



Carol Lynne
In For A Penny

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by Carol Lynne

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I would like to dedicate this story to the members of my yahoo group. You're all more than simply readers to me, you're friends.

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Chapter One

Raven Black paid the driver and retrieved his luggage from the trunk of the yellow and black cab. As the car retreated down the winding ranch road, Ray looked over the home he hadn't been back to in seven long years.

He shook his head and kicked the red dirt with the toe of his sturdy boot. No, the Lazy C Bar Ranch had never truly been his home. It belonged to the Conner family. Raven Black had been a foster child. He'd come to the Lazy C Bar after Marty Conner had found him beside the road, close to death, when he was thirteen. She'd brought his skinny, battered body home with her and called the sheriff.

Social services had placed Ray in the care of the Conner's from that day on. The sheriff found his father and arrested the drunk, abusive man for child abuse and the county social services had approved the Conners' request for guardianship.

Retrieving his olive green duffle bag, Ray made his way to the front door of the Spanish-style ranch house. It was the first time since Marty's funeral he'd been back. Ray squeezed his eyes shut in a sudden burst of pain. Marty Conner was the only mother he'd ever known. She'd been widowed before he'd ever come to live with her and her son Zane, who even then, ran the ranch.

Ray walked into the shade of the overhang and sat on one of the soft comfortable chairs. Thinking about Zane made his knees weak, which was funny because Ray stood six-foot, three-inches and weighed over two-hundred pounds. Rubbing

his forehead, he felt sick to his stomach. Zane always made him feel this way. He'd been in love with the man for years, and Zane treated him like any other hired hand.

Intimidating wasn't a strong enough word to describe Zane Conner. The man oozed wealth and power and knew how to throw both around to get what he wanted. Zane even knew a couple of powerful Washington Senators, which was why he'd been ordered to drop his undercover work and fly home to Arizona. When he'd asked why, his boss at the agency told him Zane Conner was pulling in favors.

Ray's undercover assignment was at a stand still until he took care of whatever problem Zane was having. He'd been in El Paso for the past two years working on a human smuggling ring. He'd been close to finding enough evidence against the gang to convict when he got the call to take a vacation from his job as a bartender at the Sluggish Lizard and head to the Lazy C Bar.

It appeared that after ten years, Zane finally needed him for something. Hell, he hadn't even talked to the bastard since the night of Marty's funeral when he'd been thrown off the ranch. Ray shook his head. He couldn't think about that night right now. He needed to take care of whatever problem Zane had and get back to his real job.

He stood and knocked on the front door.

A short, round woman with a long gray braid answered the door. "Can I help ... Raven?"

Ray was pulled into the soft warm body and squeezed to within an inch of his life. "Good to see you, Lupe."

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Lupe released her hold and stepped back to stare up at him. "*Dios*, you've grown tall." She reached her hands up to finger his shoulder length black hair. "What's this? Are you finally acknowledging your Native American ancestry?"

Ray smiled and bent down to kiss the old woman on the cheek. "No. I've been working undercover and its part of the cover. Why? Don't you like it?" He gave her a devilish grin and winked.

Lupe giggled, sounding like a schoolgirl and swatted his arm. "It makes you even more of a hunk." She stepped back into the house and opened the door wider. "Come in and I'll fix you a glass of my special lemonade."

Ray followed her to the kitchen, thinking of the older woman's infamous fruit, sugar, and Jose Cuervo mix and sat at the table. "So how've you been Lupe?"

She huffed out a breath and put her hands on her ample hips. "I'll be much better when *Señor* Zane pulls the stick out of his caboose." She picked up a glass and set it in front of Ray.

After taking a long drink, he set it back on the table. "What kind of stick is Zane sporting these days?"

Lupe laughed and swatted his arm before turning serious. "His cattle keep disappearing and he found a dead Native American boy in the south pasture earlier this week." Lupe crossed herself and closed her eyes. "It was awful. The poor boy couldn't have been more than seventeen. He'd been beaten and shot in the back. The sheriff thinks it's all related to the cattle rustling."

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Ray's eyes narrowed as he thought about the missing cattle and the poor boy. "Is this why Zane had me called in? Is he hoping I'll be able to stop the rustling?"

Lupe bit her lip and shrugged. "Could be the rustling. Could also be that he missed you."

"Ha. The man threw me off the place seven years ago. I don't know why, but he hasn't liked me for the past ten years and never made a secret of it." Ray finished off his lemonade and took his glass to the sink. "Thanks for the drink. I'll go find Zane and get to the bottom of why I've been summoned after all this time."

Before he could get out the door, Lupe grabbed his wrist. "I don't know what happened after Marty's funeral, but he hasn't been the same since."

* * * *

As Ray walked toward the barn, he felt nervous as hell. Flashes of that night so many years ago played in his head. He'd been in the barn crying after Marty's funeral and Zane had happened upon him. The older man had put his arm around Ray for comfort. There was something in the way that he ran his hand up and down Ray's back that led him to believe Zane had the same feelings he did. He had totally misinterpreted the situation evidently, because when he leaned in and kissed the older man, his whole world exploded. Zane seemed to accept his kiss at first. Ray swore he even heard him moan. Then he was thrust back and told to get off the Lazy C Bar Ranch and to never come back.

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Ray's breath hitched at the memories of the awful words that had spewed out of Zane's mouth. He'd lived with those words for the past seven years. He was twenty-seven now, but the rejection dealt by Zane that day still had the power to hurt.

He spotted Zane unloading supplies into the feed shed. His shirt was off and sweat glistened on his darkly tanned, well muscled chest. Ray stopped walking. Looking at Zane all the old feelings came rushing back. He'd never loved anyone the way he loved Zane.

Snorting, he shook his head. A lot of good it had done him. Zane had always treated him like an outsider. Well, that's wasn't strictly true. In the beginning, Zane had spent a lot of time with him, nursing him back to health. He'd helped teach Ray how to ride and how to fish. Then when he was about seventeen it all stopped. One day Zane was skinny dippin' with him, and the next day he was treated as if he were another hired hand.

A year later he'd joined the marines, moving quickly up to Green Beret. At the age of twenty-four the FBI made him an offer he couldn't refuse. By then he had no one in his life and deep undercover work seemed perfect for him.

Ray smiled as he continued walking toward the feed shed. He couldn't wait to get Zane's reaction to his new appearance. Not only was his hair longer, but he'd indulged in some pretty rough looking tattoos, not to mention rings in both his ears and his nipples. Too bad Zane would never get a chance to see the large barbell in his cock. That would really freak the straight laced cowboy out.

Ray stood next to the truck and cleared his throat.

Zane straightened and turned around. He looked Ray up and down. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Good to see you too."

Zane picked up his shirt and swiped at the sweat on his chest.

Ray could feel the moisture gathering in his mouth. He swallowed the drool that was about to slip from his lips. "You called. I'm here. What do you want, Zane?"

Zane motioned to the house. "Let's go up to my study." He jumped off the back of the truck and strode toward the house.

Ray had absolutely no problem following. The beautiful tight ass begged to be followed. Except for a little more silver in his thick black hair, Zane looked exactly the same. At six-one Zane Conner was the epitome of a sexy cowboy. Deep blue eyes rimmed by long, thick black lashes got him noticed by not only every woman he met, but a few of the men as well.

Ray thumped his erection when Zane disappeared into the house. This was going to be a long assignment for his uncontrollable cock. He knew he should hate the sexy cowboy, but he'd spent too many years loving him.

He wandered into the study and took a seat in front of Zane's big mahogany desk. Crossing his leg to rest his heel on the opposite knee, Ray said nothing.

Zane's eyes narrowed as he seemed to be studying him. "So tell me. What's with the changes, Raven?"

Ray smiled and flicked one of the gold hoops in his ears. "Deep undercover for the past two years, and call me Ray. I haven't been Raven since Marty died." He didn't need to tell Zane that he'd in fact been the last one to call him Raven. "Are you sayin' you don't approve?"

Zane licked his lips and broke off eye contact. "Just different, that's all." He rummaged around in his desk drawer and withdrew a file folder and tossed it across the desk.

"I'm losing cattle every week. Slim and I didn't notice at first, but the rustlers are getting bolder all the time. Last weekend I lost another thirty-four. That's a total of seventy-two head in the past four months. Considering the price I can get for good Angus, the loss is crippling me." Zane set his jaw. "We've tripled patrols and hired some off-duty cops to help with security, but so far nothin'. The local law doesn't seem inclined to do a proper investigation."

Zane motioned to the file. Ray opened it and looked at the picture of the dead boy they'd found. "We found him in the south pasture with no identification. Sheriff was called and they called the coroner. The autopsy confirmed what everyone already figured out. Death by gunshot to the back, but also dehydration, multiple contusions, and as you can see, multiple wounds to his back." Zane knew as well as Ray the wounds to the boys back were made from a bullwhip.

Ray couldn't get over how much the boy looked like him the day Marty had rescued him fourteen years earlier. Unlike Ray, however, this boy had not only been whipped to shreds, but shot. His hands shook as he deposited the folder back onto the desk. Past memories of his father assaulted him.

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Roger Black hadn't tried to contact him in over eleven years. He'd come out to the Lazy C Bar to confront Marty after he'd finally been released from prison. He'd been convicted of child abuse and assault with a deadly weapon. Ray remembered trying to stand in front of Marty as his father spat filth and hatred at his only son. Zane had come running and managed to call the police and run his father off the ranch with a baseball bat. Roger had disappeared after that and Ray hadn't heard from him since.

He looked up into Zane's eyes. Was he back? Is that the real reason Zane had called for him? "What would you like me to do?"

Zane nodded once and leaned forward in his chair. "I want you to get the fuckers that could do this to a seventeen year old boy." He leaned back and latched his hands together behind his head. "No one here besides Lupe and Slim know you've been working for the FBI. I want you to go undercover as the trouble making brother. I'll put the word out that you've come home to milk me for every cent you can get. I figure the people in charge of the rustling will see an ally in you. Just make it known that you hate my guts and would love to bring me down. Let them approach you Rav ... Ray."

Ray looked at Zane with real pain in his heart. "You really hate me don't you? Any agent could have done this job, but for some unknown reason it was important to you to get the entire town to hate my guts."

Zane closed his eyes and shook his head. "I don't hate you. Hell, I've never hated you. Despite what happened seven years ago, I've missed you."

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Ray stifled the stream of venom choking him. "Yeah, I can tell. Seven years without a phone call or a letter. You must've missed me a lot. That why you pulled strings to get me back here?"

"I brought you here to help me save the ranch that's been in my mother's family for three generations. If you won't do it for me, do it for her."

"You fucker. That's low, even for you. You know how much I loved Marty." Ray stood and strode to the window. He looked out over the ranch trying to get his anger under control.

"What happens when this is done? When the entire town thinks I'm scum? This is the only home I've ever known, Zane. You're asking me to give up hope of ever coming back here to settle down." He turned back toward Zane.

Zane stood and walked toward him. "I was wrong to say the things I did in the past. This is your home and it always will be. When this is over, I'll set it to rights with the town." Zane placed his hand on Ray's shoulder and gave a slight squeeze. "Please help me."

Ray was thrown off guard. In the fourteen years he'd known Zane, not once had he ever heard him ask anyone for help. "Okay."

Zane didn't take his hand off Ray's shoulder immediately. He seemed lost in thought. "It's good to have you back."

* * * *

After Raven strode from his office, Zane collapsed in his chair. *Am I doing the right thing?* For so many years he'd put

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Raven's—Ray's best interests above his own. Was bringing him back to the ranch only about the cattle thefts?

Zane already knew the answer. Closing his eyes, he prayed for guidance. He'd done his best to stay away from Ray after the boy had slowly become a man. The way Zane's body reacted to his foster brother had shamed him. Stepping back from their close relationship had been his only salvation. Zane had been so afraid his mother or someone from town would pick up on his unnatural feelings, he'd become more of a taskmaster to Ray than a brother. Yeah, big boss man with a woody in his jeans and a broken heart.

In his early days with the Conner family, Ray had worked hard to fit in and overcome the psychological damage done to him at the hands of his abusive father. His infectious smile and friendly attitude endeared him to the townspeople. How could Zane have justified doing anything that would have knocked down everything Ray had worked so hard to build?

Right after graduation, Ray had enlisted in the Marine Corp. Although it had killed Zane to watch Ray get on the bus that day, he knew it was for the best. It had been easier to hide his heartache without being around Ray on a daily basis.

Then Marty had died and everything changed. Ray had raced back to the ranch to mourn the only mother he'd ever known. When Zane had walked into the barn after Marty's funeral and found Ray crying, he couldn't help but to pull the man into his arms. His own grief had gotten the better of him and he had allowed his control to slip.

Zane pictured the one and only kiss he'd shared with Ray. It had been the best and worst moment of his life. Everything

he'd ever wanted and needed had been right there for the taking, but he'd known he couldn't have it. Ray deserved so much more than to have become part of the token gay couple in town. The dirty little pairing the drunken regulars at Lucky's joked about.

So Zane had thrust Ray away and ordered him off the ranch. He'd been regretting that decision since, but he finally had Ray back. The question was, would he do anything about it?

Zane looked out his office window and watched as Ray talked to Slim. The older man had been foreman on the ranch for years and damn near the only real friend Zane had. His gaze shifted back to Ray. Damn the man looked good enough to eat. The longer hair and visible tattoos made Ray even sexier than he'd been seven years ago.

After making sure the door was closed, Zane unzipped his jeans and slipped his hand inside. As he watched every subtle movement Ray made, Zane pumped his cock. When Slim evidently said something funny, Ray let out a belly laugh so loud and genuine, Zane actually heard it through the window.

The speed of his strokes increased as Ray ran his hand through all that sexy-as-fuck hair. Zane's fingers itched to bury themselves in those black locks. Preferably while Ray was on his knees sucking him off.

"Fuck!" he howled, as his orgasm overtook him.

Out in the yard, Ray stopped talking and looked toward the house, apparently hearing Zane's exclamation. Zane bit his lip and thanked God the desk shielded his activities from view. He reached out and took several tissues out of the box on the

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desk. After cleaning himself and tossing the used tissues in the trash bin, Zane zipped up. What the hell was he gonna do with temptation sleeping only a few doors down?

* * * *

Zane was in the kitchen fixing a midnight snack when he heard the ranch truck pull up. He still didn't like the thought of Ray driving himself to and from the bar after drinking all night, but they'd agreed it wouldn't fit with the bad-boy image he was projecting to the townspeople if he had a designated driver.

When the truck engine shut off and Ray didn't walk through the door, Zane became concerned. More than once over the previous two weeks, he'd been astonished his brother had made it home alive.

Going to the back door, Zane stepped out onto the porch. Ray was sitting in the dirt with his head cradled in his hands. "You okay?" Zane asked.

"Drunk. Hurt," Ray slurred.

With an inward sigh, Zane walked down the steps to Ray's side. "Let me help you into the house."

Surprisingly, Ray offered no resistance as Zane helped him to his feet. From the limited light cast by the security lamp, it appeared Ray had been in yet another fight. God Zane hated this. He knew Ray was intentionally putting himself in danger to help save the Lazy C Bar.

Helping Ray up the steps, Zane led him to the upstairs bathroom. "Let me put something on those cuts," he instructed, looking down at Ray's bloody knuckles. He barely

had time to put the seat down on the toilet before Ray plopped down and held out his hand.

Zane dug out the first aid kit. "This'll sting," he apologized, before dabbing the bloodied knuckles with alcohol. Ray hissed in pain as the medicine did its job. "I'm sorry," Zane offered. He wanted to kiss the raw looking flesh, but better judgment prevailed.

"How long will this go on until someone makes a move?" Zane asked.

Ray shrugged. "No tellin'. It's okay."

"No, it's not, not at all," Zane berated himself. Why had he done it? How could he love Ray and still agree to put him in danger?

With the bandages in place, Zane helped Ray stand once again. "Let's pour you into bed."

"I'd like that," Ray mumbled.

Zane tried to block out the double meaning. He knew Ray still found him attractive. It was evident in the way Ray's eyes seem to follow him whenever they spent time together. The only thing that held Zane back was fear. He really knew very little about Ray since he'd left the Lazy C Bar. What if Ray didn't believe in monogamy? Where would Zane be if he slept with Ray only to be cast aside when their situation on the ranch was resolved? No. Zane knew it would kill him. Better to not have Ray at all than to have him and lose him.

Helping Ray out of his boots, Zane got the younger man into bed. "Sleep it off, brother. Tomorrow's a new day."

Ray said something Zane couldn't make out before rolling over and dropping passing out. Zane stood over Ray for

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several moments and watched the gorgeous man sleep. When a healthy snore sounded in the room, Zane took a chance and sat on the bed next to Ray's hip.

This had become the routine. Ray would arrive home drunk and bloody, and Zane would patch him up and put him to bed. On several occasions, like tonight, Ray had been so far gone Zane had allowed himself to touch the man he loved.

Stretching out behind Ray, Zane spooned his body against the bigger man's heat. He buried his nose in the long strands of Ray's hair and inhaled. Despite the thick smell of cigarette smoke, Zane could smell the citrus shampoo Ray preferred.

Taking a huge chance, Zane burrowed his face to the tattooed skin of Ray's neck. He peppered several kisses along the sun-weathered flesh before retreating. Getting back to his feet, Zane reached down and ran his hand down Ray's jaw. "I love you," he whispered. "Sleep well."

* * * *

A week later, Ray wasn't any closer to finding the rustlers. He'd played his part to the hilt. Getting drunk in town almost every night and picking fights with the local cowboys. He had made it known to anyone who would listen that Zane Conner needed to be taken down a peg or two, but so far nothing.

The early evenings spent inside the house with Zane were worth every bloody knuckle and hangover. They talked about everything from the ranch to his military career. Zane talked about the pressures of running a successful cattle business. Ray discovered that Zane's father had passed away while Zane was in his first year of college. He was left little choice

but to quit and return home to run the ranch that had been in his family for generations. Marty never talked about her deceased husband and Ray never wanted to rock the boat.

Zane was finally opening up to Ray, letting him see the man beneath the surly demeanor. Ray fell more in love with him every day. When Zane let his guard down long enough, Ray learned he was a very sensitive man.

Ray kissed Lupe on the cheek as he sat down to dinner. "Smells good."

She put her fists on her rounded hips and glared at him. "I heard you've been in town bad mouthing Zane and picking fights."

Ray closed his eyes and put his head down. He knew this was coming. He didn't want to blow his cover by divulging the truth to Lupe, so he kept his mouth shut.

"He's doing what I asked him to do."

Ray's head shot up at the deep gravelly voice coming from the doorway.

Zane strode toward the table and gave the old woman a kiss on the cheek. "It's why I wanted him here." He took off his straw cowboy hat and set it on the chair next to him. "Ray's trying to get someone to approach him from the rustling outfit. We figured they'd see an inside man as a bonus to their operation."

Lupe eyed the two men. "I hope you both know what you're doing. I'll play along with your plan, but I'll not have nosy neighbors calling to talk bad about Ray."

Ray stood and gave the old woman a hug. "Thank you."

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Lupe grinned and pushed him back into his chair. "Well I knew there had to be more to the story. I know your feelings for Zane, young man, and I knew there was no way you could be out to get him." She disappeared back into the kitchen, shaking her head and muttering to herself.

Ray looked over at Zane as he filled his plate with gooey chicken and cheese enchiladas. "I'm surprised you told her the truth."

Zane was still staring at the swinging kitchen door. "She loves you, Ray. I didn't want to take the chance of lowering you in her eyes." He swung his gaze to Ray. "What did she mean about knowing your feelings for me?"

Ray finished chewing the bite he had in his mouth. He took a long drink of his iced tea, trying to buy himself some time. Should he shrug off the comment or tell Zane the truth? Well maybe he could tell him half the truth.

"I've loved you for years, you know that. Apparently so does Lupe." He didn't meet Zane's eyes as he said it. He scooped up another fork of his dinner and chewed slowly, afraid the food would stick in his throat.

Zane said nothing. He rose from his chair and walked out of the dining room, hat in hand.

"Fuck." Ray dropped his fork on his plate, no longer hungry.

* * * *

Later that night, Ray let himself into the house. It was almost two a.m. and all he'd gotten was a proposition from one of the waitresses down at Lucky's. He didn't bother

turning the light on as he made his way toward his bedroom. As he passed Zane's study, he heard noises. Ray knocked once on the door and opened it only to find Zane sprawled out on the red leather sofa shirtless.

"Zane? Is somethin' wrong?" He approached the sofa cautiously, not sure whether he'd be welcome or not. He tried like hell not to drool at the sculpted, bronzed chest in front of him.

Zane's head jerked up at his voice. He set down the glass of whiskey he was holding. "I didn't hear you come in. Any luck tonight?"

Ray shook his head and sat down on the coffee table facing Zane. "Waitress tried to fondle me to death, but that's it." He looked closely at Zane. "You been in here drinkin' all night?" He didn't think he'd ever seen Zane drunk.

Zane shook his head. "Naw. I rode Bellamy for a couple hours. Came back and tried to work on the books, but it was no use, so I thought a drink or two might help while I waited for you to come home." He picked up the half empty bottle of whiskey. "Seems I've had more than one or two though."

"I'm sorry if I pissed you off. I just couldn't lie about it anymore." Ray stood and took the bottle from the table and put it back on the mini-bar. "Why don't you try to get some sleep. Five o'clock is only three hours away."

Zane looked at him for a few seconds. "Why do you still love me after all I've done to you?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Ray sat on the table again. "Can't help it" He clasped his hands on his knees and looked down. "When I first came here you were my hero. You helped mom

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... Marty, nurse me back to health. I'd never known a man could be so gentle." Ray sighed, "As I grew older my feelings changed. I knew you'd never feel the same way, but it never stopped me. Then one day something changed between us, and you started pushing me away. I thought you'd finally figured out how much I loved you and were disgusted with me.

"When I came back for Marty's funeral I misread a few things and made a total ass out of myself. I'm sorry about that by the way. You had every right to kick me off the ranch, so how could I hate you for it?"

Ray didn't get any further in his explanation. The next thing he knew, Zane had him by the front of his shirt, kissing him.

Ray jerked back and looked into Zane's eyes. "What the..."

Zane tried to pull Ray back towards him. "You didn't misread anything, Raven." He kissed Ray again, parting his lips to delve inside.

Zane started to pull him deeper into the kiss, but Ray needed answers first. Breaking away, Ray looked into Zane's glistening eyes. "Then why did you send me away?"

"I'm your brother for Christ's sake. That's why I couldn't let myself love you the way I wanted to. That's why I pushed you away after that day we went skinny dipping. Didn't you notice that it took me a long time to come out of the water that day? I had a hard-on the size of Texas."

Zane ran his hands through his thick black and silver hair. "I was ashamed of myself. I felt dirty and perverted. What

kind of man gets an erection from seeing his little brother's cock?"

Ray took Zane's hands in his. "You keep forgetting that I'm not really your little brother. I'm the charity case your mom brought home one day."

"No! You were never a charity case to us. We both wanted you here. We both loved you like a part of the family. But you'd worked so hard to build a relationship with people from town. How could I jeopardize that? Do you have any idea what people would've said if they'd known my feelings for you?"

Ray framed Zane's face with his palms. "Whether it's right or wrong. Whether we're brothers or not. I still love you."

Zane swallowed and closed his eyes. "Just shut up and kiss me again."

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Chapter Two

Zane pulled Ray onto the sofa beside him and poured all his long hidden passion into the kiss. The deeper into Ray's mouth he thrust his tongue, the more Ray accepted it. He needed to feel Ray's skin.

He pulled back from the kiss just enough to speak against Ray's lips. "Want to feel you."

Ray sat up and started unbuttoning his shirt and stopped. He looked into Zane's eyes and cleared his throat. "Um ... before I take this off, you need to know a few things. After you kicked me off the ranch I went a little crazy."

Zane wrapped his arms back around Ray and put his forehead on Ray's shoulder. "I'm sorry." The years after that night had been excruciating for Zane, but he'd assumed Ray would simply pick himself up and move on. Even the thought of Ray hurting for more time than it had taken to pack and get off the ranch killed Zane.

Ray shook his head. "When I got back to the service I signed up for the Green Berets. Without you I didn't have anything to live for, so I took the most dangerous missions I could find. I rose quickly through the ranks until the FBI approached me to work for them. The first assignment I was given was the job I'm currently committed to in El Paso. I've been working as a bartender for the past two years in a rough gay bar called the Sluggish Lizard. The whole lifestyle seemed to fit me perfectly. I've been so angry with myself for the past seven years that I really became a part of the world I was

thrust into. I've acquired quite of few tattoos and piercings over the past two years."

Ray started to unbutton his shirt. "I wanted to tell you so you don't freak out when you see them."

Zane put his hands over the top of Ray's and gently took over the unbuttoning. Zane couldn't imagine what had Ray so embarrassed. He'd already seen the tattoo on his neck and the ones circling each bicep. As the shirt parted, Zane followed the path of skin visible with his lips. When all the buttons were unfastened Zane gave one last kiss to Ray's lower stomach and sat up again to remove the shirt.

He opened the shirt further and pulled it off Ray's shoulders before giving the chest in front of him his full attention. What he saw took his breath away. Both nipples held small gold hoops, but that wasn't what made him almost swallow his tongue. Right above Ray's heart the name Zane was tattooed.

Zane touched the intricate scroll work that spelled out his name. He leaned down and kissed the tattoo. Sitting up, he looked into Ray's eyes. "Why?"

Ray shrugged, "You own my heart. You always have. I thought it fitting to have your name there so anyone who saw it would realize that my heart was already taken."

Zane closed his eyes to keep the tears at bay at the pain he could hear in Ray's statement. He felt like kicking himself. From the sound of it, they'd both paid for Zane's decision the night of his mom's funeral. How would he ever be able to make it up to Ray? "Is that all of them?" Zane whispered.

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Shaking his head, Ray turned around. A large portion of his back was also inked, covering most of the scars he'd received at the age of thirteen. The tattoo on his back was of two horses fucking. Ray looked over his shoulder at Zane. He must have seen the question in his eyes.

"Look closer."

Zane studied the two horses. He started chuckling and bit Ray's shoulder. "You have a tattoo of two stallions fucking on your back? What did the artist think of that?"

Ray turned back around and pulled Zane into his arms. He gave him a sheepish grin. "He asked me out." At Zane's raised eyebrow, he shook his head. "I don't want to talk about past one-night stands with you."

Zane licked his lips. No. He definitely didn't want to discuss the nameless men he'd sucked off and fucked in back rooms of dingy bars. "I won't ask about yours as long as you don't ask about mine." Zane bent his head and took one of the pierced nipples into his mouth. He sucked on the beaded nub and pulled the hoop with his tongue. At Ray's groan of pleasure, he stopped and looked back up at him. He stood and held out his hand. "Please let me love you tonight?"

Ray took his hand and stood. "I've waited over ten years to hear you say that."

Zane led Ray into the master bedroom and back into his embrace. He licked around the Aztec tattoo on his neck. "I like the tattoos. They make you even sexier." Zane worked his tongue up the side of Ray's face and then over to his parted lips.

Ray moaned into the kiss and grabbed Zane's ass, pulling him against his erection. The delicious feel of the hard ridge threatened Zane's control. Rubbing side to side, Ray broke the kiss and bit Zane's shoulder again. He was quickly developing a new fetish. There was just something erotic about Ray's flesh between his teeth.

Ray ran his hand down Zane's chest to cup his cock. "Damn you feel good but I need a shower. I smell like Lucky's." He squeezed Zane's cock a little harder, running his palm up and down the length trapped behind the denim.

Zane moaned and slipped the buttons loose on Ray's jeans. "Wanna feel you skin to skin."

Ray's swollen cock sprang free of his jeans and he thrust into Zane's hand. "Shower with me."

"I've got a better idea. Let's stroke each other off and take a nice soothing bath." Zane had Ray's cock in his hand while the other hand snaked down the back of Ray's jeans. Running his finger down the crease of Ray's ass, he moaned as Ray finally fished Zane's cock out and began pumping it.

As Zane began to insert his finger into Ray's puckered hole, Ray tensed and started to pull away. Zane looked at him in question. "Sorry. I thought it's what we both wanted." He dropped his arms from around Ray.

Ray pulled him into his arms tighter and kissed him. "It is what I want. It's just that I've never let anyone touch me there before. I've always been strictly a top."

"Never?"

Ray shook his head. "I've never trusted anyone enough to submit."

Zane kissed him again and petted his cheek. He wondered how much his betrayal played into Ray's attitude about trust. He looked into Ray's eyes trying to read his emotions. "Does that include me too?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Ray rested his head against Zane's. "I don't know yet. Can you give me a little time to get comfortable with the idea?"

"We've got the rest of our lives to get comfortable with each other." Zane realized he may have spoken out of turn. "Shit. I'm making assumptions about the future that I've no right to make. I'm sorry."

Ray kissed Zane's closed eyes. "Let's take it one day at a time for now. I don't mean to be difficult, and you already know how much I love you, but trust doesn't come easy for me. It'll take time."

"Whatever you need, Raven."

At Ray's raised brow, Zane kissed his nose. "I know you go by Ray now, but Raven's the man I fell in love with all those years ago. That's the name I've called out almost nightly as I'm coming into my own hand. You're my Raven."

Ray fisted the back of Zane's hair and pulled him into a deep kiss. He drew Zane's tongue into his own mouth and sucked. Ray pushed Zane's jeans to the floor.

Rubbing his erection against Zane's, Ray broke the kiss. "You feel good. Been waiting so long."

Zane reached down and fisted Ray's length. Running his hand over the head, Zane stopped. "What the fuck is that?"

Ray smiled. "My pride and joy."

Zane rolled his eyes. "I'm not talking about this huge log you call a dick. I'm talking about the barbell stuck through it."

Ray started laughing and took Zane's face in his hands. "Just wait 'til you feel it deep inside your ass."

"Oh fuck. I think I'm gonna come just thinking about it." He lowered himself to his knees for a closer inspection. Ray's cock was huge, but he already knew that. He'd witnessed the beautiful dick ten years ago, but he'd grown since then and the curved-looking barbell was hotter than hell.

He licked the head before wrapping his lips around the mushroom shaped head. The clink of the metal against his teeth was definitely a new sensation. Pulling off, he licked his lips. "I've heard about Prince Alberts, but I've never seen one in person. Did it hurt?" Zane went back to playing with the cold piece of jewelry with his tongue.

Ray appeared a little dazed. He cleared his throat and shook his head. "It wasn't too bad really. Well worth the pain." He shoved his cock toward Zane's mouth. "Put your mouth on me again."

Zane happily obliged, taking the cock into his fist and swallowing the head. He tried to take Ray's cock deeper but it was just too thick. He settled for rimming him with one hand and playing with his balls with the other as his mouth worked on the head. He must have been doing something right because Ray started moaning.

Ray grabbed Zane's thick hair and pulled him back. "No. I'm gonna come."

Zane shook his head. "Don't care. Come all you want." He tried to latch back on, but Ray pulled him back again.

"I won't come in your mouth until we're both tested."

Zane pulled back and stood up. He continued to stroke and fondle Ray's cock as the bigger man returned the favor.

Ray put his finger to Zane's lips. For a working man, the pads of Ray's fingers were surprisingly soft. Zane sucked them inside his mouth, nursing on them as he'd done Ray's cock earlier. He ran his tongue between the digits, scraping his teeth against the tender flesh. *Yeah, definitely a new fetish.*

Ray pulled the two fingers out of Zane's mouth and reached behind him to rub his puckered hole.

Zane wasn't sure if it was the actual sensation of Ray touching his hole, or the idea that he was finally in the position to enjoy it, but he needed more. Zane threw his head back. "Deeper ... shit that feels good." Ray shoved first one then both fingers deep into his ass. Zane yelled the same name he'd shouted for years as he came into Ray's fist.

"Oh fuck that's sexy." Ray thrust into Zane's hand two more times and spilled his seed. Both men fell sideways and landed on the bed wrapped in each other's arms. They held each other while trying to get their breathing under control.

Zane was almost asleep when Ray pulled himself up and off the bed. He lifted his head, enjoying the view of Raven's tight ass walking towards the bathroom. Seconds later, Ray was back with a warm wash cloth. Zane delighted in the way Ray gently cleaned the drying come from his torso.

"Go to sleep," Raven said. "I'm gonna take a quick shower."

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by Carol Lynne

Zane nodded. Between the long day on the ranch, the whiskey and the loving, he was wiped.

He woke when a clean smelling Ray spooned up behind him under the covers. Zane drifted back to sleep in the arms of the only man he'd ever loved.

* * * *

At five o'clock, the alarm went off, jerking Zane out of a pleasant dream. He reached over and hit the snooze button. Raven barely moved.

Zane turned over to look at the man in front of him. Ray had changed so much in the past seven years. His skin was still the bronze color of his Native American mother. His nose long and straight, shaped like an arrow where his nostrils flared. With his hair long, no one would ever guess his father was white, until he opened those amazing eyes. Raven's eyes were the color of pine needles in the spring.

Zane's gaze ran down to the tattoo on his lover's chest. He couldn't resist leaning over and running his tongue around the scroll work of his name again. Despite everything that he'd said and done in the past, Raven still loved him.

He glanced up and found Raven looking at him with love in his eyes. "Good morning, baby," Zane said. "I've gotta get up. We're fixing fences this morning."

Raven ran his hand down the side of Zane's body until it rested on his bare ass. He gave a gentle squeeze. "Tell me this is real?"

"It's real."

"Tell me that you love me."

In for a Penny
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"I love you." Zane leaned in and kissed his new lover. "I hate that we can't be together the way I want right now, but you've worked so hard on your cover. If we start kissing and fondling each other in public, it'll screw everything up."

Raven kissed him again and ran his hand over Zane's ass. "I'll continue to bad talk you, and you'll continue to treat me like shit until I find whoever killed that boy. At night, though, you're mine."

The possessive tone to Raven's voice gave Zane some much needed confidence that everything would work out between them.

The alarm went off again and Zane reached over and turned it off. "As much as I'd love to stay right here with you, the hands will come looking for me anytime. I'm never in bed past five, and I'm always waiting on the porch for them at five-thirty." He kissed Raven once more and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

After his shower, he walked back into the bedroom wrapped in a towel. Raven was leaning against the headboard looking sexy as hell. Zane went to his dresser and pulled out a pair of white boxer-briefs.

He dropped the towel and gave Raven a quick smile as he put on his underwear. "So what's on your agenda for the day?"

Raven ran his hand over his erection, stopping to swipe the pre-come with his thumb. He gazed at Zane through heavy lidded eyes. "Thought maybe I'd go into the city and look for a used Harley. If I'm going to be here awhile, I'd like my own wheels."

Zane paused in the act of pulling on his jeans. "Oh you're *going* to be here a while if I have anything to say about it, but don't you think a motorcycle is a little dangerous for a man that spends every evening at the bar?"

Raven winked at him and continued stroking his morning wood. "There's an art to making people think you're drinking a lot when you're really not." He chuckled, "Top secret FBI training stuff."

Licking his lips at the sight of the enormous erection in his hand, Zane started walking toward Ray. He couldn't help but to wonder if Ray had really been drunk all those nights Zane had cleaned him up and poured him into bed. "Just be careful." He sat down and looked at Ray's cock. "I'll go get tested again today if it'll get that fat thing back into my mouth sooner," he proclaimed, leaning down to tease the head of Raven's cock with his lips.

Raven laughed and slapped Zane across the face with the huge prick. "I was just thinking the same thing. I'll stop by the health clinic while I'm in the city. Do you have time to go into town?"

Zane swiped the head with his tongue and groaned. God, as good as the pre-come tasted on his tongue, he couldn't imagine anything better than having a mouth full of Ray's come. "I'll make the time." He lifted his face to Raven's and kissed him. "See ya at dinner?"

"Hell yeah."

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Chapter Three

Pulling up to Lucky's on his used midnight blue Harley, Ray carefully scoped the area. It looked to be a typical night at the only bar in town. Ranch trucks filled more than half of the parking lot. Ray figured at least one of Zane's wranglers would be on hand to report back to their boss on his bad behavior.

Nodding as he passed several people in the parking lot, Ray made a mental note of their faces. One thing he'd learned in his years undercover was remember every detail in the most innocent of locations. The rule had served him well over the years.

Opening the door, he was hit by a wall of heavy fog. Damn, he was tired of smoky bars. He walked straight to the bar and ordered a shot of whiskey. John, the bartender, handed him the drink warily.

The fact that his hard earned reputation in town was now trashed wasn't as important as the job he'd yet to finish. He hoped Zane was right and the friends he'd come to know over the years would forgive him once the whole mess was over.

Ray headed for his usual table in the back. He sat down and waited for Tammy, the server, to stop by and flirt. Just like clockwork, the little blonde be bopped over to his table.

"Hey, gorgeous, you want the usual?"

Ray gave her his best wolf grin and nodded his head. As she walked toward the bar, he noticed the extra swing to her step. He shook his head and chuckled to himself. She

returned with a bottle of whiskey and a cup of coffee. He paid her and stuffed a nice tip between her breasts, making sure to give her a little squeeze in the process. Even though it did absolutely nothing for him, it was easier to get information out of a lust filled woman.

After Tammy licked her lips in an obscene fashion, she walked off to help another table. Ray stood and took his bottle with him to the restroom. After scouting the small room to make sure it was empty, Ray dumped the majority of his whiskey down the toilet. He filled the bottle three quarters full of water and headed back to his table.

Resuming his seat, Ray took a drink of his coffee. Without swallowing, he picked up the bottle of whiskey and spit the coffee into the too light liquid. After repeating the step several times, the color of the whiskey looked about right. Ray drank his shot and refilled his glass from the weakened bottle.

He hadn't always watered down his liquor, but nowadays he had better things to do when he got home than puke and pass out.

The longer he sat there, the more he sprawled back into his chair. He watched people coming and going for almost two hours before he spotted someone of interest. "What the hell..."

Zane walked into the bar and looked around. Spotting him, he walked toward Ray with a scowl on his face, pushing people aside who got in his way.

Ray tried his best to read his lover. What the hell was he doing here? He decided to go with it, figuring Zane must have

a plan. Ray put his feet up on the table with his ankles crossed and picked up the bottle of whiskey.

By the time Zane reached him, every eye in the bar was on the two men getting ready to square off. Zane walked right up to Ray and winked as he pushed his feet off the table. "What the hell are you doin' in here again? I thought I told you this morning that if you were gonna live in my house there would be no more drinking."

Ray slammed the bottle down on the table and slowly stood. He took a step, putting him mere inches from Zane. "And I believe I told you to go fuck yourself. Marty told me I had a room at the Lazy C Bar as long as I wanted one. It's not up to you, you bastard." He leaned in until his chest bumped Zane's.

"And just in case you haven't noticed I'm not a damn kid anymore that you can order around. I'll do what I want, when I want, and you've got nothin' to say about it," Ray added.

Zane pushed him back. Playing the drunk to the hilt, Ray fell back over his chair onto the floor. "You're a sorry piece of shit, Black. A fucking lousy drunk just like your old man." He leaned over Ray and pointed his finger in his face. "Sleep at the house if you want, but stay the hell out of my way. I don't wanna see you at my supper table again."

Ray jumped up and threw a punch. Ray hated like hell to do it, but Zane was the one that came up with this crazy new plot twist. Ray had worked too damn hard on his tough reputation to not hit a man that talked to him like that. He tried to make the punch look as real as possible while doing as little damage as he could. His fist skimmed Zane's right

cheek bone and Zane snapped his head to the side. Damn, they really were good together.

"Get the fuck out of here. This is my place. Go home to your big fancy house and count your fuckin' money," Ray spat, weaving just a little to add to the effect.

Zane gave him one last look and stomped out of the bar. Ray pulled his chair upright and sat back down. Tammy came running over as soon as Zane walked out the door.

She grabbed his hand and looked at his knuckles. "Oh God, sugar, are you alright?"

Ray smiled, "Yeah, but I'd be even better if I could fix that SOB brother of mine." He said the statement as loud as he dared, hoping the right people would hear.

"Would you like some more whiskey?" Tammy leaned over him shoving her giant breasts in his face.

"No. I've got some thinkin' to do. Bring me another cup of coffee."

After Tammy brought his coffee, he sat back in his chair and watched the crowd. With all the excitement over, they resumed their own conversations and pool games. About a half hour later Pete Smithers sat down at the next table.

"Wow, quite a little scene with your brother, Black."

Ray turned his head slightly toward the tall, skinny man. "What's it to you?"

"Just wonderin' if you really hate each other as much as it seems?" Pete took a pull off his beer bottle and waited for Ray to answer.

"That fucker's always treated me like dirt. When Marty was alive she wouldn't let him get away with it, but she's gone

now and he thinks his shit don't stink." Ray slammed his empty coffee cup down on the table.

Pete rubbed his jaw. "Workin' anywhere?"

"Hell no. No one in this town will give me the time of day anymore. You say a couple bad things about the "Golden Boy" and everyone turns their back on ya."

Pete nodded, "Well I might have somethin' for you. I need to talk with a couple of people first, but if you'll meet me back here tomorrow night, I'll let you know for sure."

"Sounds good. The quicker I can make some money, the faster I can get out of that shit heads house."

Pete stood and looked at him a minute. He nodded toward the door. "That your Harley I saw parked outside? I'd think a man desperate for money wouldn't be buying expensive bikes."

Ray stood up nose to nose with Pete. "Marty left me some money and told me to spend it on something I wanted, not something I needed. Now that I have my own transportation, I can take off when I'm ready." He narrowed his eyes. "You got a problem with that, Pete?"

Shaking his head, Pete took a step back and held up his hands. "No problem here. I'll see ya tomorrow night."

Ray watched Pete leave. Why hadn't he guessed it before? Pete had always been a dirty scoundrel willing to do just about anything to make money besides actually getting a job and working for it.

Smiling to himself, he finished off his coffee. With any luck, Pete would be put to work inside a prison before long.

* * * *

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

Ray left Lucky's two hours later. He arrived home to find the entire house dark, Zane evidently already upstairs. Smiling to himself, Ray stopped by the kitchen and took a bag of frozen peas out of the freezer and headed for Zane's bedroom.

He set the peas down on the dresser as he took off his clothes. Slipping into the bathroom, he took a quick shower to wash the stink off him and grabbed the peas on the way to bed.

Ray lifted the sheet and slid in next to Zane.

Zane moaned and opened his eyes. "What time is it?"

Ray put the bag of peas on Zane's bruised cheek and kissed him. "It's only midnight. Couldn't stay at Lucky's any longer. I needed to get home and see how you were."

Zane pulled him into his arms. "I'm fine, but I've been kicking myself for the comment I made to you about your dad. I'm sorry about that."

Ray ran his hand down the side of Zane's face. "I know you didn't mean it. What the hell was that all about anyway? Why didn't you tell me you were going to come into Lucky's?"

Zane leaned in and ran his tongue over Ray's lips. "I didn't think of it until after you left. I figured it might help get the ball rolling. Sorry if I messed up your plan."

Ray smiled. "You didn't mess up anything. As a matter of fact, Pete Smithers says he might have a job for me. He's gonna talk to some people and meet me back at the bar tomorrow night." He kissed Zane, chewing on his lips a little as he did so. "You did good."

Zane pulled him even closer. Ray wrapped his leg up over the top of Zane's hip so their cocks rubbed together.

"You get tested today?" Zane asked.

Ray nodded. "Sure as hell did. You?"

"Yep, should have the results in a couple days."

Ray reached over to Zane's bedside drawer and took out a box of condoms. "In the meantime, I bought these. They're stronger than the regular ones. Don't want to take a chance that my PA will bust through the cheap ones."

Zane groaned and ran his tongue down the side of Ray's face to his neck. He stopped at the tattoo and sucked. "Care if I mark you as mine?"

Ray tilted his head back and pulled Zane on top of him. "Do it."

Zane bent his head and licked the tattoo once more before latching on. He pulled the skin into his mouth and sucked. The feeling was unbelievable and Ray began thrusting his cock upward. Zane ground his cock against Ray's and pulled off his neck, but not before sinking his teeth into Ray's flesh. His lover sure liked to bite. Ray didn't know if he'd ever known a guy with that particular kink.

Zane continued a path down Ray's neck to his chest, sucking up marks over both nipples and his "Zane" tattoo.

Ray held on to Zane's thick hair as his lover continued a path downward. Zane stopped just below Ray's bellybutton. Ray glanced down and saw Zane staring at his hairless groin. Zane swiped his tongue along the base of Ray's cock and groaned. Staring up at Ray, he licked the length of his

heavily-veined shaft. "Tell me you're clean so I can suck this monster down my throat."

Ray could tell by the expression on Zane's face that he was asking for more than what he'd voiced. Zane was looking for a sign that Ray trusted him. Something Ray had given very few people in his life. When he stopped and asked himself if he did indeed trust his lover, the answer was yes. Whatever reasons Zane had for pushing him away seven years ago had nothing to do with the present.

Ray groaned and thrust his cock toward Zane's open mouth. "What happened to waiting until the results come back?"

Zane licked his lips. "I don't know if I've ever wanted anything in my life more than I want your cum down my throat at this moment. I'll trust you if you tell me you're clean."

Ray knew he was clean beyond a doubt. He simply couldn't believe Zane was so incredibly trusting of him. "I'd better be clean. Never even had a blow job without a condom." He pet Zane's hair. "Go ahead and taste me, but we're still not fucking without a condom until our tests come back."

Zane waggled his eye brows and went to work, starting with Ray's Prince Albert. He rolled the piece of steel around with his tongue before he slowly engulfed Ray's crown.

Ray rolled his head from side to side and arched his body upward. "Oh fuck that feels good. Never want a condom again."

"Fuck ... gonna ... OH Fuck," he shouted as he pumped seed down Zane's throat.

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Zane lapped every drop and stuck his tongue in Ray's slit searching for more. Ray pulled Zane up and took his mouth in a passionate kiss. Tasting himself on a lover for the first time, Ray couldn't get his tongue deep enough to satisfy his overwhelming hunger. The kiss was more than a physical act, it became almost spiritual for him.

Ray realized he'd shot his load and they'd have to wait a few more minutes before he could fuck Zane. "That was fantastic." He raised his eyebrow at the older man. "Just how much practice have you had?"

Laughing, Zane swatted the side of Ray's ass. "Believe it or not, that was my first time without a condom in the way too. Usually I get my needs met in the restroom at the bar I go to in Tucson or in the alley." He looked Ray in the eye, serious all the sudden. "Never had anyone to call my own before you. Never wanted anyone but you."

Running his hands over his man's body, Ray stopped and ran his finger down Zane's crease to the tight puckered hole. "From now on this is mine." He licked the side of Zane's face. "And I plan on fucking it every chance I get."

"Yours," Zane agreed.

His lover's breathing began to even out and Ray knew he'd have to wait for the fucking he'd been looking forward to.

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Chapter Four

Before Ray walked into the bar, he wiped the sappy smile from his face. He was supposed to be an angry bad-ass. The goofy grin of a man in love would definitely blow his cover.

To get into character, Ray thought of his childhood. The abuse he'd suffered at the hands of his father would make anyone grow into a mean sonofabitch. Ray knew Marty had saved his life in more ways than one. He only wished more abused kids had the same shot at a normal life.

Shaking off his depressing thoughts, Ray ran his fingers through his hair several times before climbing off his bike. He entered the bar and looked around for Pete. He spotted the wiry greasy-looking guy at a table in the back. *Showtime*.

Not wanting to seem too eager, Ray stopped at the bar. "Just give me whatever dark beer you have on tap," he said, and threw a couple of dollars in front of him.

Glass in hand, Ray walked over to Pete's table. He took several gulps of his beer while Pete talked on his cell phone. When Pete hung up, Ray gestured to one of the chairs. The other man nodded and Ray swung the chair around backward before straddling it. "Talk to your boss?"

Pete set the phone on the table and picked up a glass of whiskey, Ray presumed. "Yeah." Pete's eyes narrowed as he seemed to study Ray. "How bad do you want to get back at your brother?"

"Zane's not my brother. There's no blood between us. And damned if he hasn't reminded me of that fact since I went to live at the Lazy C Bar."

"Why do you hate him so much?" Pete asked.

"That's my business," Ray snapped. He knew if he got pulled into a conversation about Zane, his true feelings would show through.

Pete studied him for a few more moments before nodding. "You ever killed a cow?"

"Nope."

"Want to?" Pete asked, chuckling like a loon.

"I take it we're talking about one of Zane's." Ray's gut clenched at the thought of killing something of Zane's.

"Not one. I'm talking enough for him to really notice."

"How many?" Ray asked in a board tone.

"Oh, let's say ... ten."

Ten? Holy fuck. "When?"

"I got word that the Lazy C Bar is moving cattle in the morning to the holding pen. A semi will be there by evening to pick them up to be shipped off to a feed lot." Pete leaned his arms on the table and stared at Ray. "I want ten of them dead before the semi ever arrives."

Ray slammed his glass down on the table. "How the hell am I supposed to do that in broad daylight?"

"That's your problem," Pete said, sitting back in his chair.

Ray had to use every ounce of self-control not to jump up and dump the smug little bastard on his ass. He ran through several scenarios in his head before nodding. "Consider it done."

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

Now he just had to figure out how to tell Zane he would soon be ten cows down. Finishing his beer, Ray stood and gave Pete one last glance. "I'm sure by this time tomorrow, word will have spread to your side of town." He grinned. Ray liked reminding Pete that despite his dirty dealings, he was still living on the wrong side of the tracks. Crime may pay, but in a town this size, it didn't pay much.

He walked toward the bar and ordered another beer. Usually he put on a show of getting drunk, but with his new job on his mind, Ray thought he might need the real thing.

Ray was three sheets to the wind when Billy, one of his brother's ranch hands, nudged his side. "I was sent to drive you home," Billy said blandly.

Even drunk it was easy to tell Billy didn't like him. Of course Ray was sure Billy had heard the gossip around town about him bad mouthing his own brother, and if he remembered right, Billy had even seen him in action a time or two. Ray didn't want to make a scene. Yes, he definitely knew he couldn't ride his Harley home. He couldn't do much good for Zane if he was locked up or dead.

Sliding off the bar stool, Ray weaved his way out of the smoke filled building. When they reached the parking lot, the cool air smacked him in the face. Ray braced his hands on the side of the ranch pickup and threw-up.

"You're disgusting," Billy said, getting into the truck.

Yeah. Ray didn't disagree with that comment. He wiped his mouth and got in. The two of them rode in silence back to the ranch. As soon as Billy parked, Ray opened the door and vomited for a second time.

In for a Penny
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Shaking his head, Billy walked off in a huff. Ray watched the younger cowboy until the darkness of the moonless night swallowed him. Stepping over the mess he'd made, Ray staggered to the porch. He was trying to get up the steps when the front door opened and a shadow fell over him.

Ray looked up at Zane and grinned. "Got kinda drunk."

"I see that," Zane replied. He walked down the stairs and put his arm around Ray. "Let's get you cleaned up before I pour you into bed."

Ray tried to nuzzle Zane's face as they made it into the house and up the flight of stairs. Grimacing, Zane pulled away. "No offence, sweetheart, but your breath stinks."

Feeling ashamed, Ray dropped his chin to his chest and tried to pull away from Zane's hold. "Now don't get stupid," Zane admonished, getting a tighter grip on Ray.

Zane led him into the bathroom and put down the toilet lid. After Ray was seated, Zane stepped back and turned on the shower. "You think you can stand long enough to get your teeth brushed and the bar smell washed off ya?"

Ray nodded. He thought he might throw up again, and the last thing he wanted was his lover in the room. "Go. I'll be fine."

"I'll go down to the kitchen and get you something for the hangover you're sure to have."

Ray watched Zane walk out and close the door behind him. Sliding to the floor, he lifted the lid and prayed this was the last of the alcohol in his stomach.

By the time Ray showered and brushed his teeth, he felt seventy-five percent better. He was still drunk, but at least he

could string two coherent sentences together. Zane was waiting for him in bed.

Licking his lips, Ray studied the perfectly sculpted chest on display. "Get those thoughts right out of your head," Zane said. "I would imagine your body wouldn't be able to keep up with your mind as drunk as you are. And we've got some talking to do."

Zane pulled back the covers and patted the bed beside him. "Come on and get in."

Ray dropped the towel from around his waist and crawled in beside Zane. "So, care to tell me what happened?" Zane asked, wrapping his arms around Ray.

"Talked to Pete. They've got a job for me, but you're not gonna like it."

Zane tilted Ray's chin up to stare him in the eyes. "Is that why you got drunk? Because of something Pete told you to do?"

"Yeah." Ray went on to tell Zane about killing the cows. "I've been over it and over it, but I can't figure a way out. Not if I want the in I've been looking for."

Zane ran his hand through his hair, scratching at his scalp. "Damn. I think I'd have tied one on after a request like that too."

"There has to be another way," Ray said. "And we've also got another problem we haven't addressed."

"What's that?" Zane questioned.

"Someone from this ranch is feeding Pete or one of his cohorts' information. How else would he know you were moving cows?"

"Fuck. I hadn't even thought of that." Zane banged his head several times against the headboard. "Okay. See what you think of this..."

* * * *

After Zane and the ranch hands left to round up the cattle, Ray took a rifle from the gun cabinet and hid it in the scrub brush surrounding a stand of trees by the loading pen. He still had major misgivings about the plan Zane had helped devise, but it seemed to be the only way to convince Pete he could get the job done.

He wandered into the kitchen and retrieved a bottle of water from the fridge. Lupe came out of the laundry room as he was leaving. "Hungry?" she asked.

"Nope." Ray held up the bottle. "Just getting something to drink. I'll probably be out most of the afternoon, so don't hold lunch."

Lupe's eyes narrowed as she put her hands on her ample hips. "What're you up to, Raven Black?"

"Nothing," he said, trying to turn away.

Lupe stepped between the back door and Ray. "Are you fighting with Zane?"

Ray sighed. He hated keeping things from the older woman. "No. I just have to do something I don't want to do." How could he explain to the sweet housekeeper that he'd been ordered to shoot cattle?

"Something that'll get you into trouble? Cause more gossip?" Lupe asked.

"Probably." Ray ran a hand through his hair. He had to keep reminding himself the cattle meant nothing compared to helping the man he loved. "Despite what happens, I need you to trust me."

Lupe nodded. "I don't care what people say as much as what they do."

Ray tried to puzzle out what the housekeeper meant by the statement. "You can trust what I say," he said, still confused.

Rolling her eyes, Lupe continued. "I'm not talking about you. I'm just worried that something will happen to either you or Zane."

Ray noticed tears forming in the lovely woman's eyes. With a half-smile, Ray pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. "I won't let anything happen to Zane. I love him more than my own life."

"That's what I'm afraid of. If something happens..."

"It won't," Ray interrupted her. He gave Lupe one more squeeze and released her. "Do me a favor and stay inside this afternoon."

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"A heart as kind as yours doesn't need to see what's going to happen." When Lupe opened her mouth to question him further, Ray shook his head. "I've already said too much. Trust me. Please."

Lupe nodded her head solemnly, before turning and leaving the kitchen. Ray exhaled and walked outside. After making sure no one was around, he quickly got into position. He retrieved the rifle, and dug the camouflage netting out of

his small pack. Finding a small depression in the ground, Ray stretched out on his stomach and threw the netting over himself. He laid the rifle on the ground and waited.

No more than an hour later, he spotted the cowboys bringing the cattle over the rise that led to the pens. Taking a deep breath, Ray picked up the rifle and got into position. As he watched the process of corralling the cattle through his site, Ray's mind flashed back to his childhood, and the day his life changed forever.

Getting off the school bus, thirteen-year-old Raven ran toward the ram-shackled house he called home. "Zeus," he yelled, looking for his best friend.

When the big German Shepard didn't come running, Raven knew there was a problem. *Zeus is always here to meet me when I get off the bus.* He sprinted toward the house and jumped over the broken porch step. Zeus was inside the house, Raven could here his loyal friend barking.

"Oh no." He opened the front door and Zeus pushed past him, out into the yard to take a pee. "How'd you get shut inside?" Raven retraced his steps. He knew Zeus was out when he'd left the house because his dog always walked with him down the long drive to meet the bus.

"Did Dad let you in, boy?" he asked, petting his dog's head.

A thought struck him. "Oh shit," he whispered. He stepped into the house and looked around. A small wet stain on the threadbare carpet in front of the door had Raven panicking. He glanced at the clock on the wall. His dad should be pulling into the drive within minutes.

Quickly going to the sink in the kitchen, Raven dug a rag out of the cabinet and wet it. He ran back to the stain and began trying to clean it before his dad found out. He knew it wouldn't matter that he hadn't left Zeus in, it was his dog and he was responsible. The offense would surely earn him a beating. He'd been bruised for less.

The sound of a truck without a muffler caught his attention. *No. No. No.* He tossed the rag into the laundry basket on the back porch and picked up a dirty towel. Ray was trying his best to dry the stain, when the front door opened, almost hitting him in the head.

Roger Black's eyes narrowed as he took in the scene. He looked from the towel in Raven's hand to the carpet. Before his dad could start yelling, Raven held up his hands. "I'm sorry, Dad. You must've let Zeus in on your way out this morning." Raven looked down at the carpet. "I'm sure he didn't mean to do it."

Without a word, Roger walked to his bedroom and returned with a rifle. The look on his dad's face told Raven he was about to lose his best friend in the world. "No, please, Dad. It wasn't Zeus's fault. Please don't kill him."

Roger opened the front door and gestured for Raven to precede him. "I'm not gonna kill that mutt. You are."

Raven knew it wasn't a hollow threat. His dad was serious. The cruel man would actually make Raven kill his own dog. Tears immediately came to his eyes. "No, please. I'll do anything you ask, but please don't make me kill Zeus."

Raven started to kneel in front of his dad to beg forgiveness, but Roger caught him by the hair and pulled him

to his feet. Shoving the rifle into Raven's hands, Roger smiled. "Life don't come with second chances, boy. You knew the rules."

"But it wasn't me," Raven tried to argue. A slap across the face silenced him. He wiped the blood from under his nose, and looked over his shoulder at Zeus. *Run. Please run.*

"Do it. The more you think about it, the harder it'll be."

Raven looked back at his dad. He actually thought about turning the rifle on his own father and ending the nightmare. The years of abuse at the hands of this tyrant had pushed Raven that far. He wondered what his dad would do if he refused his command. Would his dad beat him again? So what. If his dad felt like punching him, he was going to do it anyway, might as well take a stand.

"No," Raven finally said.

Roger's eyes opened wide as his jaw visibly clenched. "Did you just tell me no?"

Throwing his shoulders back to look his dad in the eyes, Raven nodded. "I won't kill my dog for something that was your fault." He braced himself for the blow that was sure to come.

Instead of the slap Raven expected, his dad started laughing. "Oh, boy, you have no idea what you've just done." The longer the laughter went on, the more confused Raven became.

When Roger's laughter subsided, he looked at Raven. *Oh shit.* Of all the crazed expressions he'd seen over the years, he'd never seen anything like the evil in his dad's eyes at that moment.

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

Turning away from him, his dad walked to the old barn and disappeared inside. Raven looked down the drive, wondering if he should run and take Zeus with him. Before he could make a move, Roger was back with a long hank of rope.

Raven watched silently as his dad knotted the rope around Zeus' neck and tied his dog to the bumper of the truck. "What are you gonna do?" he asked, picturing his dad dragging his beloved dog behind the truck.

Once Zeus was securely attached to the truck, his dad turned toward him. "You'll see." He reached out and grabbed Raven by the hair once more.

It was then Raven noticed the other piece of rope. "Dad?" Fresh tears ran down his face as his dad started to wrap the scratchy hemp around his throat. "No. Please," he begged, not knowing what he was in for. Would he be tied to the bumper as well?

A sudden burst of self-preservation, had Raven kicking out with his arms and legs. The forceful punch to the side of his face nearly knocked him unconscious. As his body sagged toward the ground, his dad started laughing again. "Stupid fuck," Roger spat.

With his neck secured, Roger drug Raven towards the old cottonwood at the edge of the yard. His arms were forced to hug the tree as his dad bound his wrists. "Wait right there," Roger laughed and headed back to the barn.

Raven looked over at Zeus who was going crazy trying to free himself from the bumper. He looked into his best friends eyes, wondering if they were about to share the same fate. Zeus was the only one who'd ever loved him, so in Raven's

eyes it was fitting they should die together. He should have run off like his momma had done when he was nothing but a baby.

The first lash of the bullwhip across his back surprised a scream out of him. Raven clamped his mouth shut, refusing to instigate any more laughter from his father. As his dad continued to shred his back, Raven swallowed the bile that rose in his throat. Showing weakness wasn't an option, his dad fed on fear, Raven had learned that the hard way. The longer the beating continued, the more Raven welcomed death. Anything had to be better than the life he'd been forced to live.

He tried to focus on Zeus instead of the sticky warmth he felt running down his back as the whipping continued. Feeling weak, Raven's knees buckled, the scrape of the tree on his chest was nothing compared to the pain of his back.

"Oh no you don't," Roger yelled.

Several punches to Raven's side and face, and Roger had him standing once again. "You've still got a job to do," Roger said, untying Raven's wrists.

The rifle was placed in his hands, and all Raven could think about was blowing a hole through his own father. His dad must have seen the hatred in Raven's eyes. Roger gave him a wry smile. "You don't really think I'm that stupid, do you?"

Standing behind him, his dad made sure to rub against the torn flesh as he held Raven's hands to the rifle. Raven closed his eyes and turned his head as his finger was placed over the trigger and squeezed. The sound and kick of the rifle caused

Raven to vomit all over himself and the gun used to kill his best friend.

"Look at what you did," his dad said in his ear.

The rifle was taken from his hands, and Raven fell to the ground refusing to look at Zeus. He curled into a ball and waited for the second shot that would end his misery. As he lay there, he could feel the blood running in rivers down his back. Maybe he'd get lucky and die from blood loss before his dad had a chance to shoot him.

A grunt from his dad got Raven's attention. He opened his eyes in time to see his dad walking towards the road with Zeus in his arms. *What?* When his dad was half-way down the drive, Raven managed to get to his feet. Despite everything, his body had the will to live, even if his mind didn't.

On pure adrenaline, Raven made it to the tree-line at the edge of the property. As he looked toward his dad for the last time, he saw Roger throw Zeus into the middle of the road. *You sick sonofabitch.*

His need to make his dad pay for what he'd done took over, and Raven ran into the woods, despite his weakened condition.

* * * *

A shout from one of the Lazy C Bar wranglers, brought Ray out of his memory. He was surprised to find his face wet and his eyes blurry. Taking the time to dry his tears, Ray looked through the site once more. *You've got a job to do. Just do it.*

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Chapter Five

Zane found Ray curled up on the floor of the shower. The water had obviously long ago lost its heat, and his lover's lips were blue. He turned off the spray and grabbed several towels, climbing into the granite tiled enclosure. "Ray?"

When Ray didn't acknowledge him, Zane wrapped the thick terry cloth around the shivering body. He felt like shit for Ray's apparent breakdown. It was his fault Ray was there in the first place. Hell, if he hadn't tried thinking of an excuse to get the man back on the ranch, they wouldn't be in this position. "I'm so sorry," he whispered in Ray's ear.

Ray blinked several times before looking at Zane. "I killed Zeus."

"Huh?" Zane brushed the wet strands of hair from Ray's haunted face. "Who's Zeus?"

"My best friend," Ray mumbled.

Zane shook his head trying to clear it. What was Ray telling him? No way was his lover actually capable of killing his best friend. "I don't understand. Who did you kill?"

"When I was a boy. The day Marty found me. Roger made me shoot my own dog." Ray blinked and several tears escaped under his lashes. "When I shot those cows..."

Zane felt like he'd been punched in the chest. He'd had no idea Roger had made his lover do something so horrendous. Now he understood Ray's reaction to the job and the plan Zane had helped devise. "I didn't know. God, if I'd known I

would've never let you do it." He wrapped himself around Ray, feeling moisture in his own eyes.

"How many?" Ray asked.

"Four. They're already on their way to the processor. Nothing will be wasted." Zane kissed Ray's temple. "What can I do?"

Ray shook his head. "Make me forget."

Zane nodded and helped Ray to his feet. "Let's go to bed. The sheriff is about finished anyway. Slim will answer anymore questions if he needs to."

After drying Ray's body, Zane pulled back the covers and helped him in. He undressed quickly, needing Ray as much as his lover needed him. Pulling Ray into his arms, he took his mouth in a deep kiss. Zane knew he'd never forgive himself for what he'd just put Ray through, but by god he was going to try and help the man forget.

* * * *

A knock on the door woke them from their slumber. Zane opened his eyes. "Yes?" he called out.

"Would you like something to eat?" Lupe asked, through the heavy door.

He felt his stomach rumble at the mention of food.

"Thanks. We'll be down in a few," Zane said.

Looking down at Ray, he could see the toll the day had taken. "Wake up," he whispered. "Lupe's fixing us dinner."

Ray's long lashes fluttered a few times before opening. "I need to get to the bar."

"No. You don't." Zane rolled over on top of Ray's powerful body. "You've done your duty for the day. Stay in and let me take care of you."

Ray ran his hands down Zane's back. "I'd love nothing more, but I need to check in with Pete. If I was really as heartless as I want them to believe, killing a few head of cattle wouldn't do anything to me."

Zane kissed the bronzed skin over Ray's heart. "But you're not heartless. They'll be able to see it in your eyes."

"No they won't. I'm good at what I do. I may let you in, but you're the exception."

He couldn't help but to see the pain in Ray's words. How much had this man truly suffered over the years? He knew he could no longer add to that pain. Zane loved his ranch, but he knew he loved Ray more. "Let's forget about this. All of it. I'll sell the damn ranch and we'll move."

Ray's hands stopped roaming his back. "What are you talking about? I've got no plans to bow out of this investigation."

"This place isn't as important as you are."

Ray gently moved out from under Zane. He sat up and threw his legs over the bed, his back to Zane. "The minute I saw the picture of that boy, this was about more than saving the ranch. I know those marks. There's only one man who could've done that, and we both know it." Ray turned to look over his shoulder. "I won't leave here until Roger Black is either behind bars or dead."

Zane sucked in a breath. He'd never seen such hatred in Ray's eyes, not even when he'd pushed him away years ago.

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

Zane wondered, not for the first time, exactly what had gone on in the Black house. Once the trial was over, Ray rarely spoke of his dad or his past.

Looking at the man he loved, Zane knew it was important to Ray. Maybe the man needed to seek the revenge the boy couldn't. "Okay," he said. "I'm with you in whatever you decide."

Ray nodded. "I need to get dressed. I've got a weasel to catch."

* * * *

Walking into the bar, Ray looked back at the ranch truck and grinned. Zane might act like he had faith in him, but he still wouldn't let Ray take his bike the boys had brought home earlier. Ray rubbed his chest. It was an odd feeling to have someone care about him like that.

Growing up it had been different. He knew Marty loved him, and for a while, he'd felt Zane's love, but that all seemed to change after his foster mom's death. Taking dangerous assignments seemed reasonable to him. He was doing what needed to be done without worrying about people he'd leave behind should something happen to him.

Ray surveyed the dim interior and gave a slight nod to Pete. After ordering a double shot of Jack, he headed toward Pete's regular table. He sat down and swung his feet up. Crossing them at the ankles, Ray took a drink of whiskey and waited.

"Four? That's all you could manage," Pete said, clicking his tongue. "We're disappointed in you, Raven."

Taking another drink, Ray shrugged. "I did what I could. There were too many people around. I'm not about to get caught, even for your boss."

Pete rubbed his bristled jaw. "To tell ya the truth, we didn't figure you'd get any. Guess you have bigger balls than we gave you credit for."

Ray's hand went to his zipper. "My balls are fine. Wanna see?"

Pete did a disgusted all-over body shiver. "No thanks. That may be your thing..." The older man cut himself off.

Oh ho. So someone's been digging into my past. "You got something that'll actually pay me some money?"

"Maybe. How do you feel about borrowing a couple head from Zane? We've got a buyer already lined up."

"Borrowing?" Ray chuckled. "What'll I need to do?" He wanted to demand he be allowed to meet the boss, but he wasn't sure he was ready.

Pete picked at a scab on his boney arm. "Just help us round up a few and drive the truck."

"How much?" he asked.

"Seventy-five bucks a head."

"You're fuckin' nuts. You want me to risk jail for less than five hundred dollars?" Ray lifted his feet from the table and stood. "Give me a call when you snap back to reality." He started to walk off when Pete called to him.

"Let me talk to the boss."

Did he detect a note of panic in Pete's voice? Why did they specifically need him in on this job? "Whatever," Ray said,

playing it cool. "I've got something else going on, but I'll be back in a day or so."

Without a reason to stick around, Ray left his empty glass on the bar and walked out. He wasn't in the mood for pretending. As he climbed into the truck, he dug his cell phone out of his pocket.

"Vargas."

"It's me. You come up with anything on that picture I sent your way?" he asked. Casmiro was the closest thing Ray had to a friend outside of Lupe and Zane. He'd trusted him with his life on several occasions, and the six-four Spaniard had never let him down.

"Hello to you, too," Cas chuckled.

"Sorry. Lot on my mind."

"I'll forgive you this time, my friend. As far as the boy, I haven't come up with anything on missing persons, but I assume the local police already checked that angle." Ray heard paper rustling in the background. "I've got a meeting scheduled with border patrol in the morning. Thought maybe our boy had been caught trying to cross in the past."

"Do what you can. It's important to me."

"Why? Do you know how many unidentified illegals are found dead in this country?"

"Yeah, I know. But this one's different."

"Because he was found on your brother's ranch?" Cas questioned.

"Nope. This wasn't a random act. My father killed that boy, and it's up to me to set things right with his family," Ray said, pulling into the ranch drive.

"I'll do everything I can," Cas said.

"Thanks. I know you will."

"If you need me to watch your back, I'll be there."

Ray turned off the ignition. He pictured his old friend in the pig pen he called an office, surrounded by papers. Cas was the only other gay agent he knew. They'd made the mistake of ending up at the same club one night, basically outing each other. From then on they'd not only become friends but confidants, as much as Ray confided in anyone. "I wouldn't want you to get your thousand dollar boots dirty with real cow shit," Ray joked.

"Oh har, har, har. You're a real funny guy."

"It's a gift," Ray said with a smile. "I'll talk to you later."

"Later," Cas said and hung up.

Getting out of the truck, Ray noticed the glow of a cigarette in the shadows of the bunkhouse. A face tipped up staring at Zane's window. "Who's there?" he called.

Slim stepped forward, revealing himself in the overhead flood light. Slim was still damn good-looking despite his age, but Ray didn't like the way the older man was staring at him from the depths of those light grey eyes. "Hey," Ray said to the cow boss. "What're you out here all by yourself for?" *Slim was looking at Zane's window?*

Slim tossed the butt onto the dirt and ground it with the toe of his boot. "Just keeping an eye on things. You hear about the shooting?" Slim asked.

"Yeah. Sounds like a nasty mess," Ray answered.

"It was. Zane didn't deserve that." Slim took off his hat and ran long fingers through his salt and pepper hair.

Feeling uncomfortable, Ray nodded. "Well, I'll see ya around," Ray said, and turned to go to the house.

"Didn't see you around today."

Ray stopped in his tracks. Was he being accused of something? "I had things to do." He turned around and looked at Slim. "You got a problem with that?"

Slim shook his head. "Nope. As long as it weren't nothing that would hurt this ranch or Zane."

At that point, Ray had to reel himself in before he decked the older man. He wanted to defend himself. To tell Slim he loved Zane more than his own life, but he knew he couldn't. Keeping his undercover status secret was the key to finding out who all was involved.

"Go to bed, old man," Ray said. He turned and walked to the house.

He wasn't at all surprised to find Zane sitting on the couch in his study. "Hey," Ray greeted, falling on the sofa beside his lover.

"Rough night?" Zane asked, putting his hand on Ray's thigh.

"Aren't they all," Ray answered. "There's going to be another rustling. I've got a couple ideas on how to handle it so you not only get them back, but get the end buyer arrested." Ray untied his boots and slipped them off. "How much do you trust Slim?"

Zane sat up a little straighter. "He's been here for years. Why would you ask me something like that?"

Ray shrugged. "Just a feelin'."

"Slim wouldn't do anything to hurt this ranch or me."

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

Something in Zane's voice bothered him. "You two have a history?"

Zane shook his head. "Not really. We kissed once, but it didn't feel right between us. You don't have to worry about him."

"Maybe not." He refused to try and convince Zane that something was shady with his cow boss. He had nothing to go on except his gut instinct, which had kept him alive in more than one hot spot around the globe.

Zane tugged on Ray's arm until he fell sideways to land with his head in his lover's lap. "I like that you're home early," Zane said, running his fingers through Ray's hair.

"I can do even better than that. I told Pete I wouldn't be around for a couple of days. I need to go to the office and get a few things. Feel like going to my place for the weekend?"

Zane looked down at him. "What'll people say if we both take off?"

Ray rolled his eyes. "Hell. I don't know. Let me leave now. In the morning, mention to Slim that I took off. By late afternoon, tell him since you don't have to keep an eye on me, you've decided to head to the city to take care of some business."

Zane's hand roamed over Ray's chest as he seemed to ponder the idea. "You think it'll work?"

Ray grinned. "No way would Slim think the two of us were meeting for a weekend in bed. He thinks I hate your guts."

Strong fingers slid over Ray's jean covered cock. "Is that what we'll be doing?"

In for a Penny
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"You know it. I can put in a few calls and the stuff I need to pick up should be ready in a couple of hours." He didn't know why it was so important for him to show Zane where he lived when he wasn't on assignment, but it was. "Please."

"So we're going to El Paso?" Zane asked, unfastening Ray's jeans.

Ray shook his head. "I don't live in El Paso."

Zane's hand stilled. "You don't?"

"Nope. I live in San Anton," Ray answered.

Zane pushed at Ray's shoulders until he sat up. "What?" Ray asked.

Running his fingers through his hair, Zane shook his head. "You live less than two hours from here? Why?" Zane stood and walked to the bar. Pouring himself a shot of whiskey, he quickly drank it and refilled his glass. "You're the only family I have. Why didn't I know that?"

Ray shrugged. "Would it have made a difference?"

Zane finished off his second drink. "I don't know."

Standing, Ray walked over and put his arms around Zane's waist. He knew his lover still felt guilty for the wall that had been erected between them since Marty's death. "Can't we just be happy we're together after all this time?"

Zane's head fell to Ray's shoulder. "I'm so sorry."

Grabbing a handful of Zane's thick hair, Ray forced his lover to look him in the eyes. "Don't. You did what you thought right. I can't fault you for that anymore. I won't."

Ray placed a kiss on Zane's soft lips. "Just let me share a piece of the past seven years with you. Say you'll come."

Zane's eyes filled with tears. "I'll come."

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Chapter Six

Zane pulled his truck into the drive and looked at the paper in his hand once more. "No way," he mumbled. The house in front of him wasn't at all what he'd pictured. Instead of the sleek, downtown loft, or fancy Spanish-style home he'd imagined, the small bungalow didn't seem to fit Ray's personality.

Picking up his cell, he called Ray.

"You here?" Ray asked upon answering.

"I'm not sure." He rattled off the address to Ray. Before he could say anything more, the front door opened and was filled with the man he loved.

"Get in here," Ray chuckled, and closed his phone.

Zane grabbed the handle of his overnight bag and climbed out. The streets were alive with children on bicycles, laughing and playing. He looked back to the shaded front porch and shook his head.

Ray met him half-way and wrapped him in a hug. "I thought you'd never get here."

Zane looked back at the family-oriented neighborhood and shook his head. "Is all this to throw people off your scent?"

"What?" Ray looked around.

Zane gestured with his hand to encompass their surroundings. "All of it. I would've never pictured you living in an area like this, or is that the purpose?" He looked up at Ray. "Who are you?" he said, half laughing, half serious.

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

Ray looked bewildered at the question. He seemed to study the neighborhood for the first time. "Let's go inside."

The interior of the house was yet another surprise. Zane casually walked around the living room, studying the knick-knacks. Doilies? Who the hell's house was this, certainly not the tough ex-marine turned secret agent man. He glanced over his shoulder at Ray. His lover's eyes were scanning the room like something was bothering him. "What's wrong?" Zane finally asked.

"I don't know. You tell me," Ray said. "I get the feeling you're laughing at me."

Turning to pull Ray into his arms, Zane kissed him, pushing his tongue inside. "I'm not laughing. Just a little confused I guess." He gestured to the surroundings. "This just doesn't fit my idea of your life without me."

Ray's face fell, suddenly his lover looked worried. "I don't understand. I worked really hard to make this place homey."

"That's just it. It almost looks too homey." Zane let one of his hands drop to finger the lace table covering. "Where'd you get these?"

"A little shop downtown. Why? Don't you like them?" Ray shifted from foot to foot.

It suddenly made sense to Zane. This was Ray's idea of a normal life. It was the kind of room a kid would see on television and identify with the All American family. Zane didn't know much about Ray's life before he came to the Lazy C Bar, but he knew his lover's life had been anything but normal.

His heart melted right there on the living room floor. The neighborhood, the house and furnishings, were all meant to make Ray appear normal, even if it was only to himself.

"I like them very much. My grandma used to make them when I was a boy," Zane replied, wrapping his arm around Ray again.

"I know. I remembered seeing a couple in Marty's bedroom," Ray admitted.

"Show me more," Zane said. He took Ray's lower lip between his teeth, brushing his tongue across the plump flesh.

Ray's eyes lit up. "Well, there's not a lot, two bedrooms, an office, just normal stuff. I've got a hot tub though," Ray said. Zane could see the excited look on his lover's face. Yep, like a kid with his dream house.

"Show me," he said.

"You wanna eat first? I made some meatloaf. The potatoes are already boiled, so I just have to mash them up and make some gravy."

The more Ray talked, the more Zane's heart ached. "Yeah, meatloaf sounds fantastic."

Ray led him into the kitchen and gestured towards the small round oak table. "It'll just be a minute. You want something to drink?"

"Got any beer?" Zane asked.

Ray rolled his eyes and chuckled. "You kiddin'?" He opened the fridge and removed two bottles of Michelob.

As Zane watched Ray move around the kitchen, he couldn't help but want to know more about the man he would

love until his last breath. "Who taught you to cook?" he asked, thinking it was a pretty innocent question.

Plugging the mixer in, Ray paused. "Books mostly. I used to sneak into the kitchen though and watch Lupe. My biological mom took off before I was old enough to learn."

"How old were you when she left?" Zane asked.

Ray shrugged. "I don't really know. Around two I guess."

"What kind of woman leaves a toddler in the hands of a monster?" Zane asked before he could think better of it.

Ray's back stiffened visibly. His lover turned on the mixer and began whipping the potatoes. Feeling like a piece of shit, Zane stood and pressed himself against Ray's back. "Sorry. That didn't exactly come out right."

"It's okay. I've asked myself that same question almost every day of my life." Ray seasoned the potatoes and ran the beaters through them for another few seconds. "You wanna set the table for me?"

Zane burrowed under Ray's hair and placed a kiss on his bronzed neck. "Sure."

* * * *

After everything was loaded into the dishwasher, Ray ran some hot water into the meatloaf pan and turned toward Zane. "How about we grab a couple beers and check out the hot tub?"

He knew something was bothering Zane. He'd felt it the minute Zane had stepped out of the truck. Never had he been more self conscious of where he lived then when Zane seemed to study everything in his living room. Did his cowboy

think it was stupid that he hadn't surrounded himself with typical bachelor furnishings?

"Do I need a suit?"

"Nope. That's the beauty of it." He held up a finger. "Hold on. I'll be right back." Going into his bedroom, Ray opened his closet and pulled out two robes. He looked at the red robe he usually gave to his guests and something stirred in his chest. Zane meant more to him than any of the random men he'd had over in the past. Somehow the generic robe felt wrong.

Tossing both robes onto the floor of the closet, Ray went to the bathroom and picked up two thick towels and a bottle of waterproof lube from the shower. Much better.

Supplies in hand, he found Zane standing where he'd left him. "Come on."

He led Zane to the back door. After he'd moved in, Ray, with Cas's help, had rebuilt the large deck off the back of the house. One corner of the deck was now a well screened hot tub gazebo. With lattice on all but one side, Ray had trained bougainvillea vine around the remainder of the dark-stained structure. It had taken several years, but the fuchsia-colored flowers now hid the hot tub completely from the neighbor's view.

"Nice," Zane said with a whistle.

"Thanks," Ray said. He was proud of the work he'd done to his home and was happy Zane appreciated it.

They stepped just inside the gazebo and Ray started to strip. When Zane didn't make a move to undress, he stopped. "What? Don't you want to?"

"I still can't get over how gorgeous you are," Zane replied.

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Ray looked his lover in the eyes as he shoved his jeans to his ankles. "You keep lookin' at me like that and it'll be over before we ever get in."

With a wry smile, Zane began to undress as Ray slipped into the hot bubbling water. "Shit. I forgot the beer."

Hands on the top button of his jeans, Zane paused. "I'll get it."

Ray leaned back and closed his eyes, enjoying the soothing water. A slight splash and a cold bottle was rubbed across his nipple. "Mmm," Ray moaned. Without opening his eyes, he reached out and pulled Zane into his lap.

"This is nice," Zane said, readjusting to straddle Ray's thighs. "You fuck in here before?"

He opened one eye and looked at the naked man in his arms. "Do you really want to talk about that?"

"No. I guess not," Zane finally said. His lover looked around the small space. "How often do you get to come here when you're on assignment?"

Ray's hands traveled down Zane's back to cup the twin globes resting on his lap. In their current position, Zane's ass was spread wide enough for Ray's fingers to travel back and forth across the sensitive puckered hole. "A weekend every couple months or so. Not enough." He pressed the pad of his middle finger against Zane's hole until it slipped inside.

"Oooh," Zane moaned. His lover wiggled his ass until Ray's finger was buried to the third knuckle.

"You like that?" Ray asked, inserting another. He loved it when the always proper rancher in his arms let go of his inhibitions. "Tell me."

"Fuck me," Zane whispered against Ray's neck.

Ray reached over the side of the tub and picked up the bottle of lube. "Stand up for a second," he instructed.

With Ray's fingers still buried in his ass, Zane stood. "Are you sure no one can see us?"

Ray removed his fingers and quickly applied a generous amount of slick to them. As he made sure Zane was well lubricated, he chuckled. "If you could see what was going on in here, I'd have had the cops called on me years ago."

Zane's head snapped down at the comment. *Shit*. "Sorry," Ray apologized. He gripped Zane's hips and guided him down into the water until the crown of his cock pressed against the slick hole.

"You ready?" Ray asked.

All he received in the way of an answer was a short nod from Zane. *Crap. Now I've hurt his feelings*. As Ray eased his way inside his lover's body, he tried to think of something to say.

When he felt Zane's ass nestled against his balls, he leaned in for a kiss. "It doesn't matter how many men came before you. You're the first person I've ever made love to, and not just in the hot tub."

"Don't pay any attention to me," Zane said, starting them off on a slow rhythm. "I'm not used to being jealous. I guess I just don't know how to deal with it yet."

With Zane doing most of the work, Ray released his grip and let his hands roam his lover's body. He traced the chords in Zane's neck before moving down to torture the dark brown nipples he loved so much.

"Yes," Zane moaned as Ray took one of the sensitive buds into his mouth.

Ray's hand skimmed down the tight abdomen to encircle Zane's cock. He knew he wouldn't last much longer and wanted to make sure his lover was well taken care of. He thrust up into Zane as hard and deep as he could.

Zane growled, going wild in his arms. The water began spilling over the side of the hot tub in tidal waves, as Ray felt Zane's body stiffen with release. *Thank fuck.* He pulled Zane down and buried himself to the hilt as he gave himself over to the moment and came.

"Shit," Zane panted, leaning against Ray's chest.

"Yep." Ray ran a hand over his face. "I think I damn near drowned."

Zane sat back enough to look at Ray and started to chuckle. He smoothed the wet hair out of Ray's face and kissed him. "That was ... damn."

"Knock. Knock."

Ray's head whipped around towards the deep rumble of Casmiro's voice. His friend stepped onto the deck through the side gate.

"What do you need, Cas?" Ray asked, trying to shield Zane.

Cas stopped and looked at the watery mess on the deck. "Sorry. I ... uh ... didn't know you had company."

"Casmiro Vargas, meet Zane Conner." Ray gestured between the two men.

After looking down to make sure he was shielded from Cas's view, Zane looked around Ray. "Nice to meet you."

"Same here," Cas said. "Well, I'll get out of your way. Thought maybe you'd feel like a beer or something."

Ray could tell both men were clearly uncomfortable with the situation. "You gonna be home in the morning?"

Cas chuckled. "Depends on what I find when I leave here."

Ray rolled his eyes. Cas was constantly horny, and rarely went a weekend without picking up some young twink at one of the bars he frequented. "I'll give you a call around ten. That should give you plenty of time to either get home, or kick out whoever ends up in your bed."

"Sounds good. Nice to have finally met you, Zane," Cas said.

Damn. Why hadn't Ray noticed how sexy his friend's voice was before? He looked at Zane to see if his lover was affected by the hot Spaniard standing a few feet away. Zane's expression wasn't what he'd expected at all. It was then that he noticed the stiff posture Zane held himself in. "We'll talk later, Cas," Ray called over his shoulder.

He waited until he heard the gate close before speaking. "You okay?"

"Who was that?" Zane asked, trying to stand.

Ray held his lover in place. "That was Cas."

"I know that. I meant, who is he to you?"

"Just a friend. One of the few."

"Is he the guy you fucked in here?" Zane asked.

Ray didn't know whether to be pissed or flattered. He'd never seen this side of his lover before, and he wasn't sure he liked it. Ray had given Zane no reason to be jealous of Cas.

"No. We've never been anything but friends. Besides, I'm not his type."

"Would you have fucked him if you were his type?"

Now he was pissed. Ray picked Zane up and set him to the side. "Look. A month ago I thought you hated my guts. Cas has been the one to watch my back since you tossed me off the ranch. Don't come in here and make up your mind about our relationship after a five minute meeting."

He started to get out of the tub, but a hand to his shoulder stopped him. "You're right," Zane said. "I have no right to be jealous of your friend. He's just so..."

"Hot," Ray supplied.

"Yeah," Zane admitted. "I guess I just can't see you spending time around him and not wanting to get him into bed."

The thought of Zane and Cas in bed together didn't set well with Ray. "Don't even think about it. Cas is not the guy for you. He likes young things that barely have fuzz on their chests."

Zane started to laugh. "Now who's jealous?" He climbed back onto Ray's lap and kissed him. "I don't want anyone but you."

"Good," Ray said. "We need to get out of here before we're boiled to death."

With a smile, Zane stood and reached for the towels. "They're a little wet," Zane informed him, handing a soggy one to Ray.

"I wonder why, Poseidon," Ray joked. "Just cover yourself enough to get us into the house." He couldn't help but to

watch Zane's tight little ass as he wrapped himself in the wet towel. *Damn.* Cas had nothing on Zane.

* * * *

After a good breakfast the following morning, Ray called Cas.

"Vargas," Cas answered in his customary greeting.

"Did I wake you?" Ray asked.

"Just dozing on the couch."

"Late night?" Ray teased.

"Something like that. You ready to head to the office?"

"Whenever you are," Ray said. He looked through the French doors at Zane. His lover seemed to be enjoying the morning sunshine with a cup of coffee in one hand and a newspaper in the other. He wondered how often Zane allowed himself a morning of doing nothing.

"You know Zane can't come, right?"

"Yeah. I told him earlier. Wouldn't want to give away our top secret location to a mere civilian," he joked.

"You're right," Cas chuckled. "So you picking me up, or do you want me to meet you there?"

"No. Meet me there. I want to get in and out as quickly as possible."

"That good, huh?"

"Better," Ray supplied.

"Damn." Cas cleared his throat. "There's something I need to go over with you afterward, but I don't think it'll take too long."

"Okay. See ya in a few," he said and hung up. He stopped at the table and drank the last dredges of his morning coffee, before stepping outside to say goodbye. "I'm heading out." Ray bent and gave Zane a kiss. "Sure you're going to be okay while I'm gone?"

Zane reached up and pulled him down by the back of the neck for another kiss. "I'll try to keep myself occupied."

"You're sure about the money, right?"

"Hey, if fifty bucks a head will ensure I get my cattle back, it's well worth it."

"Okay." After giving his lover one last kiss, Ray picked up Zane's keys and walked out the front door.

He drove the ranch truck to the non-descript building at the edge of town and parked in his usual spot. All the way over he couldn't get Zane off his mind. Was he crazy to think the two of them could really make a go at a long-term relationship? He knew Zane would wither and die without the ranch. That left him to decide if a change in careers was in order.

A fist against his window brought him out of his depressing thoughts. He didn't even need to look over to know who had done it. Pocketing the keys, Ray opened the door. "Jackass. You trying to get yourself shot?" he asked his friend who stood holding a soft leather briefcase in one hand.

"Yeah right. Like you're packing," Cas said, punching Ray playfully on the arm.

Ray punched his friend back a little harder and turned to walk to the front door of the phony manufacturing facility. "So tell me what you wanted to talk about? I assume it's the

reason you stopped by and interrupted my playtime with Zane."

"Maybe you should've told me he was coming for the weekend," Cas fired back.

"Maybe it wasn't any of your business," Ray replied, nodding to the receptionist. He walked down a short hall to a heavy door and fit his keycard into the slot. The door slid open to a stairwell. Ray placed his hand on the glass pad for a fingerprint scan as he leaned in for the usual retinal scan.

After the door opened allowing him admittance, he stood and waited for Cas to perform the same procedure. With Cas right behind him, Ray walked down the long corridor, using the same keycard to enter his office.

Sitting behind his seldom used desk, he looked at his old friend. He wasn't sure what Cas needed to talk to him about, but he wanted any bad news out of the way so he'd have time to process it before going home. "Spill it."

Cas took a seat. "You're not going to like it."

"I figured that much when you didn't tell me last night or on the phone. Is it about the kid?" Ray tried to prepare himself for Cas's answer.

"Yeah. The Border Patrol had a couple different agents who'd spotted him in the past trying to get into the United States. He always traveled alone. A report was filed the evening of his last sighting. He was seen jumping into the cab of a dark green nineteen-seventy-five pickup."

"Okay. So why do I get the feeling there's more?" Ray asked.

Cas set his briefcase on his lap, before reaching in and extracting a file. After closing the case, he tossed a single photo onto Ray's desktop. "We think that's the truck."

"Okay, so you must have an idea of who it belongs to." Ray felt bile begin to rise in his throat. *God, please no.*

Another picture was tossed on top of the first one. The hateful black eyes staring back at him were too much. Ray quickly excused himself and went to the restroom down the hall. He barely made it to the stall before the entire contents of his stomach came up. It was the first time he'd seen his father since the day his old man had shown up at the Lazy C Bar. At least he was pleased to see that time had not been kind to the detestable man.

Ray slumped to the floor, allowing his back to rest against the cold tiled wall. With his suspicions confirmed, Ray at least knew he had a legal reason to go after his dad. If he could get him on the murder charge, he wouldn't have to worry about Zane's ranch getting vandalized.

The restroom door opened and Cas handed him a wet paper towel. Bless his friend for not asking him if he were all right. Ray knew he wouldn't feel right again until his dad was made to pay for killing an innocent boy. Why had he done it?

"Do you think Roger killed that kid to get my attention?" The mere thought sickened him all over again.

"Yep," Cas answered.

Ray got to his feet and flushed the toilet. Crossing to the sink he rinsed out his mouth. "Why? Why would he go to such great lengths? Why not just find me himself?"

"Where? You've been undercover for the majority of the past five years. Maybe he knew he needed something to draw you out of hiding."

"And he used the kid to do it," Ray agreed. "But why fuck with the Lazy C Bar? I haven't lived there in years."

Casmiro shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe he hates Marty and Zane for taking you in. What I'm a little fuzzy on is why you're working for him. I mean, I know why you're doing it, but why does Roger want it? And how is it undercover if he knows it's you?"

"It's all pretty twisted," Ray supplied. "My name's pretty much mud in the town. Although I know Roger's the man behind Zane's troubles, he doesn't know that I know." He looked at Casmiro.

Cas shook his head as if to clear it. "This is like a damn soap opera plot."

Ray held up his hand. "Bear with me. I didn't approach Pete. He came to me. I'm sure that wasn't his own idea. So, the big question is, why does Roger want me in on this? Believe me. He's not bringing his only child into the operation because we're family. There's something else."

"And we've got to find it," Cas said, with a nod of understanding.

"Exactly."

"Maybe he's trying to frame you," Cas supplied.

"I've thought a lot about that," Ray agreed.

"This whole thing probably all boils down to vengeance." Cas stood and straightened his clothes. "How far are you going to let Roger push before you push back?"

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"What do you mean?"

"He's playing with you, Ray. Hasn't he done that enough already?" Cas turned toward the door. "Come on. Let's get those chips so you can get home."

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Chapter Seven

"So tell me how they work? I mean, I've read about them for a couple years, but I never thought I'd actually use the technology." Zane asked, looking at the barely visible microchip in his palm.

"You inject the chip right under the skin. With it in place, you can enter all kinds of information on the computer, and then download it." He held up the small hand-held scanner. "Pass this over the individual cow, and it'll bring up all the information you have on that particular one. I really can't believe you don't already use this system. Ranchers have been singing the systems praises for years."

Zane shrugged. "I'm an old fashioned guy, what else can I say?"

"Regular dinosaur."

"Ha. Ha. Where will you be when all this is going on?" Zane asked.

"From the sounds of it, driving the truck."

"I don't like the idea of that. What if you get caught?"

Ray had wondered the same thing. He had a gut feeling he was supposed to get caught. Why else would Roger specifically want him to drive the stolen cattle? "I've got connections," he said.

Zane looked at him for several seconds before nodding. "Once you call Cas with the address of the drop-off, do we get them back?"

"Yeah. After we prove they're yours, the authorities will step in."

"Good," Zane said, handing the chip back to Ray.

They'd had a leisurely lunch of salad and sandwiches and were now sprawled out on the living room floor in front of the television. "What's bothering you?" Zane asked.

"The Border Patrol spotted a dark green truck picking up the boy that was found dead on the Lazy C Bar."

Zane stopped stretching and looked at Ray. "And?"

"Roger owns a dark green pickup."

Zane nodded slowly. "We both pretty much knew he had something to do with it."

"Yeah," Ray said. He of all people knew what his father was capable of, so why did his dad's actions still have the power to shame him?

He felt Zane's hand on his bare chest. "There's something I've been rolling over in my head."

Ray rolled to his side and propped his head up on his hand. Looking down at the man he loved, he saw the worry on Zane's face. "What?"

"According to Mom's will, you inherit the Lazy C Bar if anything should happen to me."

Ray's first reaction was surprise, but the more he thought about it, the more sense it made. Marty had always treated him like family. "I didn't know," he mumbled.

Zane's face took on a look of guilt. "I know. I should've found you after you left and the will was read, but I couldn't bring myself..."

"Shhh," Ray said, placing a kiss on Zane's soft lips.

"I was a little mad at her for not leaving you half the ranch upfront."

"What?! The Lazy C Bar has been in your family for years. It only makes sense she'd leave it to you."

Zane shook his head. "Despite your last name, you were a Conner from the day Mom brought you home."

Ray's eyes began to sting at the statement. As a boy, he'd wished his last name was Conner instead of Black. He'd never had the courage to voice the desire, but it had always been there. "Thanks."

"It's true," Zane said, running his fingers through Ray's hair as it fell around his shoulders.

"What if Roger knows about the will?" Zane asked.

"No way," Ray said.

Zane sat up and took Ray by the shoulders. "What. If. He. Does?"

A hundred different scenarios raced through his mind. If his dad knew about the provision in Marty's will it would mean getting rid of Zane ... "No." Ray stood and gathered the tracking supplies. "I'm gonna take these back to Cas. Then I'm gonna track Roger down and deal with this once and for all."

"Ray, stop!" Zane yelled, grabbing Ray's arms. "I'm not afraid of your father."

"Well then you're a fool. I know the way the twisted sonofabitch's mind works." Ray set the box on the coffee table and pulled Zane into his arms. "I'll kill him before I let him anywhere near you."

Zane looked into Ray's eyes. "Is this the abused little boy speaking, or the man with years of military and police training under his belt?" Zane brought their foreheads together. "Think, baby. The only way to handle Roger is through legal channels, and that means playing the game for a while longer."

Ray hadn't even realized he'd been crying until Zane kissed away the tears escaping under his lashes. "I love you," Zane whispered.

"Why?" Ray asked. "I've brought nothing but trouble to your life since Marty saved me."

Zane smiled and shook his head. "God, you are so wrong. You are one of the most sensitive people I've ever known. You may try to act tough, but I see through that thin veneer." Zane kissed him. "My mom loved you from the day she brought you home. And it didn't take long for you to worm your way into my heart."

Ray started to speak, but Zane kissed him again. "Let me finish. Do you remember following me around like a shadow when you were younger?"

Ray nodded. "You were everything to me. I watched you like a hawk trying to emulate everything you did. I imagine it was pretty annoying."

Chuckling, Zane bit Ray's ear. "I may've acted like it was, but I loved it. It's one of the reasons I was so ashamed when my feeling turned to a different kind of love."

"Don't," Ray cut him off. "Just ... don't," he said, peppering kisses to Zane's face. He knew he'd die if anything happened

to Zane. "I want you to go away somewhere until this is over."

"If I'm in danger, so are you. But the danger won't end until Roger is caught and put away. That's where our plan comes in. You've put too much work into this to just abandon it now."

He knew Zane was right. As much satisfaction as ripping Roger's head off would be, the sonofabitch wasn't worth spending even an hour in jail. Okay, so he could do this one last job before stepping up his game. He wished he knew how far he was going to have to drive the cattle. The thought of being away from Zane with Roger still in town didn't sit well.

"I can't do the undercover work and worry about you at the same time. What would you think if I brought Cas in to help?"

Zane's left brow rose. "You mean like a babysitter? No thanks."

Ray sighed. "I don't know what the hell to do then."

Zane's hands wandered down Ray's back to cup his ass. "I've got a few suggestions. We still have a couple hours before we have to head back."

"You're right," Ray smiled, pushing his troubles to the back of his mind. His time with Zane was precious, and the thing he wanted was to let Roger ruin it. "Hot tub sex?"

"I could be persuaded," Zane said, unbuttoning his shirt.

* * * *

After they finished tagging the herd of cattle he was supposed to steal, Ray pulled Zane into his arms. "I'll see you sometime after lunch."

Zane looked out over the pasture. Dawn was quickly approaching. "Where you going?"

Ray shrugged. "I'll probably just drive around and find a shady spot to take a nap for a couple of hours. But you need to get back to the ranch before the hands get out and about. We want them to think you spent the night in your own bed."

Zane felt bone tired. It had taken hours to get the cattle tagged, and he wanted nothing more than to sleep in Ray's arms for the rest of the day. "Maybe I'll play sick. You can come home and join me in bed later."

Ray nuzzled his neck. "Maybe I'll just do that."

Pulling back, Zane led Ray by the hand to the truck. "You could spend the morning at the Breakneck cabin. I don't have any of the boys working in that area, so you shouldn't be detected."

"Thanks. I just might do that."

As he pulled up next to Ray's Harley, Zane leaned over and kissed him. "Love you."

"Love you right back," Ray said.

After waving goodbye, Zane headed the pickup toward home. *Damn*. He hadn't pulled an all-nighter in years. It was a hell of a lot different when you were only twenty. Zane parked in his usual spot and climbed out of the truck. A stretch to ease his tired muscles and he walked up the front porch steps.

"Just gettin' in?" Slim asked from behind him.

Shit. Zane spun around to face his old friend. "Yeah. I'm not feeling well. Probably just go back to bed." He tried to escape through the front door, but Slim's words stopped him.

"Things were quiet around here with the two of you gone. Not sure if it was a coincidence or not."

Zane turned to face the long-time foreman. "What're you trying to say, Slim?"

"Nothing. Just that I don't think you really have your eyes open to what's going on around her lately."

"Meaning?" He took a step towards the stairs.

"Raven's not the man he used to be. Make sure you aren't still moonin' over something that's not there."

The statement felt like a punch to the stomach. How did Slim know?

"I'm not blind. I used to see the way you followed him with your eyes when he was younger. The best thing you ever did was to kick him off the ranch. Don't start goin' soft now."

He wanted to defend Ray, but knew he couldn't. "Why don't you get the boys lined out. I'm going to bed." Zane turned and walked into the house. On the other side of the door, he braced his hand against the wall. Things Ray had mentioned started filtering back to him. Ray had said something was off with Slim. Was his foreman feeding information to Roger or Pete?

As he undressed for bed, Zane hoped Ray would get home sooner rather than later. Crawling between the sheets, he sighed. Maybe he wasn't being fair to Ray. He hadn't considered bringing him in to the mess until the boy had been found. The whip marks on the boys back told him exactly

who'd done the killing, and all he could think about was bringing Raven home, but at what price?

His own dad hadn't been the best in the world, but at least he'd never raised a hand to him. It had taken a long time for young Raven to trust Zane. He remembered the first few months after Ray had come to live with them. The boy followed him around like a whipped puppy, but never spoke or approached too closely.

One day, Ray came running towards him, yelling something about one of the cattle dogs. Zane dropped what he was doing and followed Ray out to the field. Ginger, one of his favorites, had obviously been gored by one of the bulls. The poor Australian Shepard lay on her side, bleeding from the shoulder.

Zane didn't think twice. He'd hoisted the dog into his arms and ran back to his truck with Ray following close behind. The fear in Ray's eyes as Zane approached the truck surprised him. He told Ray to run and tell Marty they were taking Ginger into the vet.

Ray seemed surprised but quickly followed Zane's instructions. Zane could still remember the tears running down Ray's face as he held Ginger on the way into town. That was the day Ray finally let him in. After that, when Ray followed him around the ranch, he asked a million questions.

"Zane?"

"Yes, Lupe," Zane said, coming out of his memories.

"Are you hungry?"

"No. I'm gonna catch a few hours of sleep," he answered.

There was a slight pause before Lupe asked. "Is Raven okay?"

I don't know. "Yeah. He'll be here later."

Rolling to his side, he pictured his lover. Right or wrong, Ray belonged here on the Lazy C Bar. Zane just hoped the town would understand once everything was over.

* * * *

On his way to Pete's table, a hand clamped onto Ray's shoulder. Ready to throw a punch, he looked at the person attached to the hand. "Donny?"

The thin man nodded. It didn't escape Ray's notice that his old high school friend wasn't smiling. "Raven," Donny addressed him.

"What've you been up to?" Ray asked. He'd thought a lot about his friends over the years, but once Zane had kicked him off the ranch, Ray tried to leave that part of his life behind him.

"Just living," Donny said. "I've been hearing some things around town. Thought I'd come down and see if the rumors were true."

It killed Ray to see the look of disappointment in Donny's eyes. *I hope you'll forgive me.* Playing the badass, jealous brother wasn't as easy as he'd thought it would be. Slipping back into character, he nodded. "What rumors are you talking about?"

"Oh, that you'd come back to cause trouble for Zane." Donny seemed to take in Ray's long hair, piercings and tattoos. "You've changed."

"No shit. Living does that to a person." He jerked his shoulder until Donny's hand fell away.

Donny stared at him and shook his head. "Who *are* you?"

"Don't you judge me, Donny Jo, until you've spent a day in my shoes." He started to turn, but his friend's words stopped him.

"I didn't think the rumors could be true. I know how much you cared for Zane once. I guess I was holding onto an illusion of the man you used to be."

Before Ray could respond, Donny turned and walked out of the bar. *Shit*. Ray spun back around and ordered a double shot of Jack, and a beer. After upending the shot, he slammed the glass on the bar. Beer in hand, he walked towards Pete.

"I want to meet the boss," he said.

Pete looked at him like he was crazy. "Who the hell do you think you are making demands?"

Ray set his beer down and rested his knuckles on the table. "I'm the man who's risking his neck for a man I've never even met."

"You're getting paid, so don't start that shit." Pete slid a white envelope across the table. "Not as much as we'd discussed, but then you didn't do the last job to the boss's satisfaction."

Ray picked up the envelope. There were two fifty dollar bills inside. "Seriously?" Ray threw the money at Pete. "A hundred bucks? That's what killing cattle is worth to your boss?" Ray reached across the table and grabbed Pete by the

neck. Hoisting him over the scarred wood surface, Ray got right in his face. "Either get me a meeting, or I'm outta here."

Pete held up his hands. "Okay. Okay. I'll try, but the boss isn't the easiest man to deal with."

Don't I know it. "Just do it." Ray shoved Pete back into his chair. "You've got my cell number. Don't call unless it's to set up a meeting."

Turning on his heels, Ray walked out of the bar he was beginning to hate. The disappointment in Donny's face haunted him the entire drive home. How would they ever be able to redeem him with the town once this shit was over?

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Chapter Eight

"Boss says he'll see you after you drop off the cattle."

Ray gripped the phone tighter and threw the towel he was holding across the room. "That's not what I want to hear." He knew there was a fine line between realism and pushing Roger too far.

"Take it or leave it," Pete said.

"How much? And don't give me some bullshit about fifty bucks a head. I grew up on a ranch. I know exactly how much they're worth, even on the black market."

"The Boss said to tell you he'd make it worth your while."

Ray's attention shifted toward the door as Zane walked into the room. "How many and where?"

"Meet me on Hemphill behind the old Vetter barn at two in the morning. I'll have the truck and trailer ready. You don't need to know anything else before then."

"Fuck! I hate this being kept in the dark shit," Ray spat, winking at Zane. His lover came over and ran his hands over Ray's bare chest. "I'll be there," he said and closed the phone.

Ray pulled Zane into a kiss. "Looks like tonight's the night."

Zane nipped at Ray's freshly shaved chin. "I'll have the boys round the majority of the cattle up. It's time to move pastures anyway. I'll have them leave the group we tagged and recorded where they are. It doesn't have direct access to the road, but it's closer than any of the other pastures."

Ray didn't want to once again voice his concerns about a leak at the ranch. "I hope we don't throw up any red flags in the process."

"Shouldn't," Zane said. "I told Slim several days ago it was about time to move them."

Zane began kissing his way down Ray's nude body. Kneeling, Zane took Ray's cock into his mouth. "Feels good," Ray moaned.

He wanted to whimper when Zane's mouth pulled off his cock to lave his balls. Looking down, Ray's cock gave a little jerk at the sight of Zane's tongue running back up the length of his erection. "Play with yourself," he said.

Zane's eyes met his. "Already am," he chuckled.

Ray tilted to the side enough to see past Zane's head. Yep, those long fingers were wrapped around Zane's cock, jerking to beat the band. "Fuck that's hot."

Zane's skillful mouth engulfed Ray's cock again. "Yes ... Oh shit ... Right there," he groaned, placing his hands on Zane's shoulders for support.

When his lover's fingers ran down the crack of his ass, it took all Ray's willpower not to thrust his way down Zane's throat. Ray spread his legs as far apart as he could and allowed those wonderful fingers access.

Zane quickly switched hands, and used his pre-cum coated fingers to push inside Ray's hole. While pressing his tongue against the sweet spot just under the head of Ray's cock, Zane brushed a digit across Ray's prostate gland.

"Yessss," Ray hissed, finally giving in to his primal urge to thrust and cum down his lover's throat while a growl from Zane signaled his lover's own climax.

After lapping up every drop, Zane pulled Ray down and kissed him. Ray felt like he should say something profound, but his mind was too shattered by his orgasm to string a sentence together. "Love, yeah?"

"Yeah," Zane answered.

They held each other for several moments, neither wanting to let go. "I need to make myself scarce. I'll go back out to the line cabin until I'm due to meet Pete later."

"Do you want me to call Casmiro and let him know what's going on?" Zane asked.

"No. I'll do it while I'm waiting around." Ray cupped Zane's face in his hands. "Make sure you stay inside the house. I still don't know what Roger has up his sleeve, but I've got a funny feeling."

"Be careful," Zane whispered, kissing Ray.

Ray made love to Zane's mouth, fucking his cowboy with his tongue. "When this is over..."

Zane silenced him with another kiss. "We'll talk about it later."

Ray nodded. He knew they were both worried about their future together. Love was a wonderful thing, but it didn't help pay the bills, and Ray just couldn't see himself becoming a rancher.

"Okay. Later," Ray agreed.

* * * *

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

Ray paced the small room waiting for Cas to answer his phone. He'd gone over all the details of the case in his mind for hours, and he thought he might be on to something.

"Vargas," the deep voice answered.

"Hey."

"Glad you called. I've been doing some research and wanted to run some stuff by you," Cas said.

"Okay."

"Remember a couple of years ago when you got that letter from your mother's father's estate?"

Ray remembered that day very clearly. He'd received a message from a lawyer in Denver regarding his grandfather's will. Knowing his dad's father had died long before Ray was even born, he knew it had to be his maternal grandfather.

He'd quickly called the number, hoping the lawyer would put him in touch with the worthless woman who'd abandoned him so many years before. Instead of his mother's whereabouts, Ray had been told he'd just inherited a sizeable amount of money. When he'd pressed further into his mother's address, the lawyer had shut down, informing him Kathleen preferred to keep her location private. Ray had been so angry, that he'd told the lawyer to shove the estate up his ass.

"You think Roger found out about it?" Ray asked.

"That's my guess."

"Even if something happened to me, Roger wouldn't get his hands on it. I've got Zane listed as my beneficiary." As soon as he said the words it was like a punch to the gut. Could that really be what all of this was about?

"Ray..."

"What?" Ray asked around the lump in his throat.

"If something happened to your beneficiary, Roger could fight for your estate in court."

Ray's heart skipped a beat. "Fuck this. I'm gonna call Zane and get him the hell out of here."

"Figured you'd say that. I'm gonna get a few things gathered up and head that way."

"Thanks, Cas." Ray pressed end and immediately called Zane's cell. The stupid out of range recording came on. "Get to the house as soon as you get this. I'm on my way in."

Shoving the phone in his pocket, Ray ran out of the cabin. He skidded to a stop when a rifle barrel was leveled at his head.

"Where you goin' in such a hurry?" Slim asked.

"To find Zane. Now get the fuck out of my way." He took another step, but a click from the rifle stopped him. "Why are you doing this? Zane trusted you."

"I could ask you the same question. I know what's planned, and I know you're the one that's going to do it. I thought I'd just sit back and let you take your chances with the cops, but I've changed my mind."

"You've been feeding information to my father," Ray said.

Slim's jaw dropped. "What? I wouldn't give that sonofabitch the time of day."

Ray noticed the rifle had dropped a few degrees in Slim's surprise. "So you're denying you've been feeding information?"

The muzzle rose to Ray's eye level. "I've been talking to someone, but it wasn't Roger. I decided when you came back to the Lazy C Bar to let you hang yourself with your own hatred toward Zane."

Ray cocked his head to the side. "I don't hate Zane. I've never loved anyone as much as I love that man."

"Well," Slim said. "Then we have a problem, because that makes two of us."

What the fuck? "You mean to tell me you're in love with Zane? And this is how you show it? Somehow I don't think bankrupting his ranch is gonna put you in good graces with Zane. You're out of your fucking mind."

"That's why I can't let you rustle his cattle. He would never admit this, but the Lazy C Bar is barely hanging on right now."

That was news to him. He quickly wondered why Zane hadn't confided in him. Pushing the hurt feelings aside, Ray knew he'd have to reason with the older man. It was obvious Slim had Zane's best interests at heart. No matter how twisted they may be.

"I'm not going to do anything to put the Lazy C Bar out of business. Zane brought me here to figure out who was behind the thefts and death of that boy. I just got off the phone with a friend in law enforcement, and I think Zane's in danger." Ray held his breath, hoping Slim would see reason.

"What do you mean danger?" Slim asked, eyes narrowed.

Ray went on to tell Slim what he and Cas thought Roger had in mind. "So you've seriously been working for your dad?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't know I know he's behind it." Ray gestured to the gun. "Put the rifle down and let me go protect the man we both love."

After several long, torturous moments, Slim lowered the rifle. "What have I done?" Slim mumbled.

Sidestepping the foreman, Ray hopped on his Harley. "Let's hope I'm not too late." He took off down the cowpath as fast as he dared. "Be there," he whispered over and over on his ride.

He barely got the kickstand down before he was off the bike and taking the front steps three at a time. Bursting through the front door he hollered for his lover. "Zane? Zane are you in here?"

Lupe came running out of the kitchen, dishtowel in hand. "He's not home yet. Is something wrong?" the older woman asked.

"Yeah. I need to find him." Ray crossed into the den to retrieve a handgun and hunter's knife from Zane's collection. "I'm gonna go look for him. If he comes home, don't let him out of your site. Have him give either me or Cas a call."

"Cas?" Lupe questioned.

"A friend of mine. Zane has the number." After strapping the knife to his calf, Ray stuck the gun in the waistband of his jeans. Without a backward glance, he was out the front door, and running towards the barn.

"Zane!" he yelled into the lofty building. He stopped his forward progress. "Think," he said. Hell, he didn't even know if there was cause for alarm and here he was packing weapons and out of his mind.

Ray pulled out his cell phone and tried Zane's number once more. When voicemail immediately answered, he knew Zane was in trouble. His lover was almost a fanatic about his damn phone being on and within reach in case something happened on the ranch.

He hung up and called Cas. "Did you find him?" Cas asked by way of greeting.

"No and I'm going out of my fucking mind."

"If Roger does in fact have Zane, where would he take him?"

Ray closed his eyes and tried to think like the crazy fuck he called dad. "I'd say the old house, but I bought and bulldozed that piece of shit down years ago."

"Nothing's left?"

"Nothing but memories." The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. "I'm going over there."

"Give me the address. I'm still about forty minutes out, but I'll break every land speed record I can."

After rattling off directions, Ray ended the call. He contemplated calling the local police, but decided they'd be more hindrance than help. He climbed into the nearest available pickup and took out down the drive.

Ray tried to brace himself for what lay ahead. He'd sworn on the day he ran away that he'd never return to the old house. It didn't matter the land was now cleared of buildings. The ground he'd bled on time and time again still remained.

Although admittedly the last beating had been the worst, it was by no means the first. He didn't have one good memory of his father. He'd often wondered if there hadn't been any

good times, or if he'd blocked them out. One thing he remembered clearly was hiding in the weeds down by the creek with Zeus, wishing his dad would just kill him and get it over with.

Ray blinked the moisture from his eyes and squared his shoulders. That was then. As a child he knew he couldn't win a fight against his father, but he wasn't a kid anymore. And never had he had so much to fight for. The thought of Roger putting his hands on Zane had him seeing red.

He knew Zane could take care of himself in a fair fight, but nothing would have prepared his lover for the likes of Roger. Zane was a man of honor. Roger didn't even know the meaning of the word.

Ray decided to go in on foot and pulled the truck to the side of the road. He pulled the gun from his waistband and took the safety off. If he was going in alone, he damn sure wanted the odds in his favor.

Exiting the pickup, he cut through the timber. As he walked, he realized it was the same route he'd taken so many years earlier. It was only fitting. He was almost parallel to the drive when a horn sounded.

Ray's head whipped around toward the noise and saw Pete, sitting in his truck, looking straight at him. "Fuck." It said a lot about his state of mind that he hadn't even considered his dad would have a look-out man.

Deciding to take out the new obstacle, Ray steadied his feet and fired his gun. The shot hit its mark, blasting a small hole through the windshield. He wasn't out to kill his father's lackey, but he sure as hell didn't want him around.

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

The warning shot had the desired effect and the noisy truck engine started. In the blink of an eye, Pete was backing his way down the driveway to the old county road.

With Pete taken care of, Ray turned his attention to Zane. Finding the largest tree he could, he took cover and tried to survey the surroundings. He couldn't get over how different the old place looked without the house and barn.

Taking a deep breath, Ray called out. "Zane!"

"We're over here, son," Roger answered. "Right under your favorite tree."

The mention of the tree had Ray's stomach rolling. He noticed his hand holding the gun had begun to shake. Was it nerves or anger? Ray stepped out from his hiding place, gun leveled in front of him.

Ray's knees threatened to buckle at his first look at the scene in front of him. Zane was precariously perched on a stool with a rope tied around his neck. His lover had been so badly beaten, Ray barely recognized him. "Zane?"

Zane's down turned head lifted slowly. "I'm okay," he mumbled. "He said if I came with him he'd spare your life."

"Dumb fuck didn't he?" Roger snorted.

Before Ray could aim the gun towards his dad's head, Roger moved slightly. It was then Ray noticed the rope tying the two men together. "If I fall, so does he," Roger laughed.

"Why are you doing this? Why not just kill me and get it over with?" Ray spat. He didn't know the extent of Zane's injuries, but the bloody bullwhip at Roger's feet told him it was dire.

"Now, what would be the fun in just shootin' ya? Do you have any idea how much I've suffered because of you, boy? You think prison is easy?"

"I don't give a shit about how much you suffered. No matter what they did to you it wasn't anything compared to what you put me through growing up." As he talked, Ray tried to maintain eye contact with Zane. If he could stall long enough Cas would come charging in. He just needed to keep his lover alive until they were rescued.

Roger started laughing like a mad man. "Rough? Boy you don't know what rough is. I'm an absolute saint compared to my daddy."

Ray didn't doubt that a bit. He'd heard stories over the years, brief glimpses into his dad's life as a boy. "What do you want," Ray demanded. "You gonna ask me to shoot Zane? Is that what this is about?"

"Yeah, like I'm gonna ask you to shoot him with me standing right here. Give me some credit. You always did think I was stupid." Roger turned and spit on the side of Zane's face. "I know the two of you are queer. I did my homework, don't you dare think I didn't. One thing I'm good at is sniffin' out money, and I know both of you have enough to get me far away from this shithole."

"So all of this is about nothing but money?"

Roger took half a step to the side, putting more tension on the rope. Zane started to fall sideways, but managed to catch himself in time. "This is about righting a wrong. That money your granddad left you was supposed to be mine. Have you ever seen a picture of your mother? Damn that was one ugly

bitch. Hell, I married an ugly Kiowa squaw just to get at her daddy's money." Roger started the maniacal laughter again. "She was sure a lot uglier by the time she hot-footed it out of here. Marked her good."

"I don't want the money. I'll sign it over to you, every cent. Just let Zane go," Ray pleaded.

"Your granddad wasn't the only one who wronged me." Roger gestured toward Zane. "His bitch of a mother owes me, too. That's why I decided both estates are my due."

Ray shook his head. He didn't like where this was going. He knew Texas law well enough to know how Roger planned on inheriting everything. "So what? You kill him and then me? You think that'll get you everything?"

"I know it will," Roger answered.

"Wrong. In order for me to inherit anything from Zane, I have to outlive him by one hundred and twenty hours." He looked from Zane to his father. "Something tells me that isn't what you had planned."

Roger chuckled and shook his head. "You might want to sit down for this, son." When Ray didn't move a muscle, Roger continued. "Like I said, I'm not as dumb as you think I am. I know about the time lag between deaths. Why the hell do you think I've been setting you up all this time? You see, I may know you were actually helping your lover all this time, but the town sure doesn't. Public opinion is a might strong thing. I ought to know.

"So I spent a great deal of time and effort to get you exactly where I wanted you. Now, the town thinks you hate Mr. Conner here with a passion. All I've got to do is make

sure when I blow his brains out, some of it manages to splatter onto you."

Roger shrugged like it was no big deal. "I'll simply have you strip, take your clothes and hide you away. Your clothes will conveniently be found in the brush out yonder, linking you to your boyfriend's murder. Then after a week or so, I'll dump your freshly killed body outside the bar. Vigilante justice is what they used to call it. People will just assume you had what was comin' to ya."

Movement in the brush behind Roger and Zane caught Ray's eye. "You've got it all figured out, huh?" he said, waiting for Cas to get into position. "So why kill the boy?"

"Got your attention didn't it? Would you've come back if the boy hadn't been found?"

Ray saw Cas hold up three fingers. Without moving, Ray prepared himself to launch. As Cas took aim, his friend nodded twice, on the third, Ray sprang forward as a shot rang out. He didn't have time to see if Cas's bullet had hit its mark, Ray was too busy trying to catch the man he loved.

Holding Zane up by the torso, Ray lifted his leg and tried to get at his knife. "Hold on, babe," he panted. He could feel the torn shirt and sticky congealed blood against his hand as he tried to get a better hold on Zane. "Help me," he called when he realized he couldn't get to his knife and hold onto Zane's limp body.

Another shot rang out and the rope holding Zane fell around his lover's shoulder. Ray looked in the direction of the shot. Cas had come through for him once again. His friend was standing tall with one boot pressed against Roger's neck.

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

Ray lowered Zane to the ground and tried to assess his condition. His father's screams in the background were not even worth a glance as far as Ray was concerned. "Stay with me," he whispered.

Zane's eyes fluttered for a few seconds. "Get him?"

"Yeah," Ray said, digging his phone out of his pocket.

"Hang on. I'm calling an ambulance."

"Tired," Zane said, his voice scratchy.

"I know. Just try to stay awake for me."

He didn't know how long he murmured words of love to Zane before he heard the unmistakable sound of sirens coming down the road. It wasn't until the ambulance pulled up and Zane was lifted onto the stretcher that he looked at Roger.

"He dead?" he asked Cas.

"Nope. He fainted like a pussy," Cas said with a grin.

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Chapter Nine

Ray threw down his pencil and rubbed his eyes. He heard a chuckle behind him seconds before a steaming cup of coffee was set in front of him. "Thanks."

"Looked like you needed it." Cas took a seat across the table from him.

"You're right about that," Ray said, looking around the Sluggish Lizard. Damn near every government agency in Texas had a representative present. The human smuggling ring he'd worked years on had finally been shut down. Well, at least that particular leg of the operation. Ray doubted there would ever be an end to it as long as the borders remained closed to illegals.

"So what's next for you?" Casmiro asked, sipping his coffee.

"A long vacation at the Lazy C Bar. You?"

Cas shrugged. "Who the hell knows. I could be in Miami by the end of the week." Cas shook his head. "I'm getting too old for this shit."

"You and me both," Ray agreed. It wasn't that either of them was old, but deep undercover took a lot out of him. He felt twice as old as he actually was. "Maybe we should find a new line of work."

"You figure one out where I can stay in one place and use the skills I've acquired, and I'm all ears," Cas chuckled.

Ray picked up his pencil and started filling out the rest of his report. "Heard the Texas Rangers were looking to fill a few positions."

"Too bad my throwing arm is shit since I hit thirty," Cas joked.

Ray snorted, throwing his pencil at his long-time friend. "I'm thinking about it. The Austin office is a pretty manageable drive from the ranch."

"So that's what this is about. You must really love him to give up all this excitement for the damn Rangers."

"Are you saying you won't come with me?" Ray asked. He'd had stupid hopes of Cas joining him.

"I'm too old to change agencies."

"Bullshit. You're thirty-eight, not eighty-three."

Casmiro picked up the yellow number two pencil and twirled it between his fingers. "Guess I'm just not good at staying in one place too long. I like undercover because I get a chance to be someone else for awhile."

Ray could see the truth of Cas's words on his face. "Maybe someday you'll meet someone who'll make you want to stick around for a couple months at a time."

"Doubt it," Cas said, and handed Ray back his pencil. Cas slapped the table with his palm. "Well I'm gonna get outa your hair and let you finish things. Wouldn't want to keep you from your man any longer than necessary."

Ray stuck out his hand. "Thanks. I couldn't have gotten through Roger's trial without you."

Cas shook Ray's hand. "Yeah you could've. You had a pretty good man sitting on the other side of you as well. I'm

just glad it all worked out. I don't think you'll ever have to worry about Roger seeing the light of day again."

"From your lips to God's ears," Ray said.

"Give me a call when you figure out what you're doing with your life." Cas stood and squeezed Ray's shoulder. "I'm happy for you."

Ray saw the longing in his friend's eyes. Casmiro might act like the single life was for him, but Ray knew differently. Like so many people, Cas had been burned. "It'll happen," he whispered, covering Cas's hand.

With one last grin, Cas released Ray's shoulder and walked toward the door. Ray watched his friends back until it disappeared. More determined than ever, he picked up the pencil to finish his report. He'd have to enter everything into the computer once he got back to the office, but he needed to get the facts down while they were fresh in his mind. Other than coming back to testify against the men behind the smuggling ring, this was Raven Black's last official duty to his agency.

* * * *

With the rental truck loaded, Ray took one last look around his house. It had served him well, but it was time to start his life with Zane. Weekends spent in bed together once a month just weren't enough anymore.

After Zane had been released from the hospital five months prior, the two of them had decided to take their relationship a day at a time. Their love wasn't in question. It

was their vastly different careers that had put road blocks between them.

Ray spent another two weeks nursing the man he loved back to full strength. The day Zane went back to work on the ranch full time, was the day Ray returned to El Paso. As time went on, Ray came to the realization he'd lost his edge. Deep undercover wasn't something an agent could do half-assed, and Ray's mind often wandered to Zane and the Lazy C Bar.

As he closed and locked the front door, he brushed the small wooden sign that hung there. "Home Sweet Home." He chuckled as he took the plaque off its nail and tucked it under his arm. He'd tried so hard to create the home he'd always wanted, only to discover it wasn't the house at all, but what was inside that made it a home.

Tossing the sign on the passenger seat, Ray started the truck. Zane knew he was headed to the ranch, but his lover didn't know it was to stay. Ray quickly sent up a prayer that he'd be welcomed with open arms.

The drive was torturous, self-doubts creeping up to punch him between the eyes. It had been a slow process to get back into the good graces of his hometown, but that wasn't what bothered him. It was the guilt. If he were honest with himself, it was the main reason he'd fled the ranch and returned to his undercover work.

Ray had lived with his scars for years, but it had only been a handful of months for Zane. His lover still flinched when he touched them during intimacy. Zane would never admit he blamed him, but they both knew.

In for a Penny
by Carol Lynne

He parked the big truck beside the barn, out of the way, and turned off the engine. "This is it," he mumbled. Ray spotted the new foreman talking to one of the hands. At least they didn't have to worry about Slim getting between them again.

Zane had refused to press charges against his old friend, instead, he'd gotten Slim a good job on a ranch up north. Now Kenneth was in charge of lining out the hands each day. The best thing about the new guy was the man was as straight as an arrow with four kids to prove it.

Getting out of the truck, he smoothed his hair in some semblance of order and headed toward the house. He hoped he hadn't missed dinner. It was Thursday, which meant homemade enchiladas.

As soon as he opened the front door, he smelled them. Putting a little spring in his step, Ray walked through to the dining room. He leaned against the door jam and watched the man he loved.

Sitting all alone at the head of the table, Zane had a fork in one hand and a book in the other. "Must be a good story," Ray said.

Zane's head popped up and a smile spread across his face. "What're you doing here?" Zane asked. He dropped the book and walked over to Ray.

Ray wrapped his arms around Zane and kissed him. He tasted the spice of dinner on his lover's tongue and moaned. "I was hungry for enchiladas."

"Well if that's all it takes to get you home, I'll have Lupe make them for dinner every night. Lupe! Bring our man some dinner," Zane shouted towards the kitchen.

Ray let Zane lead him to the table. His unease had died the moment Zane had looked up from that book. Love. *Yep, Zane truly loves me.*

Lupe came bustling into the room carrying a loaded plate. "So good to see you, Raven."

Ray kissed the older woman on the cheek. "It's good to be seen, had my doubts there for a little while."

Zane paused in the act of taking his seat. "What do you mean?"

Ray realized his mistake and tried to shrug it off. "Just work stuff. I'm okay and it's over."

Zane plopped the rest of the way into his chair and stared down at his half-eaten dinner. Although he didn't say anything, Ray saw by the clenching of his lover's jaw that he wasn't happy.

Reaching across the table, he took Zane's hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything. I'm fine though, really."

A simple nod was all he received in reply. After several long, agonizing moments, Zane picked up his fork and gestured to Ray's plate. "Best eat before it goes cold."

The food he'd been so looking forward to refused suddenly meant nothing. Ray pushed his plate away and stood. He held out his hand and waited for Zane to acknowledge him.

Eventually, Zane looked up into Ray's eyes. "Come on," Ray said.

Zane put his fork down and took his time wiping his mouth with a napkin before taking Ray's hand. "Where are we going?"

"I need to show you something." He hoped like hell the news of him moving back home would snap his lover out of his present mood.

Ray led Zane out the front door to the porch. "I drove a new truck to the ranch, and I want you to see it," he said at Zane's questioning look.

"Okay," Zane mumbled.

Ray turned Zane toward the barn and pointed toward the large moving truck. "What do you think?"

Zane blinked several times. "It's a little big. Your gas mileage is gonna be shit."

"Funny man," Ray chuckled, kissing Zane's temple. "I thought I'd move home if you'll have me."

The light dawned in Zane's eyes. "Really? What about the job?"

Ray shrugged and wrapped his arm tighter around Zane's waist. "I did what I needed to do. It's time to move on."

"To what?" Zane asked.

"To us. To a life together," Ray answered, leading Zane back into the house and up the stairs. "I'm gonna apply for an open position with the Texas Rangers."

Zane's brows rose. "It won't be as exciting."

Ray began to unbutton Zane's shirt. "Nope. Good thing I have all the excitement I need by coming home to you at the end of the day."

Neither of them spoke as they undressed each other, Zane's hands traveling down to play with Ray's Prince Albert piercing. Ray tried to allow the overzealous hands free reign, but he was quickly on the brink.

When Zane started to kneel in front of him, Ray held his lover up and shook his head. "Let me love you." He stepped back and turned down the bed.

Zane slid between the sheets and opened his arms to welcome Ray. As soon as Ray wrapped his arms around his lover, his hands met the reminder of what Zane had recently gone through. The wounds had healed nicely, but he knew the pink skin was still tender.

Turning Zane onto his stomach, Ray started kissing the raised flesh. When he felt Zane's spine stiffen under his lips, Ray pulled back. "I'm so sorry. I'll never be able to say it enough."

"I wish you'd quit apologizing," Zane mumbled, with his face buried in the pillow.

Ray teased the hair at the nape of Zane's neck. "I can't not apologize. If I hadn't come back..."

"Okay, that's enough." Zane pulled away and sat up. "If you hadn't come back, I'd still be nursing a hard-on that no one but you could take care of. Yes, it sucks that I've got a back full of scars, but I don't blame you. Hell, if anything they make me feel even worse for what you went through as a boy. I always knew your life was bad before you came to us, but I didn't realize how bad until I had my own run-in with Roger. I can't imagine being that man's child. I was scared shitless and I'm a grown man."

Zane lay back down on the pillow and cupped the side of Ray's face. "I love you."

Ray leaned into the touch. "I love you, too. I guess I just feel guilty every time you flinch away from my touch."

"I flinch because the skin is still tender, but I can't tell you that because of the damn guilt I see in your eyes every time you look at me. Then it was like you couldn't get away from here fast enough. At first I took it personally, but then I realized something. You went back to your job as a way of punishing yourself, not me."

Ray automatically started to disagree, but stopped mid-thought. *Did I?* God he wanted to deny Zane's observation, but the more he thought about it ... "Maybe you're right."

Ray rolled to his back. "What're we gonna do with me?"

Zane's hand ran down Ray's torso to the short nest of curls surrounding his cock. "Oh, I've got a few ideas."

Ray chuckled. "I'm serious. We need to talk about this stuff."

Zane's hand circled Ray's cock. "Okay. Where do you want to live?"

"Here. With you."

"Great. Where do you want to work?" Zane asked, starting to stroke Ray slowly.

"Austin," Ray grunted, thrusting up into Zane's hand.

"What else is there?" Zane asked.

Hell, Ray could barely remember his own name at the moment. How was he supposed to carry on a decent conversation? Oh. He remembered something that had been really bothering him. "When you look at me, do you see

Roger?" He knew he looked like a younger version of the twisted fuck.

Zane gave an exaggerated body shiver. "Do you honestly think I'd be doing this if I confused you with Roger?" Zane crawled down the bed until he was eye level with Ray's cock. "Or this?" Zane asked, twirling the silver cock jewelry with his tongue.

Damn. Ray was officially done talking. He ran his fingers through his lover's hair and let Zane have his wicked way. "Good," he moaned.

Ray felt the warmth of Zane's throat as his lover took him as far down as he could. He felt his balls start to go tight and tugged on Zane's hair. "I'm gonna shoot if you don't stop."

Pulling off Ray's cock, Zane licked his lips and grinned. "Is that necessarily a bad thing?"

"I thought you wanted to fuck?"

Zane shrugged, the corner of his mouth turning down. "Maybe I do."

He knew what Zane was asking. Ray took a deep breath. "You wanna do me?" he asked, his voice cracking slightly. When he first became sexually active, allowing a partner the ability to stare at his scarred back hadn't been an option. Looking into the eyes of the man he loved, Ray knew it was time to give up some of his control.

He was about to agree, when Zane spoke. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

Oh, look at his lover's pouty lip. Ray couldn't remember a time when he'd seen Zane anything less than confident. It almost broke his heart.

Handing the lube to Zane, Ray turned over. "Be gentle. That's virgin territory down there." He chuckled to lighten the mood, but he was beyond nervous. Pulling his legs up under him, Ray raised his ass.

When nothing happened, he looked over his shoulder. "Something wrong?"

Zane shook his head. "You sure about this? I don't wanna hurt you."

"I trust you," Ray said, making eye contact. He turned and rested his head on his hands.

The first swipe of Zane's tongue across his hole caused gooseflesh to rise on Ray's skin. Before he could comment, a slick finger began circling the tightly puckered entrance. The introduction of one of Zane's long fingers caused Ray to moan. He never thought it would feel this good.

As Zane continued to prepare him, Ray gave himself over to the pleasure. He didn't worry about his scars, or turning his back on another man. Besides, Zane wasn't just another man. That simple thought helped Ray relax enough for Zane to slip in another finger.

"You doing okay?" Zane asked.

"It's good," Ray moaned.

Zane used one hand to rub and massage Ray's lower back as he slowly added a third finger. The pleasure far outweighed the pain in Ray's mind. "Do it," he pleaded.

Zane chuckled and withdrew. "I haven't even grazed your prostate yet. I've been saving that particular joy for when I'm buried deep inside of you."

A light slap landed on Ray's ass cheek. "Raise up a little more," Zane instructed.

Ray did as asked, bracing himself on his hands and knees. He felt the lubed crown of Zane's cock kiss his hole moments before the pressure began. It was overwhelming at first. Ray held his breath.

"Relax," Zane soothed. "Push out and it'll go much easier."

Ray was surprised when Zane's length slipped slowly inside of him. Although he could definitely feel the pleasure of Zane's cock, Ray felt like he was being split in two. "Hold on," he panted.

The moment his body became accustomed to Zane's cock, he pushed further against his lover. "Okay."

Zane pulled out slowly before pushing back in. Once again, gooseflesh rose on Ray's skin. "You feel good, love," Zane whispered, stretching out to lie on Ray's back.

As nice as Zane's cock felt, Ray needed ... "More," he groaned.

He wasn't prepared for the intense pleasure that rolled over him as his lover changed positions and picked up his rhythm. "Yeah," Ray encouraged. He was reaching down to jerk himself when a feeling of euphoria overwhelmed him. Whatever Zane did, Ray wanted more of it. "Again."

He'd never had so much love for his prostate as he did at that moment. With every thrust Zane pegged his gland. Ray managed to encircle his cock moments before his orgasm hit. He felt his body shake and quiver as his cock erupted stream after stream onto the white sheets below.

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A howl from Zane signaled his lover's climax. The two of them fell to the bed in a heap of satisfied flesh. "Love you," Ray managed to mumble before his eyes drifted shut.

After cleaning himself in the attached bathroom, Zane took a warm washcloth into the bedroom. Ray was completely out, snoring like a bear. Zane smiled and began to clean his lover.

Tossing the cloth to the floor, he retrieved the covers from the floor and crawled into bed. He lay there for a long time just looking at Ray's peaceful face in sleep. It still amazed him that Ray had turned out as well as he had after a childhood spent with Roger.

It had been further proved once they'd finally identified the young boy killed on the ranch. Ray hadn't given it a second thought. He immediately contacted his grandfather's lawyer and had a very large sum of money transferred to the boy's family in Mexico. Ray was still adamant that he didn't plan to use any of the money himself, but he'd decided there was a lot of good to come out of it for others.

Zane ran his fingers over Ray's long black hair. He hated to see it go, but he knew Ray would have to cut it if he went to work with the Rangers. Of course they might allow him to keep it if Ray agreed to tie it back or something. Zane hoped so. He loved the way the silky hair felt under his fingers and against his bare skin.

Maybe the Rangers would be good for Ray. At least the new job would keep him here at home where he belonged. Zane hated that his lover put his life on the line on a daily basis, but he knew it was the core of who Ray was. To ask

him to give it up would be the same as asking Zane to never ride another horse.

He watched the long black lashes flutter several times before opening. "What're you looking at?" Ray grumbled.

"You," Zane chuckled. "I had no idea my cock had the power to knock someone of your size on their ass."

"Better than a sleeping pill," Ray mumbled.

Zane smiled as Ray reached out and wrapped his arms and legs around him. The rumble of Ray's stomach was not only heard but felt against Zane's torso. "Hungry?" Zane asked.

"Not enough to let you go," Ray said.

Zane snuggled further against Ray. "I hope it's always this good between us."

"Oh, we'll fight. Make no mistake. I can be a real sonofabitch at times."

"As long as you don't try and run away from me again," Zane whispered against Ray's lips.

"This is my home. Always has been, and always will be." Ray opened his mouth and let Zane in.

The two of them ate at each other's mouths for several long moments before breaking for air. "I'm happy you finally came home," Zane said.

"Even in the years I wasn't here, a large part of me never left." Ray took Zane's hand and covered his heart. "I told you before. You stole this a long time ago."

"Good, because I never plan to give it back."

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About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles life as a full-time mom and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find her either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favorite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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With the scheming ploys put forth by her stepmother already in play, Syndra is reluctant to believe that the handsome new lord can set things right at Mardoon. But one touch of Keran's lips convinces Syndra otherwise, and she finds herself surrendering to him ... mind, body and soul.

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The war is over and Cameron Cabot no longer knows who she is. Her life was enveloped and consumed by the fight, but suddenly things have changed. Instead of fighting creatures wanting her planet, Cameron is now fighting the urge to lay claim to two men who believe she is their mate. Has Cameron found her new assignment in the arms of a Noah and Mars?

Yes, if a mischievous little spirit has anything to say about it...

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Male Me by Amarinda Jones

After Delaware Brooks sends a silly email about what she would like the new boss to do to her, she is called into the boss's office. The punishment? Every hot, sexual craving she has ever had, fulfilled. But Templeton McAdam is not the only new man in her life. His best friend, Speed is invited to enjoy Delaware much to her surprise and excitement. Two men. One woman. Their only desire is to please her.

Intense pleasure is one thing, but is it wrong to enjoy both men? What would a good girl do? And should she be falling in love with them so fast? But sudden love is not the only problem Delaware has. Someone is watching her every move and planning on teaching her a lesson.

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Handcuffs and Lace

Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law
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Ticket Me More by Tia Fanning

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her Battery Operated Boyfriend, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the "living" world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he does not seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention ... using any speed necessary.

\$2.50 e-book

Cuff Me Lacy by Demi Alex

Three months is way too long to wait for some simple, low-down, straight forward sex. It's not like Officer Chrissie Hansen is asking for prince charming to offer her the love of a lifetime. All she wants is a good orgasm that she doesn't have to work for alone.

At least with "The Bull", she knows what to expect. But when Patrick MacKlick returns to her life and tempts her with

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new options, she discovers that lace can imprison a heart better than handcuffs can.

\$3.00

Search Me Baby, One More Time by Melinda Barron

Wren Thornberry's life isn't going according to plan. She let her father talk her out of marrying Bryan Stockard, the man she loves, and moved halfway around the world. Now she's back home in Texas, babysitting her grandmother while grandma and her boy-toy work through their list of sexual exploits, making themselves the talk of the town.

But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: A police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren ... *assume the position*.

\$3.00

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Melinda Barron's Desires of the Lamp Tales are at

www.ResplendencePublishing.com

Wish Me Up, Rub Me Down

With no love life to speak of, BBW Anya Bartholomew lives only for her job. This dedication has paid off. As a successful advertising agent, she has risen in the ranks of her firm to be the top moneymaker.

But at the insistence of her two best friends, who claim she needs a break from work, Anya takes a weekend vacation to the small town of Pleasant, Maine. While shopping at an antique shop, she rubs a lamp that looks as if it could belong to Aladdin himself.

Things will never be the same.

Back at work on Monday morning, Anya finds that her boss has given her a new account ... for a lamp factory. However, her clients—two very handsome, very sexy men—are more than what they seem.

They're pleasure Djinn. And they have come to fulfill five of Anya's most secret sexual wishes.

\$4.50 e-book

Aliya Baban and the Cave of Pleasure

Advertising agent Aliya Baban is beautiful with a capital B. Unfortunately, she's also a witch with a capital B. In her twenty-eight years of life, she's managed to offend almost every woman she has ever met.

But she doesn't care, really. That's just the way life is.

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When her boss tells her to get the *Cave of Pleasure* account, or else get a new job, Aliya takes her party invitation—and the strange lamp she's received—and attends the nightclub's grand opening, ready to do battle for her livelihood.

Matuse is more than just the owner of the *Cave of Pleasure* ... he's a pleasure djinni. And Aliya has rubbed his lamp. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. Though he intends to bring intense pleasure to her body, it's also his job to make sure his "she-devil" changes her wicked ways.

Will Matuse be able to help Aliya overcome her painful past? Or will Aliya fail to make the five heartfelt apologies she needs to make to the five women she has hurt the most.

\$4.50 e-book

To Rub, Honor and Obey

Moreen McGee is a perfect example of how poor decisions made in youthful rebellion can haunt someone for life. Now on probation for ten years, she serves her court-ordered community service at a center for troubled teens, in the hopes of stopping other kids from taking the wrong path.

But when one of her young charges pickpockets a wallet from her high school nemesis, Aliya Baban, Moreen decides to put the illicit skills she learned as a teenager to good use ... by breaking into Aliya's apartment to return the stolen wallet, thus keeping the kid who stole it out of trouble and out of jail.

However, once she's in the opulent Manhattan flat, Moreen can't resist the urge to take one small token from the woman she still blames for her own downfall—an old, neglected oil lamp that she's sure Aliya will never miss.

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Moreen accidentally summons a gorgeous demon-turned-pleasure djinni named Paran ... and he's not too thrilled with the theft of his property. Moreen has rubbed his lamp, the contract is sealed. For the next thirty days, she belongs to him. And Paran intends to use this time to help his little felon learn some important lessons, including the true meaning of the words *honor* and *obey*.

\$4.50 e-book

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