chaises, Gavin assumed Toby would take the other one. Toby clomped down the steps from his apartment and ambled over to the fire pit only to stand next to Gavin looking a little nervous. It took Gavin a second to realize Toby was asking permission to share the chaise with him. An irrepressible smile plastered itself on Gavin's face as he scooted over to make room. Toby sat in the space Gavin made and wiggled into the position Gavin was coming to think of as Toby's spot against his side with his head on Gavin's shoulder. Still a little unsure, Gavin looked over at his parents to gauge reaction to their obvious affection, and what he found were soft, knowing smiles and unconditional acceptance. A wave of relaxation swept over him as the conversation flowed around him. It was one of those amazing small moments he would remember for the rest of his life. Angie even managed to document

the scene with her good camera. All four men would come to treasure those photos more because of what they represented than the artistic merits of the pictures.

It wasn't terribly long before his parents headed into the house for some much needed sleep. They took a perverse thrill at reminding everyone that this was a working farm and breakfast was at six-thirty a.m. They sat around talking and finishing their whiskey for another half hour or so.

Toby sat up on the edge of the chaise. "Alright, gentlemen... Time for us to shuffle off to bed. And because I am a controlling asshole... Tomorrow is a recovery day, so I'll see you all for morning yoga at five-thirty in the gym... and don't be late. You won't like what happens when you're late. Will they, Gav?"

"Trust me. You don't want to give him an excuse to punish you." Gavin was serious. Toby could be sadistic when he decided to push you to the edge of your fitness level or endurance. Personal training by the Marquis de Sade.

"I didn't know you two were into the whole Dom/sub thing. It would explain some things." Matt laughed as Val smacked him on the arm.

"Hey, now... Everyone has their kink and this is a judgment-free zone." Gavin tried to smother his laugh and his friends erupted with their amusement.

With a roll of his eyes, Toby stood and grabbed the sand bucket to smother what was left of the fire. "Seriously, Val. I wanted to show you some yoga postures and exercises to strengthen your psoas and you both could use some lumbar and lower core work. Five-thirty in the gym."

The gym space was one of Gavin's favorite places on the farm. South-facing windows and a couple skylights made it bright even on the grayest winter mornings. Gavin and Toby had converted the unused workshop into a yoga/fitness/home gym space when they were still in college. For Toby's birthday last year, Gavin gave him the four foot tall stone and copper water fountain that was bolted to the wall in there. It was good for the Feng Shui of the room at least according to Noreen, Toby's yoga instructor/mentor. Gavin thought the student had far exceeded the teacher at this point, but she was a good egg anyway.

"You guys sure you don't want to stay in the guestroom or use the pullout couch at Toby's? It's memory foam and surprisingly comfortable."

"No, we're good. The trailer is more like home than our ranch at this point. We will commandeer Toby's shower after he tortures us with his yoga voodoo.

I'm going to check the horses one last time before turning in. We'll see you bright and fucking early. Why did we come here again?"

"Because it saves you more than ten hours driving time, knucklehead."

Matt took Val's hand and pulled him off the ground. "In case Val has totally forgotten his manners... Thanks for the invite. It saved a lot of wear and tear on us and the horses. We'll be sure to say something to your folks in the morning. Come on, baby. I need some Zs." Hand in hand, Matt and Val headed towards the barn and corrals.

Staring up at the stars, Gavin paused to appreciate where he was. Hazy Hill was far enough away from civilization that there wasn't much light pollution to detract from the brilliance of an early-September night sky. He searched out the few touchstone constellations he knew and thought about his father, grandfather and great-grandfather looking at the same sky and wondering about their future and their place in it.

Toby slid behind him and wrapped his strong, muscled arms around Gavin's waist. "Find what you're looking for?"

"Yeah, I did, a long time ago in a middle school not so far away. It was his first day in a new school, Mr. Donohue introduced him in homeroom. He stood in front of the class wearing a red and blue striped rugby shirt and he had a Harley Davidson backpack on his shoulder. Later, I saw him sitting by himself at lunch, worried no one would sit with him and pretending he didn't care."

"I remember. You sat down across from me and smiled before you introduced yourself. You asked if I liked motorcycles, I was surprised anyone noticed my backpack. When I asked you if you'd ever ridden on one, you said no, but you rode horses all the time and it had to be the same, just quieter. We laughed until people started looking at us. You asked if I wanted to come over sometime and go horseback riding. When I told you I didn't know how to ride, you smiled so big and said I needed to spend the weekend at your house so you could teach me and you made it happen. Never understood why you wanted to be friends with the short, pudgy new kid, who couldn't even ride a horse."

"You were this cool kid from the city who knew about motorcycles and video games. I was a hick farm kid who didn't know much about anything outside this little town. I saw the look in your eyes when I talked about the horses and I knew I could get you to be my friend if I taught you to ride."

Toby kissed the side of Gavin's head. "It worked. By the end of the weekend, I was completely ensorcelled by you, your family, and this magical

place. I can't believe it took almost fifteen years to figure out what was right in front of me."

Breaking free of Toby's embrace, Gavin spun around and hugged Toby tightly. "Well, we're here now and we'll be here forever, I hope."

"You are my forever, Gavin. No matter where our careers or our destinies take us, wherever you are is my home. This place is just a bonus." Toby kissed him deeply with all the emotion passing back and forth between them. Eventually, like all good things, the kiss had to end. "We should get to bed. I have cowboys to torture before breakfast and we can't be late or I'll be the one who ends up tortured."

"Come on and I'll show you how much you like being tortured." As usual when Gavin made up his mind, that's exactly what happened. Gavin's erotic torture ended with the first wisps of sunrise on the horizon and Toby feeling blissfully sated. In the end, they were only a little late and were too happy to care about the teasing.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter 10

Early morning sun warmed Toby's face as he slowly woke up. He had only been home for about eight hours after being away from the farm for more than a month. Toby crept out of bed, trying not to wake Gavin. He knew Gavin needed the sleep. It took him a minute to slip his right arm into the shoulder-immobilizing sling and get the straps fastened without help. Pulling on the loose red sweats wasn't any easier. He'd go without a shirt until Gavin could help him later.

Being hurt sucked. Two days ago in Oklahoma, Toby'd gotten bucked off a bull named Hot Brown and in the process he'd separated his shoulder. No one in the arena could tell Toby'd fucked up his shoulder, but Gavin knew the second Toby rolled onto his feet after hitting the dirt. Over the year they'd been together and especially since Toby moved up to the premier tour of the PBR, Gavin had learned to deal with not being in the arena every time Toby rode, but it was still hard, especially when Toby got hurt. Luckily, he hadn't been injured much so far this season and this shoulder separation was the worst one yet.

In the kitchen, Toby banged his way around one handed, heating water in the electric kettle and making his tea. He grabbed the wool blanket from the arm of the sofa and made his way onto the porch wrapped around two sides of the house. The redwood swing they had put up the last time he was home was the perfect place to sit and enjoy his morning for a few minutes before the day started. He wrapped the blanket around his shoulders and took a sip of tea.

Being in the new house had been amazing. The renovations and the new barn had taken nearly six months to finish because of their crazy schedules, but it was all done now. The three-bedroom log house had a great layout and was structurally sound so most of the work was in replacing the windows and updating the kitchen and bathrooms. As you'd expect in a sixty-year-old house, they'd found a few plumbing and electrical issues along the way, but nothing major. It had surprised Toby how little they actually needed to buy. Between what Toby already had in his apartment and the unused furniture and household goods squirreled away around the farm, left over from a century of living, they were pretty well set after a single exhausting trip to the mall. Toby loved the end result. It was an eclectic, comfortable mix of old and new that fit the log cabin character of the house.

After sitting in the swing for a while, Toby grabbed his tea and wandered out to the brand-new barn to turn out the horses. He and Gavin bought two

gorgeous tobiano mares from one of Matt's friends in Montana. Marley, a big palomino paint, and Nickle, a stunning blue roan paint, were eager to get outside. Both horses had settled in to their new home and even got along with Whiz who spent almost as much time here as he did up at the Hazy Hill barn. Toby suspected the gelding would be a permanent resident before long. Toby stood at the fence and watched the two mares stretch their legs a little after being cooped up all night. Nickle was a bit of an attention whore and shortly stood in front of Toby looking for treats and affection.

He was so caught up in the horses he never heard Gavin walk up behind him. "I thought I might find you here when I woke up without you and there was no compensatory breakfast waiting for me. Not a great start to my day."

"Yeah, well... I thought you'd sleep a while longer and I wasn't so keen on cooking one-handed without my sous chef backing me up. Gimme a couple days to get used to the sling and I will be back to making your breakfast as usual, King Friday."

"Sorry... I was teasing. My brain is still in the house asleep under my pillow." Gavin kissed him before turning and watching the horses for a couple minutes. "I'm sorry you're hurt, but I'm glad to have you home. I've missed you so much. I know I got to see you in New Mexico, but it's not the same as having you here."

"I know, but we've got a month before I can even ask for a medical clearance to get back for the last few weeks of the season. We just have to make the most of it. I've been thinking about next year. What do you think about going to Brazil for a few weeks next summer? I could ride the Brazil PBR tour and we'd get to see Pietro..." They all missed Pietro quite a bit. They called and emailed periodically, but it wasn't the same. Early this summer, Pietro'd been forced to go back to Brazil and take over the family ranch after his father and older brother were killed in a carjacking on their way to a business meeting in São Paulo. According to Val, P was having a hard time coping with being back home, especially with his mother pushing him to settle down now that he was head of the family. It was a sad situation, and they all wished there was something they could do to help, but there just wasn't.

"I'm all for it, if the scheduling works. We need to start planning anyway."

"That's why I mentioned it now." Synchronizing a schedule between the farm, Gavin, and Toby that everyone could live with for this year took three Nobel prize laureates, a brain surgeon and a Buddhist monk to figure out. In the

end, nobody was completely happy, but it was a workable compromise. Gavin took the time to create a color-coded master schedule that was set in concrete for the month ahead on the fifteenth of every month. The fixed schedule didn't allow for much spontaneity in their lives, but Gavin and Toby were each able to stay in the top twenty of their respective sports and Gavin was able to lighten the workload for both of his parents on the farm.

"Come on, dude. Let's skip breakfast and go back to bed for a couple hours. Mom and Dad told me to take the next two days off, so I don't have to be anywhere anytime soon."

"I need to go see Grandma Betty. I've already gotten two voicemails and five or six texts from her about my injury. What possessed you to get her a smart phone and teach her to text?"

"Relax. I talked to her last night while I was waiting for you at the airport. We're picking her up at her new place and taking her to dinner at Felice tomorrow night. I even made reservations."

"Excellent." Toby took Gavin's hand and lead him back to the house. "More sleep sounds like a plan."

Gavin laughed. "I said bed, not sleep, but I think we can work something out." They walked through the house and up the stairs to their master bedroom. Toby climbed onto the bed and leaned against the headboard watching Gavin. For a second, Gavin stood at the foot of the bed and stared at Toby like he was trying to make a decision and then walked over, opened a drawer in his dresser and pulled something out. Holding whatever it was tight in his hand, Gavin crawled up on the bed and stretched out on his side facing Toby. "I was going to wait for our anniversary at the end of the week, but I can't wait. I have you home in one piece, relatively speaking, and I want to celebrate now. I asked my dad for this a few weeks ago so I could give it to you. I didn't expect to be nervous about this. Shit. I'm just gonna say what I need to say..."

"Toby Prescott, I've loved you for as long as I've known you and you are my forever. This is a promise that one day when the stars align and we're free to be together openly, I will ask you to marry me. But until then, I thought you could wear this on a chain around your neck as a reminder." Gavin handed him a black velvet jeweler's bag. With shaking hands, Toby opened the drawstring and poured a man's wedding ring and a sturdy chain into his palm. "The chain is new, but that was my grandfather's wedding ring. They are rose gold and the

patterns carved in the ring are apple blossoms. My grandmother picked them out to represent Hazy Hill... What do you think?"

Speechless, Toby slid the ring onto his left ring finger and kissed Gavin with so much love and earnestness it brought tears to both of them. "It's beautiful. I will be honored to wear your ring." Toby stared down at the ring on his finger and used his thumb to fiddle with it. "I never thought I would have this. I dated women and didn't understand why I couldn't connect with them anywhere outside the bedroom. From the beginning, you and I had this intense connection, but I couldn't risk ruining what we had by even considering it might be more than friendship. After you came out to me the second time, it was like a door opened and all this suppressed emotion came rushing in, filling all the gaps between us. In the instant I finally found the nerve to kiss you, everything changed. It took a few days before I knew beyond any uncertainty I was head over heels in love with you and had been for a long time. Gavin Hayes, you are my heart, my home and my forever. I cannot wait for the day when I can accept your marriage proposal, until then this is enough. I will wear it around my neck until you put it on my finger in front of our family and friends..." Toby rolled around on the bed like a one-flipper walrus trying to get into his nightstand without hurting his shoulder. He finally came back with a ring box of his own and handed it to Gavin. "My mother gave me all of my father's jewelry when he died and this is his wedding ring." Toby watched Gavin open the box and slip the simple gold band onto the ring finger of his left hand. "When I found it during the move, I set it aside so I could give it to you one day and I guess today is that day. Sometime in the not-too-distant future, I will put it on your finger permanently, but it already represents all of my commitment to you and our life together. I love you beyond reason."

With infinite gentleness, Gavin manipulated Toby onto his back and supported his injured shoulder with a pillow. Toby welcomed the warm and seductive kiss that followed. It allowed him to convey his love for this cheeky, sexy man through touch and tongue without any need for more words or romantic gestures. They would make love, nap and make love some more before starting their day. Eventually they would make their way over to Gavin's parents' house for dinner so Angie and Keith would stop worrying about his injury. Piper and Chad were coming with baby Hunter, who was already five months old, and maybe their nephew wouldn't quite understand his first lesson in love and commitment when he tried to chew on the shiny rings hanging



around their necks, but he would grow up seeing it manifest in the men who would teach him to ride horses and grow healthy, wholesome things that feed people, body and soul, while still being good stewards of the land. And one day, Hunter and his little sister, Katie, would have the privilege of watching their uncles exchange those rings at the center of a cherry orchard in full bloom surrounded by friends and family at the very top of Hazy Hill.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Jae Moran is a New England girl, born and bred. She has tried to live in other parts of the country but she always longs for home. Living in the Lakes Region of Maine with her partner-in-crime of more than twenty years and two crazy dogs, Jae spends her free time playing with the multitude of sexy men who live and love in her imagination. Jae's been writing since she learned to hold a pencil but it has taken her a while to share her stories with the world.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

[Email](#) | [Blog](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Tumblr](#)