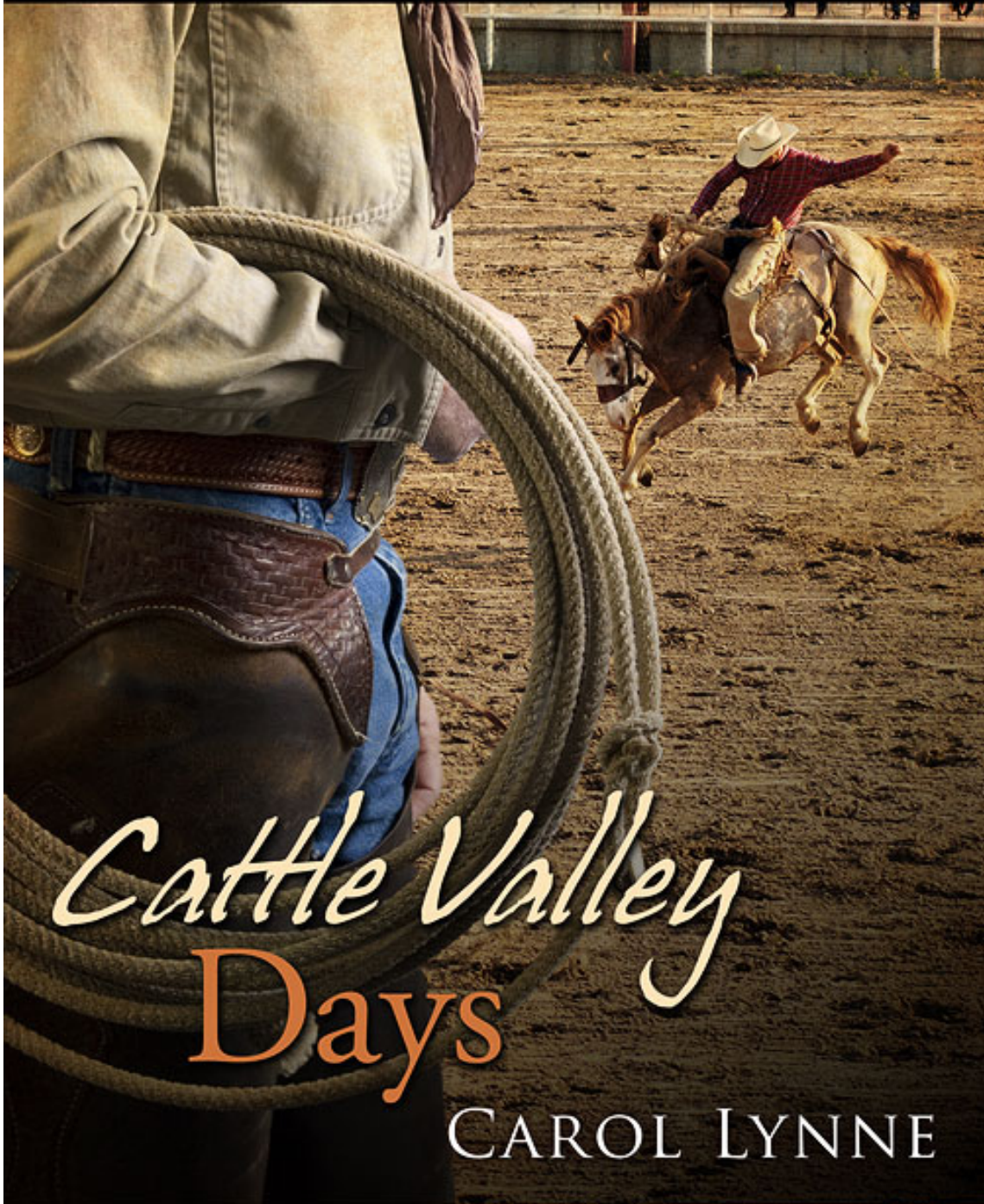




CATTLE
VALLEY



Cattle Valley
Days

CAROL LYNNE

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Cattle Valley Days

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Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Cattle Valley

CATTLE VALLEY DAYS

Carol Lynne

Dedication

For M. Todd Howell

Maybe someday we'll get lucky and a place like Cattle Valley will really exist.

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Coke: The Coca-Cola Company CORPORATION

Tim McGraw: McGraw, Tim

Much Ado About Nothing: Play by William Shakespeare Movie by Samuel Goldwyn Company

Chevy Suburban: General Motors Corporation

Chapter One

Entering the house, Nate tossed his keys onto the table and sighed. With the annual Cattle Valley Days only a week away, his work day was getting longer and longer. Whose idea was it for him to run for Mayor?

He chuckled. *Me, myself and I. Suck it up, Mayor Gills.*

Nate set his briefcase down and headed for the kitchen. Hopefully his men had saved him some dinner. An item of underwear in the middle of the great room caught his attention. Suddenly his good mood went south.

“Dammit! Can’t you pigs clean up after yourselves once in a while?”

A chuckling Rio appeared in the doorway leading from the media room. “You’re home. I thought maybe you forgot the way.”

Nate was too tired to get into the ongoing discussion about the hours he’d been keeping. He pointed towards the red boxer-briefs. “Why the hell are your dirty drawers on the floor?”

Rio walked over and snatched the underwear into his hand. “Sorry. Must’ve fallen out of the basket on the way to the laundry room.”

Nate sighed. “Did you at least leave me something for dinner?”

Rio held up his hands. “You said you’d grab something. Ryan and I went to O’Brien’s for Taco Tuesday. I can make you an omelette or a sandwich.”

Nate was so tired he couldn’t even remember having a conversation about dinner. “Forget it. I’m going to bed.”

He walked upstairs shaking his head. Maybe a decent night’s sleep would put him in a better frame of mind. His footsteps slowed as he neared the guest room. Would Rio and Ryan feel slighted if he slept by himself? Yeah, probably, but he was too worn out to care.

He shed his clothes and crawled into the unfamiliar bed, drifting off a few seconds later.

* * * *

Rio tossed the underwear into the hamper and returned to finish the movie he and Ryan had started. "He's in another one of his moods," he grumbled.

Ryan lifted his head and placed it back on Rio's lap. "Cut him some slack. I remember how pissy Quade used to get this time of year."

The long black hair fanning over the edge of the sofa begged for attention. Rio began running his fingers through the thick silk. "If I'd known, I would've put up more of a fight when he wanted to do this mayor crap."

Ryan gazed up into Rio's eyes. "Nate's gratefully shared everything with us since he came into our lives. This is something he wanted for himself. Give him that, will ya?"

His lover always had a way of slapping his hands without coming out and yelling at him. "I just miss him."

"We both do, but we'll get him back after next week. Right now he needs our understanding, not our criticism."

Rio wanted to argue, but knew it would be futile. He returned his attention back to the movie. Life without Nate being, well...Nate, sucked. He hadn't realised how much he depended on his little metrosexual until he wasn't there.

The movie lost its appeal, and Rio turned off the television.

"Hey. I was watching that," Ryan protested, pinching Rio's thigh.

"Sorry. I thought maybe we could go upstairs."

"Okay, but you really coulda asked first." Ryan sat up and swung his legs over the wide leather sofa.

Rio stood and pulled his tattooed man into his arms. "I'm a thoughtless ass sometimes, but you love me anyway."

Ryan nipped Rio's chin. "You're right on both counts."

They turned off the lights and headed upstairs. Walking into their bedroom, Rio was surprised to find the bed empty. "Fuck!"

"Oh, this will not do at all," Ryan growled, turning to stalk out of the room.

Rio followed as Ryan threw open the guestroom door and turned on the light. He threw the covers from Nate's nude body and picked him up. Nate was dead to the world and didn't even stir as he was carried into the master suite.

Working quickly, Rio had the bed turned down and his clothes off in no time. He loved it when Ryan got this way, all commanding and sheriffy.

Ryan laid Nate on the opposite side of the bed and started stripping. "I don't give a shit if he's too tired to fuck, but I'll be damned if I'll have him anywhere but in my bed."

Spread out on his back, with his feet firmly planted on the mattress, Rio let his legs fall open in invitation. "I got what you need right here, Sheriff Blackfeather."

Ryan licked his lips as his hand began to stroke his cock. "You feel like being my prisoner, do ya?"

Wow. How long had it been since Ryan had looked at him with such unbridled lust in his eyes? "Yes. Use me, Lawman. Teach me a lesson."

With a wicked gleam in his eyes, Ryan turned and rifled around in the dresser drawer, finally pulling out a pair of handcuffs. "Turn over."

Rio's eyes went wide. *Kinky motherfucker.* He did as ordered and stretched his arms towards the spindled headboard. The cold metal clicked into place, and Rio started to worry. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

He felt the bed dip a second before a large hand slapped him on the ass.

"Ow! What the fuck?" he asked, trying to look over his shoulder.

"Shut up. Prisoners speak when I tell them to speak." A slick finger shoved its way inside Rio's ass. He flinched, not expecting the sudden intrusion.

"Got any contraband in here?" Ryan asked, adding another finger.

"I don't think so, but you might keep looking just in case I forgot something," Rio moaned. He felt the pad of Ryan's finger rub against his prostate and groaned. His cock was soaking the bed sheets with copious amounts of pre-cum. Usually, when Ryan got him this riled up, Nate was there to slurp the dripping liquid into his hot little mouth.

"Fuck me already, Sheriff."

He received a harder slap to his ass. "You want this? I don't think you can handle it. You look like a big candy-assed thug to me."

Rio shoved his ass back as far as he could. "Please fuck me."

Yeah, he was begging, but what the hell. He needed, and needed now.

After another round of Beat-Rio's-Ass, Ryan entered him without his usual gentle nature. Rio almost swallowed his tongue at the sudden invasion. Spots appeared in his line

of vision, and he had to take deep breaths to keep from passing out as Ryan assaulted his ass like never before.

Seriously, what the fuck was going on with his Sheriff? Rio began to think Nate's distance of late was affecting Ryan more than he let on.

It was the rough hand pulling on his black curls that finally did it for him. He roared his release as his cock erupted, spraying not only the sheet but his damn pillow as well. *Fuck.*

A sound beside him caught Rio's attention. He turned his head just in time to see Nate come. Rio should probably feel guilty for waking his lover, but from the expression on Nate's sleepy face, his man didn't mind much.

Ryan howled like the Alpha male he was as he thrust deep inside Rio and let loose. Ryan collapsed against Rio's back, and they both fell to the bed below. Now that the excitement had passed, Rio's ass really started to burn. *Damn.* He was going to be sore in the morning.

* * * *

Nate was finishing his first cup of coffee of the day when Ryan walked into the kitchen. "Morning."

Ryan filled a cup with coffee. "Mornin'."

Was it his imagination, or was Ryan pissed about something. "What's wrong?"

His lover leaned a hip against the counter and took a sip of his coffee. "Why'd you go to bed in the guestroom?"

Shit. When he'd woken in bed with Rio and Ryan, he assumed he'd crawled in after the sexy dream he'd had during the night. "Sorry. I was tired."

Ryan slammed his cup onto the counter, hot coffee splashing everywhere. "Let's get something straight. You wanna work yourself 'til all hours of the night, that's your business. But when your fucking job wears you out to the point that you don't end up in my bed at the end of the day, then *we* got problems."

Nate stared at his lover. What the hell? "God forbid I ask for a little fucking support around here. This festival is my first real act as mayor. Forgive me if I wanted to make sure it

was done right. I stupidly thought all the long hours I was putting in would end up making you and Rio proud."

He stood, leaving his cup on the table and started to walk out of the kitchen. "I guess I didn't realise my place in this relationship."

Nate hurried his steps. He felt the tears coming, and the last thing he wanted was to cry in front of Ryan. He grabbed up his briefcase and escaped to the more tranquil setting of his convertible.

He heard the front door open and spun out of the drive. *No*. Ryan didn't get a chance to twist what he'd said.

As he drove towards town, Nate tried to push his family problems to the back of his mind. He had so many things yet to do in order for next week's celebration to go off without a hitch.

Once in town, he started to feel better. Friendly faces waved to him as he drove by. He pulled in front of the bakery. Nothing, not even a fight with Ryan, would stop him from his morning cappuccino and maple Long John.

Kyle greeted him as soon as he stepped inside the shop. "Morning, Mayor."

"Morning." Nate got in line behind Naomi, the cute little redhead who owned the bookstore in town. He poked her in the back with his index finger and chuckled at the glare she shot him over her shoulder.

"Watch it, Mister, or I'll report you for harassment."

"Well, if I'm gonna get in trouble for poking you, I might as well grab your ass, too," Nate joked.

Naomi's significant other stepped up and gave Nate the stink eye. "You looking for trouble?"

Nate held up his hands in defence. "Hell, no. Everyone in town knows not to mess with the lesbians. You all could kick my ass."

Naomi laughed. "Gracie Sutherland could kick your butt. It has nothing to do with being a lesbian, jackass."

Nate grinned at the image of little Gracie trying to kick his butt. "Why is it that everyone thinks I'm a wimp? Do I have to remind the residents of this town that not only am I a highly trained private investigator, but I also have several black belts?"

Naomi cocked her head. "Weird how that is, huh?" She shrugged. "I guess you just don't project tough."

"Gee, thanks." Even though he knew Naomi and Courtney were only joking, Nate started to take the banter to heart. They were right. Everyone saw him as the impeccably dressed partner of the two bad asses in town. When did he cease to be seen for what he really was? An impeccably dressed stud who could also kick ass.

Suddenly, coffee didn't sound good. He turned and walked out of Brynn's without a word to anyone. Damn. He hated being in funky moods because they made the day drag on. Not that he had anything to look forward to at home at the end of the night. Well, besides another go 'round with Ryan. He wondered if Rio was as pissy with him as the Sheriff.

Walking into city hall depressed him even further. The air conditioning was acting up again, and it was already hotter than hell in the old mansion turned administrative offices.

"Morning," he told Carol on his way through the outer office.

"Ryan just called."

Nate didn't say a word. He placed his briefcase on his desk and started making a pot of coffee. It felt like he'd only just left the office, and here he was back again.

Carol came bustling in the room and handed him a stack of phone messages. "The people with the portable toilets need you to call them ASAP."

For some reason, that made Nate chuckle. "Perfect. My morning's already gone down the shitter, might as well talk to people who can do something about it."

"Oh, don't start with the sarcasm. Look at this." Carol bent over the desk and stuck the top of her head in his face.

"What? You got dandruff or something?"

"No, idiot, I'm getting grey hair. I've never had that until you came along."

Nate studied his secretary. It was hard for him to tell if the feisty lady was joking or serious. "What're you saying, Carol?"

She put her hands on her curvaceous hips and sighed dramatically. "Why don't you call in the committee heads to deal with some of this stuff? Quade never tried to put Cattle Valley Day's on by himself. It's suicide."

Nate scrubbed his hands over his face. Why didn't anyone understand? "I just want it to be special. I'm putting every ounce of myself into making it that way."

"I know you are, and I'm sure it'll be spectacular, just like you are. But don't forget you do have plenty of people willing and able to help out."

"I know, and I plan to use them to help decorate. Speaking of which, can you get me the phone numbers for the town beautification committee? I know Hearn's, of course, and I'm sure you know George Manning's off the top of your head, but I'll need a full list."

Carol went wide-eyed. "Why would you think I know George's number?"

Nate grinned. "Well, because the two of you worked together for several months, and because I've seen the way you two look at each other."

Carol stood and tossed her hair behind her shoulder. "Flirting's all we do. He's bisexual, and I've had my fill of bisexual men."

Nate leaned back and put his feet on his desk. "Suit yourself, but you'll either have to get over the bisexual thing, or search for a man outside of Cattle Valley."

"Who says I even want a man? I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

"You say it every time you sigh while reading one of those smutty romances you're so fond of."

"They're just books."

"If you say so."

A loud, disgusted grunt came from Carol as she stalked out of his office.

Nate picked up the phone to call the potty people, and it rang, startling him. "Nate Gills."

"Hey, baby. Feel like meeting Ryan and me for lunch later?" Rio asked.

"Not if you're both gonna gang up on me."

"Be nice," Rio admonished.

"Yeah, that's me, Mr. Nice Guy."

"You used to be. I'm not sure what name to call you lately."

Nate bit the inside of his cheek to keep back a smartassed retort. "I've got meetings, but I should be outta here early enough to be home by seven. Guess you'll just have to wait until then to give me an earful."

"What the hell is wrong with you lately? Every time you open your mouth something hateful comes out. Do what you want."

Rio hung up, and Nate was left holding the phone. He shook his head and called the potty people. *Fuck*. He didn't have time to be the happy-go-lucky guy people were used to.

* * * *

Rio spotted Ryan as soon as he entered O'Brien's.

"Pitcher of my usual, please," Ryan told Sean on his way through. He slid into the booth and leaned over to give Rio a kiss. "How's work?"

"Okay." He wouldn't tell Ryan the truth. Sure business was good, but it wasn't the same without Nate there running the place with him. "I got a call from Garron. He wanted to know where they should make hotel reservations."

"Great. So Sonny and Garron are definitely coming for the rodeo?"

"Yep, and everyone else."

Ryan grinned. "I can't wait for Erico to get a look at all those gorgeous Good boys. He'll have to wear a bib while they're in town."

Rio shook his head. "I don't know about that. He's been hot on Jay lately, but Jay won't give him the time of day."

"Good for Jay," Ryan chuckled.

Kitty brought over the pitcher of Coke Ryan had ordered, as well as the big cheeseburgers Rio had pre-ordered. Rio licked his lips. Jay made the best burgers in town. "Thanks, Kitty."

"Enjoy. Let me know if you need anything."

Rio attacked his food. He'd gone without breakfast because of Ryan's mood and Nate's hasty departure. He didn't say anything to his men, but he'd been having a lot of stomach issues lately.

"Damn. You'd better slow down, or you're gonna make yourself sick."

Rio glanced up from his lunch to meet Ryan's gaze. Both of them refused to acknowledge the elephant in the room. Well, actually, the missing elephant in the room. He secretly hoped having their friends from Nebraska visit would pull Nate away from his mayoral duties for a little while.

"So, anything exciting going on around town?" Rio asked.

“Not really. I’ve spent all morning interviewing guys that’ve applied to work security for Cattle Valley Days. Most of ’em are Sheridan police officers who’re looking for extra cash, but only a few so far are open minded enough to fit in.”

“Any cute ones?” Rio asked. He knew Ryan was an extremely jealous lover, and enjoyed keeping him on his toes from time to time.

It worked. Ryan’s eyes narrowed over the top of his glass. He set his Coke down and reached across the table. Ryan grabbed a handful of Rio’s black curls and pulled him forward until they were nose to nose over the table. “Do you need me to handcuff you to the bed again?”

Memories of the previous night danced wickedly through Rio’s mind. Hours later, Rio could still feel Ryan inside of him. “Maybe.”

His hand still firmly buried in Rio’s hair, Ryan kissed him, tongue thrusting deep. Rio opened wide to receive the openly erotic public display of affection. With a grunt and a grin, Ryan released his hold. “That can be arranged.”

They both sat back in their seats and finished their lunch. Rio continued to torture Ryan by slowly licking the ketchup from his fry.

“If I didn’t have a meeting with Nate later, I’d take you home right now.”

Bringing up Nate’s name immediately killed Rio’s mood. “Tell him I’m making lasagne for dinner.”

Ryan pushed his plate to the centre of the table and sighed. “We had a fight earlier.”

“Yeah. I kinda figured that out when I woke up alone in bed and found you in the kitchen growling like a bear.”

“He just makes me so damn mad sometimes. Doesn’t he realise what he’s doing to this relationship?”

Rio felt stomach acid slowly work its way up his oesophagus. Even the mere mention of his relationship being the least bit rocky had Rio wanting to throw up. “I just remembered I have a weight-training class in twenty. I’ll have to catch you later at home.”

Ryan’s head tilted to the side, his long black hair spilling over his shoulder. “You okay? You look a little green.”

“I’m fine, just gotta get going.” Rio slid out of the booth and gave his lover a quick kiss. “You want me to pay on my way out?”

“Naw, I’ll take care of it. Go teach your class.”

Rio escaped the pub as quick as he could. He climbed into his truck and turned the air conditioner on full blast. *Please don’t throw up.* He needed to hold shit together for another two weeks, and then Nate would be finished working crazy hours, and maybe Ryan would get off his ass.

Two weeks. Rio hoped he wouldn’t lose any more weight in that time. According to the scale at *The Gym*, he was already down twelve pounds. It was a wonder his men hadn’t noticed, but then again, his men hadn’t noticed much other than the tension between the two of them.

Rio put the truck into gear and headed back to work. Despite what he’d told Ryan, he didn’t have a class for another two hours, so hopefully he’d get a chance to lie down and get his damn stomach under control.

Chapter Two

After losing the battle to keep his lunch down, Rio gargled with mouthwash and went in search of Mario. He found the martial arts instructor making a fruit smoothie.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Okay, I guess. Asa called and cancelled another session. Guess he's got to go out of town again." Mario grumbled.

"Damn. That man travels all the time."

"Yeah. Makes it real hard to try and pin him down for a date. Just when I think I've gotten up the nerve to ask him out, he bails on me."

Rio shook his head. Mario and Asa had been dancing around each other for over a year. He wasn't sure what either of them was waiting on. "You just need to tie the sonofabitch down some afternoon during class and ask him."

A devilish expression crossed Mario's face. "Oh, don't think I haven't thought about tying that man down. Although, if I ever succeed, asking for a date will be the last thing on my mind."

Rio choked. He never would've guessed Mario was into the rough stuff. The previous night once again flashed through his mind. "Kinky."

Mario grinned. "Not for a while, but I'm hoping."

"Does Asa have any idea what you're into? Maybe you're scaring him off."

Mario chuckled, flashing his to-die-for dimples. "He hasn't said anything, but I get the feeling he's the kind of man who might enjoy giving up some of that ever-present control once in a while."

Rio laughed right along with Mario. It felt good. So good, in fact, he forgot his plan to lie down. He remembered a time when Nate could make him forget all his worries. Now it seemed Nate and Ryan *were* his worries.

"So, uh, what was that about earlier?" Mario asked, suddenly looking serious.

"What?"

"Tossing your cookies. I notice you've been doing that a lot lately. You're not pregnant, are you?"

Rio was embarrassed that Mario knew his secret. "No. I'm not pregnant. Just been having some trouble with my stomach. Nothing serious."

Mario leaned forward on the juice counter. "That's a load of b.s., and we both know it. So what's going on?"

Rio broke eye contact and glanced around the large, open room. Men and women were working out, either listening to music on their headphones, or watching the big screen televisions he and Nate had strategically placed around the room. So why did *The Gym* seem so empty? *Because Nate's not here.*

"I miss Nate. He doesn't have time for me anymore." Rio shrugged. "Guess I'm letting it get to me."

"Has it been this way since he took over from Quade?"

"Some. Not as bad as it's been lately, though. I keep telling myself that once next weekend is over, I'll get him back, but I don't know anymore. Seems like he's really getting into this mayor thing. After the celebration, I'm sure it'll be something else that needs his attention." *Damn.* He knew he sounded like a girl.

"What's Ryan say about it?"

"Normally he's the one yelling at me for getting upset with Nate, but I guess he and Nate had it out earlier over a cup of coffee."

"And Nate? Has either of you even bothered to actually tell him how you're feeling without it coming out as a challenge?"

How many times had he told his lover he missed him? "Yeah. I've tried. Either he doesn't care, or he's not listening."

He reached down and rubbed his burning stomach. All this talk about Nate had the acid churning again. "Excuse me."

Rio raced to the bathroom and once again threw up. With nothing in his stomach, the only thing to come up was the acid that tasted so vile. He flushed the toilet and poured a small amount of the complimentary mouth wash into a tiny paper cup. He stared at himself in the mirror as he rinsed his mouth. *I don't want to be here.*

He opened the door and almost ran into Mario. The big Italian stood just outside the door with his massive arms crossed over his chest. Mario didn't say a word, but his expression showed his worry.

"I'll be okay. I think I'm gonna head home for the day." Rio didn't wait for an answer, but he got one anyway.

"It won't go away until you deal with it," Mario shouted after him.

* * * *

Ryan stepped inside the Tall Pines ski lodge and strode towards the front desk. "Hey, David, is Chad around?"

"Hi, Sheriff. Something wrong?" David asked, suddenly looking uneasy.

Ryan grinned at the young man. David had run into some trouble in the past, but he'd turned into a damn fine addition to the Cattle Valley community.

"No trouble. Just wanted to catch up with Chad and ask him about some rooms for friends that're coming into town."

"Is there something I can help you with? Chad usually takes a break from twelve to two before The Grizzly Bar starts getting busy."

Ryan tried his best to wipe the knowing smile from his face. He knew exactly what Chad was up to, and he was positive the lodge manager wasn't doing it alone. Ryan glanced at his watch. Chad still had another twenty-five minutes to finish his business with Richard.

"Okay. I'll go ahead and make the reservations and then just wait for Chad in the bar."

David positioned his fingers over the computer keyboard. "What're you looking for in the way of rooms? We're starting to get pretty booked, but I'm sure I can find something."

"I need three rooms. King-sized beds. Close to each other if you got 'em."

David's fingers flew over the keys. "I have a two bedroom suite with a sitting room, and a single room across the hall. I know the suite's more money, but if you factor in the cost of two rooms, it's only a little more."

Ryan nodded. "That'll work. Do they all have king-size beds?"

David glanced at his computer screen. "Yes."

“Good. Go ahead and book ‘em for Wednesday through Monday. Put them all under the last name of Good. I’ll let the brothers fight it out over who goes where. Do you need a copy of my credit card to hold them?”

“That would probably be best. I know you’re good for it, but I’m not always on duty.”

Ryan dug out his wallet and handed David his card. Once everything was entered into the computer, Ryan gestured to the bar. “Tell Chad I’d like a word when he gets a chance.”

“Will do, Sheriff.”

Ryan found a comfortable chair by the wall of windows and settled in. He had a meeting with Nate at three-thirty, and if he was honest with himself, he wasn’t looking forward to it.

The thought was like a punch to the gut. Had he ever felt that way? Usually just the sight of the man he loved was enough to set off butterflies in his stomach. Now...what? Ryan wasn’t sure. Nate had changed, that much was obvious. It wasn’t just since preparations had begun for Cattle Valley Days, either. Something was bothering Nate, but Ryan couldn’t seem to get to the root of the problem, no matter how hard he tried.

He spotted Chad and Richard walking towards him.

“Hey,” Chad greeted.

“Hey, guys.”

“Thought I’d stop by and say hi before heading to the kitchen to make sure all the supplies I ordered came in,” Richard said.

“Business good?” Ryan asked.

Richard smiled. “Business is great. We’ve seen a lot of tourists come in and out. People are taking advantage of the hiking and bike trails.”

Ryan nodded. “Yep. I’ve seen quite a few new faces around town.”

Richard shook Ryan’s hand and gave Chad a kiss. “I’d better get going.”

“I’ve got friends staying at the lodge for the celebration, so I’m sure you’ll see plenty of me.”

“Good.” Richard waved and retreated to the kitchen.

Chad took a seat beside Ryan, and gazed out over the breathtaking view. “David said you wanted to see me?”

"Yeah. Nothing big, but I wanted to give you a heads-up about the friends coming to town. I'm sure you don't have a problem with it, but among my friends is a threesome made up of twin brothers and their wife. Thought I'd let you know ahead of time so you're not shocked when they check-in."

Chad whistled. "Damn. I've read books, but I've never actually seen..."

"Yeah. It's as hot as you might imagine. Hell, probably hotter," Ryan chuckled.

"Would you like me to tell David? He'll probably be the one checking them in. He's been working double shifts most days to pay off Guy for the damages to the lodge."

"Sure. Don't make a big deal out of it, though. The Good boys are great people. I wouldn't want them embarrassed in any way."

Chad nodded knowingly. "I'll take care of it."

Ryan stood and studied the view once more. "Well, I've got a meeting I'd better get to. See ya around."

"Okay. Let us know if you need anything."

"Will do." Ryan walked out of the bar and headed to his SUV. The butterflies in his stomach had already begun, but they had nothing to do with being anxious to see Nate at their meeting.

* * * *

Leaning back in his chair, Nate watched Ryan's mouth as his lover and George Manning discussed which roads would need to be blocked off for the celebration. A tapping noise drew Nate's attention away from Ryan. It appeared Hearn Sutherland was as bored with the meeting as he was.

Hearn caught Nate staring at him, and laid his pencil down on the conference table. Nate gave him an easy smile, and Hearn smiled back.

He'd been half-hoping Ryan would arrive before the others, so they could clear the air a bit before the meeting, but no such luck. Instead, the tension between them was thick as a San Francisco fog.

Nate watched as Ryan stood and walked over to the large map of Cattle Valley he'd tacked to the wall. He was pointing and explaining how the Sheriff's department would

route traffic before the big parade. *Damn, Ryan was sexy.* Nate's gaze travelled from Ryan's strong forearms down his torso to the tight fit of the blue jeans he wore as part of his regular uniform.

"What do you think?"

Nate continued to stare at Ryan's fly, totally oblivious to the fact that all eyes were on him.

Ryan cleared his throat. "Nate. Hello? Are you with us?"

Nate blinked and sat up straight. "I'm sorry. Guess you caught me daydreamin'."

"I was asking if you'd taken care of getting the school busses to shuttle people into town from the rodeo grounds," Ryan reiterated.

"Uh, yeah. All taken care of. We'll have three busses running continually from the rodeo grounds, and two busses running back and forth from the school parking lot to downtown."

Ryan stared at him for several seconds before turning back to his map. As he started talking about closing roads again, Nate drifted off once more. He was so incredibly tired. Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally. Maybe he needed to get drunk and dance on the tables. Hell. How long had it been since he'd been the life of a party? Too long.

Gone was the fun Nate of yesterday. Mr. Fun was now Mr. Mayor. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

The next thing he knew, George stood and gathered his things. Nate's gaze slid to Hearn. "Is it over?" he whispered.

"Finally," he whispered back.

The office emptied in minutes, leaving Nate and Ryan in the room. Nate stood and walked back over to refill his cup. "Care for some more coffee?"

Ryan paused in the process of rolling his map. "Sure."

After refilling his cup, he carried the pot to the table and took care of Ryan's.

"Rio said to tell you he was making lasagne for supper," Ryan mumbled as he slipped a rubber band around the roll of paper.

"Sounds good."

"Good enough for you to actually come home in time to eat it with us?" Ryan asked.

Nate gave Ryan a short nod before slipping behind his desk. If he were a woman, Nate would've sworn he was experiencing PMS. Everything Ryan said had him nearly breaking down in tears.

Ryan brought his coffee over and leaned against the side of Nate's desk. "Sorry about earlier. Guess the hours you're working are starting to get to me."

Get to him? What about all the times Ryan had been forced to fill in for one of his deputies? There'd been weeks when Nate and Rio had barely seen their partner, but they'd both tried to understand. Why was this situation so different?

"It'll be over soon." Nate refused to meet Ryan's penetrating stare. The last thing he wanted was another argument. Silence was better than screaming any day of the week in his opinion.

"Yeah. So you've said." Ryan carried his cup over and set it beside the pot.

Nate clamped his jaw shut in an effort to keep his mouth closed. *Don't say anything. Don't say anything.*

Ryan strode back over and retrieved his map from the table, before coming to a stop beside Nate. "Do I get a kiss before I leave?"

Nate tilted his chin up and gave Ryan a chaste kiss on the lips. "I'll be home for dinner. I promise."

Ryan stared at him for several moments before turning and leaving the office. Nate leaned back in his chair and sighed. Maybe he'd duck out early and stop by O'Brien's. At least Jay always seemed happy to see him.

* * * *

"Hey, Sean."

"Mayor," Sean greeted Nate with a nod.

"Jay busy?"

Sean glanced around the virtually empty bar. "I doubt it. Dinner rush won't start for another thirty minutes or so."

"I won't take up much of his time." Nate entered the kitchen through the swinging door.

"Hey, buddy," he called out.

Jay jumped and spun around, his hand on his chest. "You scared me."

"Sorry." Nate could tell Jay was trying to hide something behind his back. "What've ya got there?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I heard it was Kyle's birthday." Jay glanced over his shoulder and bit his lip. "I'm sure it's not nearly as good as his, but I thought..."

"He'll love it." Nate strode over and gently moved Jay's tiny body out of the way. "Goddamn, Jay. I don't know how the thing tastes, but I do know I've never seen a prettier cake in my life."

Jay tilted his head as he studied the ivory and sage green cake. "You think? I wanted to do something special."

"It's perfect. Really." Nate shook his head. This was exactly the reason he wanted to stop by. No matter what the boy had been through in his life, he always seemed ready to make someone else smile in his own shy way. Nate figured it was Jay's good heart that showed through the emotional scars left by his ex-boyfriend.

"Make sure you let Sean see that before you take it over to Kyle."

"Why?" Jay asked, looking at the floor.

If there was one thing that bothered Nate about Jay, it was his self-defeating personality. Not only did Jay not seem to realise how pretty, or how talented he was, but he rarely looked anyone in the eyes.

Nate reached out and gently lifted Jay's delicate chin until he met his gaze. "It's good. There might be an occasion when Sean could use a cake like that in his catering."

"Oh, I'm not really good enough for something like that. I'm still learning. I bought a book from the clearance rack at Booklovers."

"You learned to do that from a book?" Nate knew of several pastry chefs in Chicago who'd gone to the best culinary schools in the world to learn their trade, and from what he could tell, Jay's cake was every bit as good as one of theirs.

Jay nodded, his head starting to tilt back towards the floor. "I've been practicing at night, but I use cardboard instead of an actual cake."

Nate couldn't help himself. He reached out and pulled the small man into his arms. "You're unbelievable. I'm so glad you came here."

Jay tucked his arms up against his chest and sank into Nate's body, his face turned down. Nate got the distinct impression Jay needed this. It wasn't a sexual hug by any stretch of the imagination. More like the kind of hug a parent would give a child. He couldn't help but wonder if Jay's parents had ever held him.

Nate kissed the top of Jay's hair. "You smell good."

Jay laughed, the sound like musical notes working their way up and down a scale. "I spilled amaretto extract on myself."

"Well, it's nice whatever it is." He finally released Jay and took a step back. "I need to get home for dinner, and you need to get that cake finished before you have to start flipping burgers."

"Yeah," Jay replied in that mesmerising voice Nate loved.

"Save me a dance next Saturday night."

Jay shook his head. "I won't be at the dance. I'm babysitting Gracie and Joey."

"Well, maybe I'll send Ryan up to give you a break for a few minutes. You have to dance at least once. I've worked really hard to make this the best party Cattle Valley has ever seen. I'd be hurt if you didn't show up."

Jay's expression turned worried. "I don't know how to dance."

"Bullshit. I've seen you dancin' babies around a room. You've got the moves. You just haven't tried them on anyone old enough to really wrap you in their arms. It's a feeling like none other."

Jay grinned. "Okay."

"Good. I'm looking forward to it."

Nate left O'Brien's with a smile on his face.

He arrived home at six on the dot and let himself inside. "I'm home," he called out.

Rio appeared in the kitchen doorway. "You made it. I was just getting ready to put the garlic bread in the oven."

There was something so wholesome in the way the big man gazed at him. Despite the tension between the three of late, Nate needed his men. He strode towards Rio, hoping he'd be welcomed in those strong arms. His wish was granted when Rio opened to him. Nate immediately wrapped his arms around his lover.

He knew Rio and Ryan thought otherwise, but he really did miss them. The job he'd been elected to do wasn't what he'd expected at all. For some reason he'd thought it would be a good chance to really get to know people in the community. Instead, he was usually stuck behind a desk under a pile of papers.

Rio's hands felt good rubbing up and down his back. Nate moulded himself further against his partner. "I love you," he whispered before giving Rio a kiss.

Damn Rio tastes good. How long had it been since he'd indulged in the flavours of his men?

A sigh from Rio caught Nate's attention. It wasn't the sound of lust or love. Nate pulled back and looked into Rio's eyes. "Something wrong?"

Rio shook his head. "I needed to hear that, is all."

Nate cupped Rio's gorgeous face and kissed his chin. "You know even though I don't always find the time to say it, I always feel it."

A build-up of moisture in Rio's eyes nearly broke Nate's heart. "You do know that, right?"

He watched Rio's Adam's apple bob several times before he spoke. "I've missed you so much."

The simple sentence had Nate on the verge of tears. What the hell was he doing to his family?

The front door slamming shut sounded Ryan's arrival. Nate stayed where he was, tucked safely in Rio's embrace. He felt Ryan step up behind him, pressing that strong body against him.

There was absolutely nothing in the world like the feeling of being sandwiched between the two men he loved. Ryan bent and kissed Nate's neck. Nate tilted his head to the side to give Ryan more room. When the kissing didn't resume, he glanced over his shoulder.

Ryan's eyes were narrowed. *Uh oh.* Nate knew the look well. Hell, he should, he'd been on the receiving end quite a bit lately. "What's wrong?"

"What's that smell?"

Nate tried to figure out what Ryan was talking about. He knew he'd put on deodorant. *Shit.* "Does it smell like Amaretto?"

Ryan took a step back and spun Nate around to face him. "How the hell should I know what Amaretto smells like? All I know is you don't smell like Nate. You smell like someone else."

Nate nodded. "Jay. I stopped by O'Brien's on my way home to see how he was doing."

"And what? You felt the need to get up close and personal with him?"

For fuck's sake. It seemed like every time he turned around lately he was getting yelled at for something. "It's Jay. And yeah, I felt the need to give him a hug. Since when are you so fucking paranoid?"

"Since you decided to sleep somewhere other than my bed," Ryan growled.

Nate squared his shoulders and held a finger in front of Ryan's face. "One night. One. I was so goddamned tired I couldn't see straight. Forgive me for not being your fuck toy for one goddamned night."

A crash from the kitchen stopped the fight dead. Nate and Ryan both ran to investigate. Nate was ashamed he hadn't even noticed Rio's absence. They found the back door open and the glass dish of lasagne smashed on the floor.

Shit. Rio's truck spraying gravel as it sped out of the driveway was the only sound they heard. "I'll go after him."

Ryan grabbed Nate's upper arm. "No you won't. I'll go."

"Seriously? Now you want to fight about this? Why the hell do you think he left in the first place? We were enjoying a beautiful moment when you barged in and started chewing my ass for something as innocent as giving Jay a hug."

"It wasn't about the hug," Ryan mumbled.

Nate wrapped his arms around himself. "What's happening to us?"

Despite the question, Nate already knew the answer. The trouble started when he'd become mayor. "Do you want me to resign?"

Ryan shook his head. "I just want my family back."

"So tell me how to do that. Seriously, I need you to tell me, because I have no clue how to be all things to everybody and still have a tiny bit left for myself."

Ryan's voice softened even further. "You start by letting the people who love you, help you. There's no shame in accepting help from others, Nate. You've got an entire town of

people who'd do anything you asked of them. Why is it so important for you to shut everyone out?"

Nate bit his tongue. His men had worked so hard to get him elected. There was simply no way he could tell Ryan the truth. Maybe if he let Rio and Ryan help him things could go back to normal. "Okay. But first I need to go find Rio and talk to him."

"Would you mind if I went with you?" Ryan asked.

Nate shook his head. "I think that would go a long way in getting him to come back home."

Chapter Three

Rio wasn't sure how long he drove around before finally heading towards Mario's place. He knew Ryan and Nate were probably out looking for him, but Rio wasn't ready to be found.

The tiny house Mario rented was dark when he pulled into the drive. He almost left again, but spotted a flicker of light behind the front curtains. With a deep breath, Rio climbed out of the pickup. He knocked on Mario's door and waited. *I probably should've called.*

"Hang on," Mario yelled from inside.

When Mario opened the door, Rio almost swallowed his tongue. There, in front of him, stood a Mario he'd never seen. "You going out?"

Mario glanced down at his skin-tight black leather pants and shook his head. "Nope," he chuckled.

"Someone coming in?"

Mario laughed harder. "No. This is what I feel most comfortable in when I'm at home."

Rio ran a hand through his hair. He felt a little uncomfortable knowing this side of his friend. Why the hell was he finding all this out now? "How long have we been friends?"

"I don't know, a year and a half or so, why?"

"Exactly. Why didn't I know you were one of those leather guys?"

With an amused expression, Mario stepped back and gestured for Rio to enter. "Want something to drink?"

"I could use a beer if you have one," Rio answered as he glanced around the small living room. He saw that a movie had been paused, a close-up of a man's face frozen in time on the screen. Rio wondered if Mario was watching a BDSM porno or something.

Curiosity got the better of him, and he picked up the DVD jacket from on top of the television. *Much Ado About Nothing?*

"Surprised?" Mario asked. He handed Rio a beer and took a seat on the couch.

"Yeah, actually. I didn't know you liked Shakespeare."

Mario tilted his head to the side. "It appears there's a lot about me that you don't know. I like Shakespeare, leather, and fucking a man so hard it makes his teeth rattle. But you didn't come here to find out about me. What's going on?"

Rio couldn't get the image of Mario fucking out of his mind. *Damn.*

"Rio?"

Rio shook his head and took a drink of his beer. "Had to get out of the house. Ryan and Nate were at each other's throats again."

It was uncharacteristic for Rio to expose his feelings so openly, but he needed to talk to someone, and from what he could see, Mario was good at keeping secrets. "I grew up with that, ya know. I couldn't deal with it then, and I can't deal with it now."

Mario's hand reached across the back of the couch and wound its way into Rio's black curls. "You and I both know you're giving yourself an ulcer. Do you want it to turn into a serious problem like Casey's did?"

"No, but I can't tell my body to ignore my mind. If I'm worried, I'm worried."

Mario absently scratched the back of Rio's head. "What're you worried about exactly?"

Rio swallowed around the lump in his throat. Memories of a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in front of a judge, assaulted him. *Who would you like to live with, Rio?* What no one had bothered to tell him was that the choice he made would forever change his life.

"If things don't work out between Ryan and Nate, I won't choose between them," Rio answered vehemently. Just the idea of being put into that position again had Rio grabbing his stomach. "Can I use your bathroom?"

Mario nodded and pointed. "First door on the left."

* * * *

"Hey, Sean, you haven't seen Rio in here have you?"

"Not since lunch. Is there something wrong?" Sean asked.

Ryan waved away his friend's apparent concern. "Nothing we can't handle. Thanks."

He left the bar and climbed back into the SUV. "Sean hasn't seen him."

"Well, shit."

Ryan's cell phone erupted with Indian Outlaw by Tim McGraw. "Maybe that's him," he said as he pulled his phone out.

"Rio?"

"Nope, but I know where he is," Mario answered.

"We'll be right there."

"If you and Nate are still acting like a couple of jackasses, don't bother. I just thought I'd let you know he was safe."

What could he say to that? He knew Mario was right. They had been acting like a couple of children. "We're working on it. We'll be there in five minutes."

Ryan hung up and tossed the phone to the console between them. "He's at Mario's."

Nate placed a hand on Ryan's thigh. "You think we'll be able to get him to come home with us?"

Ryan's chest ached. That was the first time in days Nate had voluntarily touched him. He covered his lover's hand with his own and squeezed. "All we can do is try and assure him that we're gonna work together from now on."

Nate nodded and turned to stare out the passenger window, but he left his hand on Ryan's leg. One step at a time, Ryan told himself.

Ryan parked in front of Mario's house and turned off the engine. He lifted Nate's hand and kissed it. "Ready to do some damage control?"

"I just hope he gives us the chance," Nate mumbled. He pulled his hand away and got out of the SUV before Ryan could say anything further.

Ryan met up with his lover on the sidewalk and pulled him into his arms. Nate's body felt stiff, but Ryan wasn't about to release him. "I can't imagine my life without you. You're the sunshine in my day."

Nate's body relaxed against his. "I love you, too."

Ryan bent and covered Nate's mouth with his own, slipping his tongue between his partner's lips.

* * * *

Embarrassed, Rio stepped out of the bathroom. "I hope you don't mind, I borrowed some of your toothpaste."

Mario was straddling the arm of the sofa. Rio knew if he wasn't hopelessly in love with Ryan and Nate, he'd be trying his best to get into those skin-tight leather pants. Why was he just now noticing how sexy Mario was? He always knew the guy was a stud, but the more he got to know him, the hotter Mario became. Mario's earlier statement about fucking a man hard enough to rattle teeth had goosebumps breaking out on Rio's skin.

Headlights stopping in front of the house drew Rio's attention. He glanced at his friend. "Did you call 'em?"

Mario nodded. "I told them not to come unless they'd stopped acting like a couple of jackasses. Didn't want them to worry though."

Rio stepped up to the window in the still darkened room, and peered out. He was shocked by the silhouette of his lovers kissing. Rio's cock hardened even further. He turned back to Mario. "I'd better go with them."

Crossing his arms, Mario nodded but said nothing.

Before moving towards the door, Rio stepped up to his friend. He cupped the side of Mario's face and gave him a chaste kiss on the lips. "Thank you. Your time will come."

"From your lips to God's ears," Mario said. Despite the smile, Rio could see the loneliness in Mario's dark eyes.

Rio pulled away and walked out the front door. He didn't wait for an invitation to join his men. Instead, he strode up to them and wrapped Nate and Ryan in his arms. Nate and Ryan broke their kiss and turned towards Rio.

"We're so sorry," Nate apologised between kisses.

"Have you guys made up?" Rio asked.

Nate looked at Ryan and nodded. "Can we take you home?"

"You make me sound like a puppy."

Nate chuckled and slipped his hand under Rio's T-shirt. "You can be my puppy, if I can rub your belly."

Rio smiled. The twinkle in Nate's eyes had been missing for so long that Rio had forgotten what it did to his insides. "I'll follow you home."

Nate pulled Rio's head down for a kiss before whispering in his ear. "I'm going to ride home with Ryan. Things are better, and I'd like to keep it that way. Too much time to think and you know how he gets."

Rio nodded his understanding and released his lover.

Nate tugged on Rio's hair, pulling him back down again. "Why do you taste like toothpaste?"

Rio felt his face heat. "I threw up and borrowed some of Mario's."

"You threw up?" Ryan asked, turning Rio more fully towards him. "Are you sick?"

Rio shook his head. "I just got upset. I'm okay now."

Ryan's gaze shot from Nate back to Rio. "We'll see you at home."

Nate was herded towards the SUV in typical Ryan fashion. If nothing else, at least his two men were acting more like their old selves. He hopped into his truck and fired up the engine. He noticed a shadow at Mario's front window and waved as he pulled out of the drive.

* * * *

Nate sat in the chair beside the bed and watched his men sleep. How long had he been sitting there? He glanced at the clock and determined he'd only had about two hours sleep. He'd need to get into the shower in thirty minutes.

He rubbed his eyes and wondered if mayors were allowed to call in sick the week before a huge celebration. Nate watched as Rio's hands reached out for him in sleep. When they met Ryan's much bigger body, his eyes popped open.

"I'm over here," Nate whispered.

Rio looked over the top of Ryan. "What're you doing over there, baby?"

Hugging his legs to his chest, Nate shrugged. "Couldn't sleep."

"Come back to bed."

Nate stood and walked around the end of the bed. He climbed over a delightfully naked Rio and landed in the usual spot. Within seconds, he was wrapped in his lover's warm embrace.

"Why can't you sleep?" Ryan asked, spooning against Nate's back.

"I don't know. Every time I close my eyes, I have nightmares about bulls getting out of the pen and stampeding, or Trick Allen's bus breaking down on the way to the dance." He shrugged again. "It's always something different."

Rio tilted Nate's chin up. "You're not God. You may think you are at times, but you're not. You're worrying about things you have no control over."

"Well, to be honest, I also worry about things I do have control over."

"What's really bothering you?"

Rio was studying him so intently Nate didn't know what to say.

"Haven't you learned nothing good comes from keeping secrets?" Rio asked.

"You're one to talk. How many times in the last month have you thrown up, and don't lie!"

"A couple," Rio mumbled.

"A couple? Are you sure?" Ryan questioned Rio further.

"Maybe a little more," Rio confessed.

"Should we make you an appointment at the clinic?" Nate asked.

"Naw. I'll be fine as long as we're all okay."

Ryan reached across Nate and pulled Rio closer. "Arguing with the people you love most in the world sucks, but you can't let it affect your health."

"It's not like I throw up on purpose."

Nate was ashamed of himself, but he much preferred the focus being on Rio instead of him. "Have you always been that way?" he asked.

"No. I used to go out, track and kill bad guys when I got upset. Unfortunately, that option is no longer available."

Nate thought of the years Rio spent as a mercenary in Mexico and South America. He was thankful his lover no longer pursued that particular career. He realised he'd never really asked about Rio's life before they got together. He knew Rio didn't like talking about his years in the jungles of the world, so he'd always shied away from bringing up the past.

"How old were you when you became a mercenary?" he finally asked.

"Twenty-six or thereabouts. I joined the Marines when I was seventeen, the day after I graduated. I liked the work, but had trouble with a few of their rules."

"Don't ask, don't tell?" Nate guessed.

"Yeah, that was the big one. But I also decided I wasn't meant to follow orders that didn't always make sense to me."

"What about before that?" Nate asked.

"Before what?"

"Before you joined the Marines." The only thing Nate knew about Rio's childhood was that his mother had died when he was barely in his teens. He'd asked several times, but Rio always seemed to change the subject before divulging any real information. Rio always said his life started the day he became a Marine.

Rio rolled over on top of Nate and kissed him. Nate knew it was Rio's way of shutting him up, but he'd divulged a lot for him, so Nate decided to give the man a break. He wrapped his legs around Rio's waist and ate hungrily at his lover's mouth.

Rio drew his legs up and broke the kiss. "You gonna let me in this ass?" Rio asked, prodding Nate's hole with the tip of his cock.

Nate was about to ask Ryan for the bottle of lube when slick fingers began working his hole. "Fuck, that feels good."

The previous night had been about making Rio feel loved, but now. *Oh, damn.* Now he wanted to feel Rio's thick meat push inside of him. Nate closed his eyes and pushed against Ryan's fingers as they worked their magic inside his ass.

"You want daddy to fuck you hard enough to make your teeth rattle," Rio growled.

Nate's eyes sprung wide open. "What?"

Rio grinned. "Something I heard recently."

Nate shook his head. "I don't think I want to know where."

"Probably not," Rio agreed. "Get them fingers outta there, Ryan, cuz I'm going in."

Nate chuckled as Rio slapped at Ryan's hand. God, it felt good to laugh. His old fashioned alarm clock went off, and Nate reached out, snagged the damn thing, and threw it across the room. They all started laughing when the clock broke into large pieces but continued to ring.

"Time for you to go digital, baby," Ryan remarked.

"Whatever. Forget the clock and think about the cock. In. My. Ass."

Rio quickly poured a few drops of lube onto his shaft and positioned the crown just inside Nate's hole. Before thrusting forward he regarded Ryan. "What part you feel like playing in this? You wanna fuck my ass or Nate's mouth?"

Ryan reached behind Rio and grunted. "Feels like you're pretty sore back there. I'll take it easy on you and feed Nate his breakfast."

Nate rolled his eyes. He hated when his men discussed him without consulting him. "Who says I want your seed for breakfast? Maybe I was hoping for waffles."

Rio thrust forward in one smooth move.

Any protest he might've given flew out the window. Nate opened his mouth for Ryan's pre-cum dripping cock. "Feed me."

* * * *

"Ooh, someone got laid this morning," Carol noted when Nate finally strolled into the office.

"What was your first clue? The fact that I'm two hours late, or that I can't seem to walk without looking like a damn cowboy?"

"Giddy up," she chuckled.

Nate couldn't wipe the smile from his face as he walked to the coffee pot. "Hey, Carol, would you call Hearn for me and see if he can come in?"

"Sure enough, cowboy."

Rolling his eyes, he carried his coffee to the desk and sat down gingerly.

"Hearn'll be here as soon as he drops Gracie at the flower shop," Carol yelled.

"Thanks."

After a long talk with his men the previous night, Nate decided to ask for help. As much as he loved his pride, he loved his men more, and he knew things couldn't continue like they had been.

Strangely enough, the one person he knew he could go to for help was the very man who had wanted his job in the first place. But Nate knew Hearn didn't hold a grudge about losing the election.

In fact, Hearn had confided in him that he'd decided to run more for Tyler's sake than his own. With the addition of his new duties as Parks and Recreation Director, Hearn was happier than he'd ever been.

The phone rang. "I'll get it," he called.

"Be my guest."

"Nate," he answered.

"Hey, it's Rance. I've got some bad news."

Nate closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of his chair. *Shit*. There went his good mood. Bad news from the outfit providing rodeo stock wasn't something he'd been prepared to hear.

"Whatcha got?" he finally asked.

"I don't know if it's too late to change the programmes for the rodeo, but the boss just shot Zero Tolerance."

"Jesus! What happened? He go after Bo again?"

"Worse. He went after Bo while he was carrying Joey. And I think we both know how protective Shep is of that baby. I don't know if I've ever seen him so het up."

"Are they okay?" Nate didn't even want to think about a bull of that size going after an infant.

"They're fine. Joey never even woke up."

"Good." Nate breathed a sigh of relief. "I'll ask Carol to check on the programmes. You have an alternative?" Nate was busy thanking the big man upstairs, when Hearn walked into the office.

"We're gonna try out one of our newest acquisitions, Satan's Bandit."

"Oh hell. I'm glad I'm not riding."

Rance chuckled. "I'm not sure how he'll be in the arena, but he's not half as bad as Zero was here on the ranch."

Nate knew it wasn't any of his business, but he had to know. "Is Bo breathing easier since Shep put Zero down?"

"That's the hell of it. Bo seemed more upset than anyone. If I live to be a hundred, I'll never understand the twisted relationship those two had."

"I hear ya. Well, Hearn's here, so I'd better get off the phone. Tell Shep the change is fine."

"Will do. Thanks, Nate."

Nate hung up the phone, still chuckling. "Shep shot old Zero Tolerance for looking cross-eyed at baby Joey."

Hearn whistled. It didn't take a genius to know just how much money Shep had just cost himself. All rodeo bulls had high dollar insurance, but no company in their right mind would pay out on a death like that.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Nate asked as he got up to refill his.

"No thanks. Tyler has me on two cups a day, and I've already met my quota."

"I wanted to know if you had time in your schedule to help me get things together for the dance. I think I have most everything ordered, but I have quite a few things picked up from Sheridan, and I'm in desperate need of volunteers to help decorate."

"Sure. I've told you all along I'd do anything I could to help."

"I know you did. I'm sorry it took so long for me to get my head outta my ass."

"Tyler told me this morning the new hanging baskets you ordered for all the light poles on Main Street will be delivered by Friday. I can contact the Beautification Committee and ask for volunteers to help hang them."

"That'd be fantastic. What about the flowers for the new planters? Will they be here Friday as well?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll find out."

Nate nodded. "I've got that big outfit coming in from Casper to set up the stage, but they can't do that until the day of, because Main Street will have to be closed."

Nate continued to run through the list in his head. "Oh, the beer garden. It took a lot of sweet talk, but I managed to get Erico and Sean to work together this year, so hopefully the garden will resemble an outdoor lounge instead of just tables and hay bales stuck behind a rope strung between trees."

With his hands clasped and resting on his chest, Hearn grinned.

"What?"

"It's obvious why you've been so grouchy lately. I know everyone will notice and appreciate the changes you're making, but you know it wasn't necessary, right?"

Although he knew Hearn didn't mean it as a reprimand, that's what it felt like. He'd worked damn hard trying to make this the best Cattle Valley Days ever, what was so wrong with that?

"We both know I don't do anything half-assed," Nate replied. He played the comment off like it didn't bother him.

"Ain't that the truth," Hearn chuckled.

Nate couldn't help but wonder whether or not he'd made a mistake by asking for help. Would the townspeople treat him as a joke? He simply wanted to give them the best Cattle Valley Days the town had ever seen. Maybe Hearn was right. Maybe he was going over the top?

"Is there anything else?" Hearn asked.

"Uh, no, not that I can think of. If you'll call your volunteers and ask them about the hanging baskets and getting the flowers into the planters, we should be good until the day of the dance."

Hearn nodded and stood. "I'll take care of it. By the way, we have eight teams signed up for the baseball tournament."

"Excellent. I'm sure I'll show up to at least one of Ryan and Rio's games."

"Too bad you couldn't play this year," Hearn said on his way to the door.

"Yeah, well, too many irons in the fire this year."

He gave Hearn a parting wave and picked up a file like he had work to do. Well, he did have work to do, but his mind wasn't on it. He waited a few minutes before venturing into Carol's office.

"Do I have any appointments?"

Carol looked at the calendar on her desk. "Nope."

"Good. I'm going out for a while. If anyone needs me, call me on my cell." He started out the door, but stopped and turned back. "Shit. I almost forgot. Can you call the printer and see if it's too late to change the programme for the rodeo? Zero Tolerance is out and Satan's Bandit's in."

"Wow. You going to tell me why, or just leave me hanging?"

Nate winked and opened the door. "I'll tell you when I get back. That way I know you'll still be here."

“Wrong, Mr. Smarty Pants. I have a dial finger, and I’m not afraid to use it.”

Nate chuckled. Carol was as much of a busybody as he was. It was probably why the two of them got along so well. “Have fun.”

Chapter Four

Rio closed his phone and slipped it into his pocket. "Nate's running typically late, but he'll be here."

Ryan nodded and sipped at his drink. "Hopefully, he'll get here before everyone else does."

Their friends from Nebraska had arrived at Tall Pines two hours earlier, but had begged a shower before the planned barbecue. Rio opened the refrigerator and put away the fruit salad he'd just made.

With his hands on his hips, he tried to determine if everything was ready. Usually, Nate was the host for these kinds of get-togethers, but with all the last minute preparations for the celebration, it had been left up to him and Ryan.

Rio glanced at his lover, kicked back in one of the more comfortable chairs in the kitchen. *So much for a team effort.* He shook his head, and started getting out the plates and glasses. The easiest thing would've been to go with paper plates and plastic glasses, but Rio knew Nate would die if he served guests that way.

The sound of crunching gravel signalled an arrival. Rio looked out the kitchen window. "They're here," he announced as he took off the simple white baker's apron.

Ryan swung his legs down from the chair they'd been resting on and stood. Rio grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the front door. They stood on the porch as seven gorgeous adults climbed out of the big black Suburban.

Rawley and Jeb were the first to reach them.

"Hey, strangers," Rio greeted as he shook hands with the two men.

When Garron walked up the porch steps, he knocked Rio's hand away and pulled him into a hug. "Missed you guys."

"We've missed you, too," Rio replied. He let go of Garron and pulled Sonny into his arms. "How's life living with a lawman?"

"You should know," Sonny chuckled.

"You have my sympathy."

Sonny stepped back and the twins, Ryker and Ranger made their way onto the porch with their wife, Lilly tucked between them.

Although Rio didn't know Lilly well, he hugged her anyway. "Nice of you all to come. I'm sure you're worn out from the drive."

Lilly let out a giggle. "I think Garron and I were the only ones awake for most of the trip. You get these Good boys into a car, and it's like they've taken a sleeping pill."

"At least we'll be wide awake later," Ranger said with a wink.

Lilly rolled her eyes and the group headed into the house.

"So where's the pretty one?" Garron asked as they made their way out to the patio.

"Nate had a few last minute things to take care of. He should be here any minute." A horn sounded as soon as the words left Rio's mouth. "Speak of the devil."

"Things going any better for him?" Garron asked.

Rio could tell by the expression on the man's face that he'd obviously talked to Nate at some point since he'd taken over as mayor. There was something in the way Garron asked that had Rio's hackles up. Did Garron know something he didn't?

"He's finally asking for help, but he still takes too much of it on himself. We'll see how things go after the celebration is over."

Garron was the first to reach Nate when he stepped onto the patio, grabbing Rio's Nate up into a bear hug. Although Rio knew Nate and Garron had known each other for years, he was man enough to acknowledge the streak of jealousy that raced through him.

Nate was unceremoniously passed from person to person until all greetings were out of the way. Nate started to sit in the chair beside him, but Rio needed his lover closer. He pulled Nate into his lap and gave him a quick kiss.

"I'm happy you're home," he whispered in Nate's ear.

"I'm happy to be home." Nate gazed up at Rio with those beautiful light brown eyes.

Uh oh, his little man wanted something. "What?"

"Elliott Simms called me on the way home. He was supposed to take tickets at the rodeo on Saturday, but he threw his back out stocking dog food at the grocery store."

"And?"

"I was wondering if I could talk you into doing it?"

"Will I still be able to see the rodeo from where I'll be standing?"

"Yes. And with your height, you shouldn't have any trouble seeing over someone if they get in your way."

Taking tickets all day in the sun wasn't Rio's idea of a good time, but he knew Nate wouldn't have asked unless he really needed him. "Sure. Just tell me when to show up, and I'll be there."

"You're the best," Nate said before giving Rio's mouth a slow and sexy tongue fuck.

Ryan cleared his throat, reminding Rio they weren't alone. He knew it was nothing their friends hadn't seen before, but he'd already promised Ryan he'd be on his best behaviour.

"So the parade is Saturday morning, and then the rodeo, right?" Ryker asked.

"Yeah, but the preliminaries for the rodeo are all day tomorrow. Then the finals on Saturday. Then after that comes the big street dance," Nate informed the group.

"What else is going on tomorrow besides the rodeo?" Jeb asked.

"Well, the carnival will be running both days, but then there's the bake-offs, cook-offs, baseball tournament..." Nate stopped. "Oh, shit."

"What?" Rio asked as he rubbed Nate's back.

"I forgot about you and Ryan playing in the baseball tournament. What if you make it to the finals on Saturday?"

Ryan shook his head. "Don't you remember? You had the finals changed to Sunday so they wouldn't interfere with the parade?"

Nate sighed and leaned back against Rio's chest. "I swear I'm losing my mind."

Snuggled up against him, Rio felt the vibrations of Nate's stomach growling. "Is that my cue to start the grill?"

"Would you mind? I haven't eaten all day."

"Nope. Let me up, and I'll get started." Rio gave Nate's ass a playful slap as he stood.

"Why don't you show me the horses I keep hearing so much about?" Garron asked Nate.

"Sure," Nate agreed and took off towards the barn with Garron following.

Rio stopped just inside the door and watched the two men heading across the field. He wished he knew what they were talking about.

* * * *

Nate turned on the light in the barn as they entered. The sound of the fans blowing made it hard to talk, but he was glad to get Garron alone. His old friend was the only person he'd confided his fears in.

"Now. Tell me the truth as to how things are going."

Nate sat on a bale of hay and gazed up at his friend. "Well, the planning is going a lot smoother since I started asking for help, but what do I do next week?"

"You get up and go to work."

"Easy for you to say. You know how to be a sheriff. I know nothing about being a mayor. You know me, if it was up to me, every city employee would get a big raise every year. But now I'm in the position where I have to kinda pick and choose, and that's just not me."

Nate started to run his fingers through his hair, but thought better of it. He was having a damn good hair day, so why mess with perfection? "And it's not just the raises. It's everything. I'm so afraid I'm going to do something wrong, I'm afraid to do *anything*."

"I think you need to relax and cut yourself some slack. Everyone knows you're new to the job. I doubt they expect perfection. Besides, they voted for you, they must believe in you."

Nate buried his face in his hands. That was exactly the problem. "They voted for me because they like me, not because I was more qualified for the job than Hearn. It was nothing more than a popularity contest. Well, now I've been crowned homecoming king, but I don't know what the hell to do with the crown."

"Weren't you friends with the old mayor?"

"Quade? Sure, but he's off living a life most of us only dream about. He doesn't have time to hold my hand."

"How do you know, have you asked him?"

"No."

"It might not be a bad idea. Hell, the guy might even be flattered. But you sittin' around beating yourself up over it on a daily basis isn't going to get the job done."

"You're right." Nate sighed. "I miss the days of hanging out at *The Gym* with Rio."

“Now you’re starting to sound like a spoiled brat. You’ve taken an oath to serve this town. It’s your duty as a man and a member of the community to fulfil your term.”

Why did Nate suddenly feel like he was sitting in front of his high school principal? Because Garron was right, he was acting like a brat. “I’ll call Quade next week and see if he can offer a few suggestions,” he relented.

Garron clapped Nate on the back, nearly sending him to the dirt floor. “Good man.”

Nate stood and dusted off the seat of his pants. “Let me introduce you to our babies while we’re out here just in case Rio quizzes you at dinner.”

* * * *

After dinner Ryan suggested they all go to the Grizzly Bar for a drink. Nate was so tired he could barely keep his eyes open, but when he’d tried to get out of going, Ryan had called him out. He said their friends had come into town and spending time with them was worth a few hours of lost sleep.

Nate didn’t want to upset Rio in any way by arguing the point with Ryan, so he reluctantly agreed. He felt Rio’s hand land on his thigh and smiled.

“You doing okay?” Rio whispered in his ear.

Nate nodded. “A little tired, but I’m fine.”

Rio’s gorgeous face tilted to the side. “You sure, baby? Cuz you’ve got dark circles under your eyes.”

The last thing Nate wanted to hear was that his looks were suffering. He glanced at Ryan who was telling a story. He didn’t begrudge his lover an evening with their friends. Hell, Nate wished he felt like drinking and having a good time, but it just wasn’t happening.

He continued to receive suspicious glances from Garron throughout the evening. Nate hoped Rio didn’t notice. Although he loved his big mercenary dearly, Rio could read things into a situation that wasn’t there, and lord knew the man was a jealous lover.

A yawn came out of nowhere that he couldn’t hide. *Shit.*

“Time to get you home,” Rio said. He gave Nate several gentle kisses before waving Ryan over.

Ryan stopped mid-story and strode towards them. “What’s up?”

"We need to get Nate home. The poor little feller can barely keep his eyes open."

Ryan glanced around the table and finally nodded. "Okay. Let's say goodbye and get going."

Nate gave his friends hugs goodbye, explaining he'd see them all downtown the following morning.

When it became Garron's turn, his friend held him close and whispered in his ear. "Talk to your men. Rio's been giving me the stink eye all evening."

Nate nodded and stepped back. He turned towards Rio and held out his hand. Rio led him to the door and into the Tall Pines lobby. They waited for several moments, but Ryan didn't appear.

"I'll go prod him in the ass," Rio growled.

Nate took a seat in one of the comfortable leather wingback chairs and waited. He struggled to keep his eyes open, but eventually lost the battle.

"Wake up, baby."

Nate opened his eyes when he felt strong arms lift him from the chair. "Sorry," he mumbled, snuggling in against Rio's chest.

"Not your fault."

Nate may have been damn near asleep again, but he heard the anger in the gentle giant's voice. *Uh oh.*

"I can walk." Nate tried to swing his legs down, but Rio caught him back up.

"You stay where you are. I'll take care of you."

"Was that a dig at me?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah, I guess it was. I told you damn near forty minutes ago it was time to get out of here," Rio barked.

"Lilly wanted to show me the wedding pictures. What was I supposed to do?" Ryan asked.

Although awake, Nate kept his eyes closed. This was one argument he wanted no part in. He heard the truck door open a second before he was deposited in the centre of the bench seat.

The door slammed, and Rio buckled him in and pulled him against his side. "Just rest your head on my shoulder."

"Don't argue," he whispered in Rio's ear.

Rio tried his best to smile. "Okay, baby."

The driver's door opened and Ryan climbed in. Before starting the pickup, he reached over and cupped Nate's cheek. "I'm sorry. I guess I was having fun, and I just...sorry."

"There's nothing wrong with having fun. If you want to take me home and come back, that's fine with me."

"We've all got a long weekend ahead of us. I was caught up in the moment, but there'll be others." Ryan removed his hand and started the truck.

The drive down the mountain seemed shorter than usual. Had he fallen asleep again? Although Ryan and Rio wrapped arms around him, Nate insisted on walking into the house on his own two feet.

His lovers helped him undress and before he knew it, he was sound asleep sandwiched between Rio and Ryan's gorgeous bodies.

* * * *

Nate walked down Main Street, amazed at what he saw, or what he didn't see. Where was everyone? Cattle Valley looked like a ghost town. The over-flowing baskets that had been hung the previous week were either on the ground or dried up still hanging on the light poles.

He spotted Jay coming out of the door that led up to his apartment and rushed over. "Where is everyone?"

Jay sneered at him and jumped back. "They went to the carnival up in Sheridan."

"What? Why? We're supposed to be having a celebration right here."

Jay snorted. "Yeah. A lame celebration. It was so much better when Quade was in charge. We've seen the way you've been running around like a chicken with its head cut off. No way we wanted to trust our weekend to you. I'm outta here, man."

"No wait! Please don't go!" he screamed.

"Nate. Nate wake up."

Nate opened his eyes and came face to face with Ryan. Thank god.

"Bad dream?" Rio asked.

He nodded. "No one came. All this work and no one was at the celebration." He didn't divulge the rest, although Garron's words continued to haunt him.

"It's gonna be great, baby. Everything you touch turns out fantastic." Rio tried to comfort Nate with sprinkled kisses down his neck to his chest.

Nate buried his fingers in Rio's thick hair and directed him further south. He may be too tired to fuck, but he'd never turned down a blowjob in his life. "What if something goes wrong?"

Rio lifted his head. "I've been doing this for years. Believe me, nothing will go wrong."

Nate chuckled and tugged on a black handful of curls. "I was talking about this weekend and you know it."

"This weekend will take care of itself. Right now I'm taking care of you," Rio told him.

"You mean we're taking care of him," Ryan added, joining Rio down at Nate's groin.

Nate spread his thighs to accommodate both men. He tried to concentrate on the pleasurable tongue bath his balls and cock were receiving, but his to-do list would not let him truly enjoy it.

"Bite me," Nate suddenly ordered.

Both men stopped and gazed up at him. "Excuse me?" Ryan asked.

"Bite me. Take me outta my head. Please. Just for one night."

Ryan's teeth were the first to sink into his flesh. His lover got him on the inner thigh below his balls. The hair on Nate's body stood on end. *Fuck.* "Again."

He could detect whispering going on between the two men at his crotch but couldn't make out what they were saying. "Uh...guys?"

Rio grunted his displeasure, but Ryan bit Nate again. Instead of joining in, Rio chose to swallow Nate's cock to the root.

The dual sensation of pain and pleasure did the trick. Nate planted his heels into the mattress and thrust up, fucking Rio's mouth as Ryan continued assaulting him with his teeth. Nate knew he'd be bruised as hell by morning, but he wasn't planning to flash anyone other than the men in his bed, so he didn't worry about it.

Rio hooked his arm under one of Nate's knees and lifted, raising Nate's foot from the bed. He almost protested until he felt the scrape of Ryan's teeth across his hole.

"Fuck!" Nate howled as he shot down Rio's throat.

Panting, he gazed down at his lovers. After milking Nate's balls dry, Rio started kissing Ryan, the two of them passing his seed back and forth between them.

"Damn, that's hot," Nate said around an escaped yawn.

Still kissing, Rio and Ryan moved together up the length of Nate's body. Without a word spoken, the two men's mouths came down on Nate's. He didn't care what anyone said, tasting your own seed was sexy as fuck.

The swapping eventually died down, and Rio began petting Nate's chest. "Sleep, baby."

Nate yawned. "What about the two of you?"

Ryan shook his head. "This was about you."

Nate reached down and held the two throbbing erections in his hands. "Are you going to try and tell me you're gonna let these go to waste?"

"We can save them for breakfast. The important thing is that you know we love you. Now go to sleep and think about that instead of the celebration." Rio wrapped an arm around Nate and settled him against his chest.

Nate snuggled in and sighed. "I love you two."

He knew he still needed to come clean with his men, but there would be time later for that.

Chapter Five

"Give me a taste," Nate begged.

Rio raised a brow and looked down at his little man. "What'll you give me?"

"Anything you want," Nate answered.

"Anything?"

Nate licked his lips. "Anything. Anytime."

"You'll spoil your dinner."

"That's okay. After the breakfast you fed me earlier, I didn't have lunch," Nate chuckled.

It had been a long time since Rio had seen Nate so carefree. He wasn't sure if his man finally realised Cattle Valley Days was out of his hands or what, but Rio loved it. Reluctantly, he leaned closer. "Just lick it. No biting."

Nate rolled his eyes and grabbed Rio's wrist, bringing the ice cream cone to his mouth. He swirled that cute pink tongue of his through the sweet cream and moaned. "I need one of those."

"So get yourself one."

"Can't. I have to go pull raffle tickets. You bought some, right?"

"Yep, just like you told me to. Though what we're gonna do with a moped is anyone's guess."

"It's not the moped that's important. It's the money raised for the home that took care of Gracie until she came here." Nate bumped hips with Rio. "But I would like to win the trip to Hawaii."

"You and me, both."

Nate finally released his hold on Rio's cone and stood on his toes to plant a sweet kiss on Rio's lips. "What time is your next game?"

"Five."

“Okay. I’ll be there. Sorry I missed the first one, but I got caught up with the whole bus route confusion.”

“That’s okay. You do what you need to do, and we’ll be around when you’re done.” Well, at least he’d be around. Ryan had taken off again. Rio wasn’t sure if it was business, or a few drinks with their friends.

He gave Nate one last kiss before his lover jogged away. Rio took his cone and found a seat under one of the shade trees.

He spotted Mario and waved him over. “You win?”

Mario shook his head and took a seat next to Rio. “Lost seven to five. What about you?”

“We won.”

“Congratulations, old man,” Mario teased as he punched Rio in the arm.

Something in the distance seemed to catch Mario’s attention, and he immediately stopped laughing. Rio glanced over and realised it wasn’t a *something*, but a *someone*.

“Asa’s back in town, I see.”

Mario nodded, not bothering to take his eyes off the rumoured playboy millionaire. Asa was looking pretty damn good in a pair of blue jeans and a bright red golf shirt, the man’s dark hair perfectly in place despite the hot summer day.

“Go talk to him.”

Mario shook his head. “He’s holding court, can’t you tell? Look at ‘em, fawning all over him.”

The crowd around Asa did indeed appear to be doing their fair share of fawning. Rio watched as Asa spotted Mario. The two men stared at each other for several moments before Asa returned his attention to his adoring group of young men.

Rio wanted to tell Mario to go over and stake his claim, but who was he to give relationship advice? Hell, he didn’t know from one day to the next how his own home life was going.

Mario stood. “I’m gonna check out the rest of the carnival. Wanna come?”

Did he? No, not really, but he wanted to be a friend to Mario. “Sure.”

* * * *

"So what's up with you lately?" Sonny asked.

Ryan continued to survey the growing crowd. He'd run back to his office after his baseball game and changed into jeans and a uniform shirt. Another two hours on street patrol and he'd be back at his office changing again for the game that evening.

"What do you mean?"

"You seem kind of distant, that's all."

"Just trying to make sure the day goes smoothly."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it. I'm talking about you, Rio and Nate. Is something going on there?"

Ryan turned to regard his friend. "Getting kinda nosy, aren't ya?"

Sonny shrugged. "Wouldn't ask if I didn't care."

Ryan knew the man was telling the truth. Since his shooting, Sonny had become one of the most genuine people he'd ever known. "I don't know. Just tired of coming in second, tired of seeing Rio mope around because he misses Nate, tired of arguing."

He felt his jaws clench. He was about to admit something to Sonny that he hadn't told anyone. "Tired of not being in charge, I guess."

"In charge?" Sonny questioned.

Ryan shrugged. Hell, it sounded stupid even to his own ears but it was how he felt. "Before Nate won this election, I was kinda the big dog in our relationship. Now that position has been passed to Nate, and I'm not sure how to deal with it."

"Why does there have to be a big dog? I'm confused."

"I'm not saying I get off on telling them what to do, but there was a time when they both seemed to really look up to me. I never had that growing up. I'll admit I kinda liked it."

Sonny reached out and held Ryan's hand. "You believe Nate and Rio think less of you now?"

"No. I'm not saying that. Maybe I'm the one who feels...less."

"Then that's something you need to work out on your own. But if you think it has something to do with Rio and Nate, and the way they see you, you owe it to them to talk to 'em."

“Hard to say how Nate feels these days. He’s been so damn busy. I mean, I get that, I really do, but it makes it hard. And Rio gets himself so worked up over the slightest argument lately that I can’t talk to him about it.”

Sonny elbowed Ryan in the side. “There’s Rio. Why don’t you try talking to him? Maybe he’s feeling the same way.” Sonny looked into Ryan’s eyes. “What the three of you have is more important than pride or misunderstandings. You’d be a jackass to fuck it up because you don’t want someone to possibly get upset.”

Ryan sighed. *Damn.* He knew he should’ve run when he spotted Sonny coming towards him. The man made too damn much sense. He seemed to have the uncanny ability to take something complex and break it down into the lowest common denominator.

He gave Sonny’s hand a squeeze before walking towards his partner. “Can I have a second?”

Rio stopped and regarded Mario. “Can I catch up with you later?”

Mario glanced at Ryan and nodded. “I’ll be around.”

Rio gestured to a spot of empty grass. “Wanna cop a squat?”

What Ryan wanted to talk about, he thought would be better dealt with in private. “How about going back to my office?”

Rio’s big body stiffened. “Okay.”

Ryan unclipped the radio from his belt. “Roy?”

“Yeah,” his deputy said over the radio.

“I’m taking a break. Everything seems to be going fine.”

“Okay, I’ll keep my eyes open.”

“Thanks.” Ryan slipped the radio back onto his belt and reached for Rio’s hand. “Did you eat?”

Rio nodded. “Shared an ice cream cone with Nate earlier.”

At least his lover had something in his stomach if he decided to throw up. Which reminded Ryan. “Did you ever go see the doc?”

Rio shook his head. He didn’t say anything else until they made their way to Ryan’s office. “It’s just nerves.”

Ryan led Rio over to the sofa and pulled him down beside him. “I’ve seen you nervous before, and you never did this. What’s different?”

Rio reached up and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "I can't handle the two of you fighting. It scares me."

Ryan didn't know if he'd ever heard Rio admit to being scared about anything. "What scares you?"

"The thought of the two of you breaking up. Would I have to choose?" Rio asked.

The anguish in Rio's voice, combined with the tears filling his eyes, broke Ryan's heart. He reached out and wrapped his arms around the man he loved. "We've just hit a rough patch. That's all. I love Nate to the bottom of my soul. Why would you ever think we'd make you choose between the two of us?"

"The judge made me choose," Rio whispered as he wiped his eyes.

"What judge? When?"

"When my folks split up. My dad had the money, and he caught my mom in an affair. They went to court because they claimed to both want me. When the judge called me into his chambers and asked who I'd rather live with, I told him my dad. It wasn't that I didn't love my mom, but I knew if I chose her, dad would make our lives hell."

Ryan knew Rio's mother had died when he was young. He wondered...

"She killed herself a month later." Rio gazed into Ryan's eyes. "See why I can't choose?"

How long had he been with Rio? How could he not have known? Suddenly his feelings felt petty in comparison. He pulled Rio in for a kiss, pushing his tongue deep into his lover's mouth. "I love you. The family that I have with you and Nate means more to me than anything."

"Really?"

Ryan nodded. "I've been acting like a jerk lately because I got caught up in self pity. If I'd known about..." Ryan kissed his way from Rio's lips to his ear. "I didn't realise how much Nate's winning that damn election would affect me."

Rio pulled back. "He hasn't said anything, but I think Nate feels the same way. I think that's what all these dreams are about, and why he's working himself to death."

"You think?" Ryan asked.

"Yeah, I do. It didn't really dawn on me until his last nightmare, but yeah, I think I'm right. I've even been considering selling *The Gym* to Mario."

"*The Gym?* Why? You love that place." Goddamn they were a fucked up bunch.

"I did love it. Now every time I walk in and don't see Nate's goofy smile, I get depressed. It's not the same, and I hate it."

"Who would've thought one job change could cause all these hurt feelings?" Ryan put his feet up on the couch and adjusted Rio to lie beside him. "Can I just hold you for awhile? I should get back out there, but I need this more than anything right now."

"You can hold me forever."

"I plan to."

* * * *

Nate raced across the grass towards the baseball fields. He'd gotten held up at the rodeo preliminaries and had lost track of time. *Shit*. He hoped he'd at least get to see the last half of the game.

The Goods and their families were taking full advantage of one of the many surrounding shade trees. Nate came to a stop and braced his hands on his knees. "What've I missed?" he panted.

Ryker glanced up from the blanket on which he, Ranger and Lilly were lying. "They're down by three, top of the seventh."

"Crap. They're gonna kill me. I promised I'd be here."

"And you are," Garron said and gestured to an empty lawn chair. "Sit down and enjoy yourself for a few minutes."

Nate took the offered seat. "Gladly. This is the last item on my to-do list for the day."

"Well, we've got nothing to compare it to, of course, but we've had a fantastic time so far. You should be proud of yourself."

Rawley's words shocked him. The hard-nosed man wasn't known for his compliments.

"Thanks. After clean-up on Sunday, I'm planning to sleep for a week."

"Maybe you should take a vacation," Jeb added to the conversation.

"Only if I can wrestle that trip to Hawaii away from Guy. Hell, it's not like the man needs a free trip. He's got more money than he knows what to do with."

Garron started laughing. "So do you, smartass. Release the purse strings and take your family to the islands for a couple weeks."

Nate's jaw dropped. He'd become so accustomed to looking for ways to save the city money, he'd completely forgotten he had plenty of his own. *Fuck me.* "I might just do that."

"Maybe you could look Quade up while you're there," Garron put in.

"Yeah, maybe."

The crowd started cheering and Nate stood. "What'd I miss?"

"That number thirty-two just hit a homer," Ranger told him. "Nice ass on him, by the way."

Nate grinned. "That's Hearn, and you're right. He's got a damn nice ass."

He watched Hearn cross the plate and jog to the fence to give Tyler and Gracie kisses. Nate tried to picture Hearn as mayor. Would he let the stress of the job interfere with his family? *No.*

"Mayor Gills?" a soft voice said from behind.

Nate grinned and glanced over his shoulder. "Jay, how many times have I told you to call me Nate?"

Jay blushed and looked down. "Several. I...um, wanted to introduce you to someone."

Nate noticed a thin young man behind Jay. He stood and gestured to an adjacent shaded area. He held out his hand to the guy. "I'm Nate Gills, and you are..."

"Ethan. Ethan Drake."

"Ethan's a friend of mine from back home. He took the bus from DC to surprise me."

Nate immediately went on alert. He wondered if this was the punk who'd been stalking and beating the shit out of Jay. He studied Jay for a few moments but couldn't read him. "Is this your ex?"

Jay's normally fair complexion paled even further. "No! As far as I know Randy still doesn't know where I am. Ethan used to volunteer at the shelter. He worked as a clerk for the Family Services Administration." Jay turned to Ethan. "Tell him."

Ethan appeared as timid as Jay, but the young man finally spoke. "There's this guy that came in one day yelling about how we took away his family. I was filling in at the front desk while the usual woman took her break. The guy, Jim, got it in his head that I'd tell him where they were. Since we usually deal with family violence, I knew there was no way I could help him. I tried to tell him that, but he grabbed me by the shirt. He told me if I didn't tell him, he'd make me sorry."

"Did you go to the police?"

Ethan nodded. "I filed a complaint. The police went by the guy's house, but he'd been evicted." Ethan took a deep breath. "I've only seen him a couple of times since, but I think he followed me home one evening. When I left for work the next morning, I found a dead cat in the hall outside my apartment. I knew the police couldn't do anything about someone they couldn't find, so I panicked. I scraped together what little money I had and hopped a bus out here."

"I told him how nice everyone was. I hope that's okay?" Once again, Jay looked worried.

"It's fine. Did you call the police in DC and tell them about the cat?"

Ethan nodded. "I called them before getting on the bus. I told them I was moving here."

Nate nodded. "You got a place to stay?"

"Jay said I could sleep on his sofa until I found a place."

With his hand shielding the glare, Nate surveyed the crowd. "Come with me."

Sitting on the bottom bleacher of the small grandstand was Kyle. "Hey, can I talk to you about something?" Nate asked, sitting beside his friend.

"Sure. What's up?"

"Did your assistant ever find a house?"

"Yeah. He moved out a couple of months ago, why?" Kyle asked.

Nate gestured to Ethan, who was standing back with Jay. "A friend of Jay's just came into town. He needs a cheap place to live. I don't know the kid personally, but Jay seems to think a lot of him. I guess he did volunteer work at the shelter where Jay used to live."

"Good enough for me. Although I'd like to have a few days to seal the elevator shaft. It's not that I don't trust the guy, but I'd rather someone who wasn't working for me didn't have access to the bakery."

"I can understand that. So what do you think? A week?"

Kyle nodded. "A week sounds good. Tell him to come by the bakery on Monday around ten. I'll give him the keys and let him take a look around."

Nate gave Kyle's shoulder a squeeze. "Thanks."

Kyle shrugged. "Don't thank me. That's what this town's about."

The words were like a punch to the stomach. Leave it to Kyle to remind him of the reason he and his partners had moved to Cattle Valley in the first place. "Yeah. You're exactly right about that."

After filling Jay and Ethan in on his conversation with Kyle, he sent them off and went back to his friends.

Garron was shaking his head when Nate arrived. "You've missed it. They're one out away from losing the game."

"Shit."

"At least they know you're here. I spotted Rio eyeing you earlier."

"A good eyeing or a bad eyeing?" Nate asked.

Garron chuckled. "Depends on what you call good. I seem to recall seeing him brush at the front of his pants a couple of times."

Nate grinned. "Oh, good."

He watched as Ryan came up to bat. At least he'd get to see one of his men in action. The crack of the bat sounded perfect. Nate stood and watched the small white ball as it flew through the air in a high arc.

"Damn," Ranger cursed before the ball even came down.

Ranger must know a hell of a lot more than Nate did because a moment later, Matt Jeffries caught the ball. A mixture of groans and whoops of joy wound their way through the crowd of fans.

Nate turned and folded the lawn chair before leaning it against the tree.

He took several steps and waited. After shaking the hands of the opposing team, a very dirty and sweaty pair of men came towards him, and they had never looked more gorgeous. He knew it was customary to go to O'Brien's after the game, but Nate wondered if he could talk his men into taking him home. Perhaps a night of hot sex was in their future.

"Sorry you lost," he said, giving Rio and Ryan consolatory kisses.

"That's okay. Just means we can take it easy on Sunday," Ryan said.

Nate bit his lip. It wasn't the time to bring up the fact that he'd have to help with clean-up on Sunday. He'd wait until after his planned night of debauchery.

"You guys heading to O'Brien's?" Rawley asked.

"Yep. A nice cold beer sounds perfect," Ryan answered.

Everyone loaded up their borrowed blankets and chairs and put them in the back of Rio's pickup. As soon as they were squeezed into the front seat, Nate put a hand over both men's cocks.

"Would you mind if we had a couple beers and made it an early night? I'm feeling exceptionally frisky for some reason." He finished the statement by groping the growing bulges under his hands.

"Damn, baby. Maybe we should run by *The Gym* and get in a little mat time before we head to the pub," Rio moaned.

Nate gave Rio's cock an extra squeeze. "Go the long way through town."

Before Rio even made it out of the parking lot, Nate had the zipper down on his uniform pants and his jock pushed to the side. He pressed his lips to his lover's crown and spread the tasty pre-cum over them.

As he slowly swallowed Rio's length, Nate felt Ryan's fingers pressing against the seam of his jeans. The truck swerved a bit, and he heard Ryan tell Rio to head to the parking lot behind *The Gym*.

Nate smiled around the fat cock stretching his lips. It had been a long time since they'd had a dirty truck fuck, as Ryan called them.

A hard right by Rio and Nate bumped his head on the steering wheel. He came up for air. "More of that and we'll get pulled over by the cops. Wouldn't that be perfect, a business owner, the sheriff and the town mayor locked up for lewd behaviour?"

Rio put a hand to the back of Nate's head and guided him down once more. "You just let me do the driving. You've got more important things to do."

A slight bump as Rio turned into the parking lot, and within seconds, the truck was in park and the seat pushed back. Although it had been a while, Nate knew just what to do. He reached down and helped Ryan remove his jeans before tucking his knees up under his chest.

The sound of the glove box being opened signalled Ryan's quest for lube. He swirled his tongue around Rio's head and came back up for air. "Need it, Sheriff."

"I know. I think we all do," Ryan said as he spread a liberal amount of slick on Nate's hole. "Not gonna stretch you. I want you to feel my cock all day tomorrow."

Ryan knelt behind Nate, squeezing in between the door and Nate's ass. It was the wide bulbous head that first touched his hole. *Holy Shit*. Ryan really wasn't going to stretch him.

Nate wrapped his hand around the base of Rio's cock. If he was pushed forward by Ryan's meat, he didn't want to gag himself on Rio's. He felt like he'd licked an electrical socket when Ryan pressed his way inside. Nate couldn't decide if he liked the feeling or not. One thing was for sure. He'd definitely feel it for days.

Once Ryan was fully seated, Nate began administering to Rio's cock once again. He got his fingers involved after reaching behind himself to catch some of the excess lube. *Damn*. Ryan must've thought he looked rusty with all he'd squirted back there.

As he sucked Rio's fat head, he worked his lover's hole. With every thrust of Ryan's hips, Nate took Rio deeper into his mouth. Without the ability to tell Ryan how good the fucking was, Nate settled for a series of loud moans and whimpers, which Rio seemed to greatly appreciate.

At one point, the sounds of slapping skin and moans of ecstasy were so loud in the closed confines of the truck, Nate almost covered his ears. Yep. This was exactly the kind of dirty truck fuck he'd been looking forward to.

Rio was the first to slip over the edge, although Nate had a feeling it was the third finger he'd introduced that had done the pushing. With Rio collapsed against the driver's door, Nate reached down and wrapped his hand around his own erection. He gave Ryan his full attention as his lover's hips pistoned back and forth.

When Rio's thumb pressed against the slit on Nate's crown, he completely lost it, spraying the seat and their hands with the thick, white cream.

"Shit. Shit. Oh fuck, I'm coming," Ryan howled.

Nate felt Ryan's body jerk against him as he emptied his seed.

It wasn't until he'd regained his breath that Nate noticed the overwhelming smell of sex in the cab. Although the air conditioning was running full blast, Nate reached across Rio's lap and rolled down the window.

He collapsed against Rio's thighs and wished for nothing but a good night's sleep. It was Rio's cell phone going off that woke him several moments later.

"Hello?"

"Oh, yeah. We'll be there. No. No. We just got a little sidetracked. Okay, see ya then."

Rio ran the back of his hand over Nate's jaw. "They wanted to know where we were."

Nate opened his eyes and sat up. He was sure they all smelled like sex. "Let's run inside and clean up first."

"Sounds like a plan," Rio agreed.

Ryan gave a grunt and pulled his baseball pants back on.

"Two drinks, right? Then we can leave?" Nate asked, making sure they were all on the same page.

"Yep. If we even make it to two." Ryan winked and opened the passenger door.

Nate began to hatch a plan to get his lovers horny enough to leave early. Shouldn't be too hard, he was a professional when it came to flirting.

* * * *

"So, no bull riding this year, huh?" Rio asked Jeremy Lovell. Before he could answer, Nate once again ran a hand up the inside of his thigh. Rio squeezed his legs together, trapping the tormenting hand.

Jeremy laughed and shook his head. "Nope. I've found something even better than the adrenaline rush I got from a good bull ride."

Rio watched Jeremy glance at Shep. *Yeah*. He knew that feeling. There was a time when he couldn't imagine anything more exciting than wandering the jungle, protecting his clients. Now, he had all the excitement a man could ever need. "I get that."

He finished off his beer and poured another from the pitcher between him and Nate. He bumped shoulders with his lover. "Better drink up."

A sleepy-looking Nate began chugging the warm beer in his glass before pouring himself another. "You do know I have to be up and out of the house by five, right?"

Rio glanced at the large Coca-Cola sign on the wall. Even if they left in the next few minutes, it would only give his partner about five hours of sleep. On the other side of Nate, Ryan was involved in a lively discussion about tattoos with Kade.

He leaned over and whispered in Nate's ear. "Why don't you give Ryan some of the attention you've been paying me? That'll light a fire under his ass."

"Or in his crotch," Nate said with a chuckle.

Rio turned back to Shep. "Heard you had a problem on the ranch last week?"

Shep shook his head. "Yeah. I still can't believe I did that."

"You should've seen him. He was like a man possessed," Jeremy laughed.

"Should've just sold the mean sonofabitch." Shep gazed at Jeremy. "What can I say, I'm a man ruled by passion, and at that moment my passion was to see Zero dead and buried."

Someone thumped Rio on the back of the head. He spun around ready for a fight, and came face to face with Ryan's hard cock trapped behind the zipper of his uniform pants. He followed the sexy length of his lover's body until they made eye contact. Yep. He could see the lust written all over Ryan.

"Nate needs to get home."

Rio grinned. "Okay." He turned back to Jeremy and Shep. "We'll probably catch up with you all at the rodeo."

After waving goodbye to the rest of his friends, Rio strode towards the door. He couldn't keep a chuckle from erupting when he spotted Ryan practically pushing Nate out of the bar. Nate must've done a damn good job of convincing Ryan it was bedtime.

Chapter Six

With Ryan beside him, and Rio behind the wheel of the vintage convertible, Nate waved to the people lining Main Street. "Where'd all these people come from?"

"Hell if I know. Guess word's gotten around over the years. This is by far the biggest crowd I've ever seen in Cattle Valley," Ryan answered.

Despite the friendly smile plastered on his face, Nate began to mentally calculate the supplies he'd ordered. "If all these people come to the dance, I won't have enough seating. That's not such a big deal, but I gave Sean and Erico an estimate of the number of people, so they're not gonna have enough food and drink."

He heard Ryan reassure him that everything would be fine, but Nate was too busy beating himself up over the failure.

As soon as they got to the end of the parade route, Nate slumped down in the seat and covered his face as he finally allowed himself to break down in tears.

"Hey, hey," Ryan said, pulling Nate into his lap. "Don't let this upset you."

"You don't understand. I should've known I couldn't do this. I'm a total fuck-up as a mayor, but I thought I could at least put on a good celebration. That's all I wanted. I was hoping if people enjoyed themselves more than they ever had, they'd cut me some slack when it came to my other duties."

Rio continued to drive until they were between the town and the rodeo grounds before he pulled onto a side road. He stopped the car and crawled into the backseat with Nate and Ryan.

Nate's big strong lovers gave him the sweetest kisses as they worked to calm him down.

"Is this what's been botherin' ya all this time?" Rio asked.

Nate nodded. "I didn't want you guys to know what a fuck-up I was. I couldn't let people help me, because I was afraid they'd see how unqualified I am for this job." He threw

up his hands in despair. "And now all my work will be for nothing, because I'll have a mob of hungry people without anywhere to sit on my hands, and it'll all be my fault."

"Oh, baby," Rio tried to soothe him. "We'll help."

"I'll get one of the big city trucks and drive into Sheridan. Surely there are more tables and chairs we can rent. I'll get the Good brothers, Garron and Jeb to help. We'll take care of it. I promise."

Lifting his gaze to make eye contact with the men he loved had him crying even harder. "I'm so sorry I didn't tell you. I don't know why you put up with me."

"Because you're our Nate, and we love you," Rio whispered against Nate's tear stained cheek.

"Now dry those eyes. You've got a rodeo to preside over, and I've got some tables to find."

"Can you stop by, or call Sean, and ask him about the food and beer?"

"I'll take care of it." Ryan held Nate under his chin and kissed him. "When we stick together, we make a pretty damn good team."

"So why can't we seem to remember that?" Rio chimed in.

Nate lifted the bottom of his golf shirt and used the underside to dry his face. His breathing was still erratic from the episode, but at least the crying jag was coming to an end. He knew the three of them would need to sit down after all this was over and have a serious talk about his future in politics.

Ryan and Rio continued to pet and soothe Nate until he was completely calmed down. "I need to get to the rodeo," he mumbled.

He wasn't looking forward to being in the announcer's box, but it was expected. Nate hoped he wasn't supposed to talk and joke around with the announcer, because he really didn't know if he'd be able to pull that off.

At least Rio would be down below taking tickets and acting as one of his gate keepers. He knew if he needed him, Rio would drop everything for him. "Okay. Let's do this thing."

Rio gave him another kiss. When he started to pull away, Nate held on and kissed him again, thrusting his tongue into his lover's mouth.

Rio groaned and started to take things further, but a clearing throat stopped them. Nate pulled his tongue out of Rio's mouth and grinned. "A little something to get me through the day."

Ryan started to chuckle, and, before long, they were all laughing. Nate felt better by the time Rio climbed back into the front seat and put the car into gear. He may not be fit to be mayor, but his men loved him regardless.

* * * *

"So, I assume since we're making this run, Nate finally talked to you?" Garron asked.

Driving the truckload of eight foot long banquet tables, Ryan glanced in the rear view mirror to make sure Ranger was keeping up with him. They'd left Sonny, Jeb and Lilly to get the extra tables and chairs from the church recreation hall while they made the trip.

"Yeah," Ryan finally replied. He shook his head. "I had no idea things were so bad for him."

"Whatever you do, don't let him quit."

Ryan took his eyes off the road long enough to give Garron a narrowed gaze. "I'll support him no matter what he decides. I've never seen him like he was earlier. No job is worth that."

"Maybe not, but I think Nate's just suffering from lack of self-confidence. He has the intelligence and the people skills to do that job, and we both know it."

"Could you watch Sonny do something that made him miserable?"

"Yep. I did. When he was working his way through physical therapy, it killed me to watch him struggle and suffer, but I continued to push because I knew it was the right thing to do. Don't think I didn't have days when I just wanted to sit and hold him, and protect him from the world. Look, all you can do is give him all the love and support you can, while still pushing him to do the right thing."

Ryan knew Sonny had had a rough time after he'd been shot in the head. Nate had talked to Garron almost daily during Sonny's rehabilitation. Maybe he should listen to what Garron was trying to tell him. It felt to Ryan like he was riding a fence. He wanted to give

Nate what he needed to be happy again, but at the same time, he knew Nate would never be the same if he just gave up.

"I'll think about it," he agreed.

He'd been lucky enough to get the beer distributor on the phone before they'd made the run out to Cattle Valley. He'd been even luckier when the guy told him he had enough to bring him an additional ten kegs of beer. Ryan figured if that wasn't enough, it would be too damn bad. As it was, it didn't sit well with him. Was it even ethical for a sheriff to supply an entire town with free-flowing alcohol? Once again the answer came back to Nate. It may not be the smartest thing he'd ever done, but he'd do it again if it helped his lover.

As they drove by the rodeo grounds, Ryan could hear the screaming crowd even with the windows up. "Must be a helluva show."

He was disappointed he wasn't going to be able to catch it this year. He'd been to every rodeo since he'd moved to town.

Garron whistled. "What I wanna know is, how they packed all those people in there? They got cars parked clear out here by the road."

Ryan tried to turn a blind eye to all the illegally parked vehicles. *It's one day a year.* "Hopefully we'll have time to get this stuff set up before the thing's over. I called Roy and asked him to get another two blocks cleared of cars and closed down. I don't know what we're going to do if we still don't have enough room."

"We'll figure it out." Garron laid a supportive hand on Ryan's shoulder.

"We're gonna have to."

* * * *

Still at the gate he'd been assigned, Rio had found a wire crate and turned it upside down to use for a stool. The rodeo was almost over, and, so far, the darn thing had managed to hold him. One of the out-of-town cowboys was set to ride Satan's Bandit, and so far no one had been able to stay on the mean sonofabitch for the full eight seconds.

The cowboy was still in the chute trying to get his hold just right. The tension in the air was so thick, the crowd had gone completely quiet. Rio wiped the sweat from his forehead as

he watched the gate fly open and Satan's Bandit come flying out, kicking like his name sake were on his tail.

Although it was close a time or two, the cowboy managed to stay seated until the eight second buzzer sounded. The crowd behind him erupted in applause. When the judges' scores came up as the highest of the day, the people went nuts, stamping their feet, hollering and jumping up and down. An unnatural sound caught Rio's attention, he surveyed the screaming crowd, trying to figure out what it was. He made eye contact with Nate up in the box and waved. He chuckled as the announcer seemed to get into the spirit of the moment. The gaudy sequined cowboy shirt almost blinded Rio every time the red haired man jumped in the air.

Before Nate could lift his arm to return the gesture, a loud popping sound echoed throughout the arena. Rio's eyes widened as he watched the box his lover was in begin to fall, along with an entire large section of the grandstand. Screams from those suddenly falling mixed with the celebrating crowd.

The entire collapse lasted mere seconds. Rio was momentarily stunned as he searched the pile of debris for the white box Nate had been ensconced in. As he pushed off the crate and started running to the catastrophe, he pulled the cell phone out of his pocket and called Ryan.

"Hey," Ryan answered.

"The grandstand collapsed. Get every emergency vehicle you can out here, now!"

"Wait! Are people hurt?" Ryan asked, his voice frantic.

"Some worse than that I'm afraid, by the looks of things. I gotta go find Nate." Rio hung up without waiting for a reply and shoved the phone back into his pocket.

"Nate!" he called as he headed for the remains of the announcer's booth.

The structure had partially broken apart on impact. Rio carefully made his way to the top of the heap and began sifting through the broken boards. He caught sight of a sequined shirt. Moving quickly, he uncovered Earl Graves, the announcer. *Fuck*. It was obvious by the man's twisted neck that he was dead. Fear filled Rio. Although others were screaming for help, Rio's focus was on getting Nate.

"Nate!" he called again as he moved another section of the booth.

"Here!" Nate yelled back.

Rio saw a hand stick up from around a door. He picked the slab of wood up like it weighed nothing and carefully tried to move it to the side. All around him cries of pain and anguish could be heard.

His first glimpse of Nate's bloody face nearly stopped his heart. Rio tried to shut out the chaos while trying to figure how to get his love out of the debris without hurting him further.

"Just get this board off my leg and help me up," Nate said, calmer than Rio had expected.

He lifted the board and set it aside, knowing it was possible someone was buried beneath where he was stacking the broken wood. He shook the images off Earl and focused once again on Nate, who reached out and grabbed Rio's arm. "I'm okay. Just lift me up."

Rio didn't know whether or not to follow Nate's instructions. What if Nate was hurt worse than he knew? What if by lifting him out, Rio inadvertently hurt him more?

"Rio! Snap out of it and help me up!" Nate screamed at him.

With a deep breath, Rio carefully lifted Nate into his arms. He stared at his man's bloody face, arms and legs. "You're hurt."

Nate shook his head. "Nothing I won't live through, but there are others who need our help."

A particularly bad cut on Nate's arm caught Rio's attention. Without thinking, he tore the T-shirt from his body and ripped it into several strips, which he used as a makeshift bandage.

"We need to get these people out of here. Did you find anyone else from the booth?"

Rio blinked several times, the activity around him finally catching his full attention. How would Nate react if he told him the truth? "I found Earl." He shook his head. "He's dead."

"What? Did you get him out?" Nate asked.

"No. Everything's so unstable. I'm afraid the more I dig, the more I'm likely to hurt someone. I don't know where to begin."

Nate held one hand over his bleeding arm as he surveyed the area. Rio watched as his lover wiped a few stray tears from his cheeks. "Let's start over there at the edge. We can work our way in and down from there."

On their way over to the edge of the collapsed bleachers, Rio stopped to help Pam Gleeson to her feet. "Where're the boys?" he asked, thinking of her two young sons being buried in the rubble.

Pam shook her head and pointed towards the concession stand. "They wanted popcorn," she cried and covered her mouth. "I let them go by themselves. I...I thought they'd be save enough."

Pam started to sink to her knees, but Rio kept her on her feet and passed her off to a waiting man he didn't even know. Pam clung to the man for dear life. "What if they were on their way back up?" Pam continued to cry.

Rio turned away and took a deep breath. He knew before the day was out, his emotions would be tested to their limits. If he didn't get control over himself, he wouldn't be good for anybody.

He spotted Nate speaking calmly to a woman, who appeared trapped between the fallen section of grandstand and the still-standing one. How could his lover appear so calm?

Come on, Ryan. We need you.

* * * *

As Ryan sped towards the rodeo grounds, he called the Wyoming State Police office in Sheridan and explained what had happened. "I'm pulling up to the scene now. Our ambulance was already on hand in case one of the riders was injured."

"We'll coordinate things on this end," the dispatcher told him.

"Holy fuck," he whispered as he got his first glimpse at the carnage. "Send as many helicopters as you can. It's worse than I thought."

"I'll put in the calls."

Ryan hung up and handed his phone to Garron. "If they call back, you'll have to talk to them. Tell 'em you're a sheriff in Nebraska and they won't give you any shit."

Garron nodded and stuck the phone in his front pocket. "What do you want us to do?"

Ryan couldn't believe all the activity going on in front of him. "Anything you can."

It was easy to spot Rio from his position towards the top of the pile of rubble. Had he found Nate? A hole seemed to open inside him at the thought of Rio searching for Nate by himself.

As he made his way through the debris, he assured people that help was on the way. Several times injured friends and neighbours reached out to him for assistance. Ryan did what he could, but moved away quickly once they were safe.

"Rio!" he yelled.

Rio stopped what he was doing and looked up, meeting Ryan's gaze. He pointed to the left.

Ryan followed the gesture, his eyes roaming the sea of injured people until they landed on Nate. "Thank God."

He continued to watch Nate for several moments to make sure he was okay. Nate appeared to be handling the accident better than anyone. He was sure as hell a lot calmer than everyone else. Ryan briefly wondered if his lover could be in shock.

A comforting smile transformed Nate's bloody face to one of hope. Nate was fine. Ryan took a deep cleansing breath. It appeared as though there were plenty of people already actively searching for the injured, so Ryan decided to put his field training to use.

He made his way down to the ambulance. Zac Alban was inserting an IV into Ezra James. Wyn stood next to his partner, his face paler than the moon in the night sky. Ryan glanced at Zac. The paramedic must've understood the unspoken question.

"He's had a minor heart attack, but I think he should be okay if we can get him to the hospital. I've got his vitals under control. Do you know how far out help is?"

Ryan shook his head. "I told 'em to send helicopters."

Zac shook his head. "From what I've seen, we're gonna need a hell of a lot of 'em, plus a fleet of ambulances to transfer these people."

"Where are the docs?" Ryan asked.

"Nate already called them. They're setting up the clinic for the walking wounded."

Ryan scratched at his jaw. "We can start loading people on one of the busses in the parking lot. We'll have to set up an area where we can try and assess people's injuries. The cuts and scrapes can go into the clinic. That'll free up the helicopters and ambulances for the more seriously injured."

Zac nodded his agreement. "Nate's already started setting up an area over by the parking lot. You might see if you can find George or Collin Zeffer. They've both been trained in triage."

"Got it." Ryan spun around and searched the crowd. He wished he had his sheriff's vehicle with him. At least then he'd have a bullhorn. He was proud of Nate for keeping his cool in the situation.

He strode over to the crowd and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Collin Zeffer! George Manning!" he shouted as he walked through the throng of injured people.

"Here!" Collin yelled, waving his arms as he tried to make his way to Ryan.

"Where's George?" Ryan asked.

"I don't know. I tried to call him earlier, but he's not answering his phone."

Ryan looked at the pile of debris. "Was he here?"

Collin shook his head. "I don't think so. Trick was supposed to come into town earlier. He's probably with him."

Shit. Ryan knew the two men were old school friends. They could be anywhere. "Okay. I need you to go help Zac. Nate's set up a triage area. The people that have minor injuries will be bussed to the clinic. I'll see if I can find the driver and have him move the bus as close as possible."

He heard a helicopter overhead. "Okay. Let's get moving. I'll keep trying to get George on the phone."

Collin nodded. It wasn't until he started to move off that he spotted Abe. He could tell the reclusive man was uncomfortable in the chaotic atmosphere. "Why don't you go with Collin," Ryan said to Abe.

"Thanks."

It didn't take Ryan long to find the hired bus driver. He was working right alongside everyone else to get as many people uncovered as possible. Ryan explained what the plan was and sent the man on his way.

Since discovering Nate was safe, Ryan had slipped into rescue mode. It wasn't until he saw the vacant stare of Gavin Lively that it all became real to him.

Ryan knelt and bowed his head. He didn't need to touch the young man to know he was dead. Tears sprung to Ryan's eyes. These were his friends. The people he said hi to every day. How many would end up like the young man who ran Wyn's store?

Ryan was caught between what he wanted to do and what he should do. Finally going with his gut instinct, he lifted the steel bars that covered Gavin's body. Once cleared of the twisted metal, Ryan came face to face with the fatal head wound that had ended the once happy man's life. He quickly looked around to make sure he wasn't drawing a crowd and closed the dead man's eyes. "Sleep," he whispered.

He took a deep breath and pulled off his shirt. He wrapped the khaki sheriff's department garment around Gavin's head and lifted the body from the rubble. Once clear of the crowd, he surveyed the area.

"Ryan?"

"Don't come over here, Nate." He purposely stood with his back to his lover.

"Is he dead?" Although Nate's voice was controlled, Ryan could hear the anguish of the day hidden below.

"Yes. I need to find somewhere to lay him down."

Without a word, Nate strode past him towards the horse trailers. He glanced back and gestured for Ryan to follow.

"I can take care of this. Why don't you go back and help the others."

Nate shook his head. They continued to journey around the trailers until they came to a small shade tree. "Here. Put him next to Earl," Nate said, gesturing to an area beside another partially covered body.

Ryan laid Gavin's body in the cooler temperature of the shade and straightened the man's body.

Nate knelt beside Ryan. "Who is it?"

Ryan realised it was the first time Nate had asked the question. It said a lot about his lover. To Nate it could've been anyone who deserved the respect of privacy and shade in death. Ryan knew Gavin's death wasn't going to come easy for his lover. Nate practically kept Wynfields's Department Store in business, and Gavin had become a partner in crime for his monthly shopping trips.

Nate's hand landed on Ryan's bare arm. "Ryan?"

"Gavin."

Nate's hand squeezed the flesh under it. "Neil's been looking for him."

"Neil Peters?"

Nate nodded. "They've been seeing each other for a couple of months now."

Nate suddenly stood and turned back towards the chaos. Ambulances could be heard flooding the area as well as a helicopter taking off. Nate looked up. "That'll probably be Ezra. I wonder if they let Wyn ride with him?"

"I doubt it," Ryan said as he stood beside Nate.

It was an oddly serene moment. The two of them stood there for several moments without a word being spoken.

"Well, I need to find someone from the *EZ Does It* who can take care of Neil after I tell him..." Nate choked on a sob as it burst from his chest. "Our town will never be the same."

Ryan pulled Nate into his arms and kissed the top of his head. "We'll heal."

* * * *

Rio helped Ryan Bronwyn make his way to the triage area they'd set up before turning back to the pile. It had been over two hours since the collapse, and they still had people unaccounted for.

At least they'd been lucky so far. Although a lot of people were trapped in the debris, most victims only had minor injuries. There'd been a few where he wondered if they'd make it, but most, like Ryan, were suffering cuts, bruises and dehydration.

In an odd moment of quiet, Rio heard a woman's voice calling for help. His spine stiffened. He knew that voice. "Carol!"

He listened again, but another helicopter was landing nearby, drowning out any possible reply from Nate's assistant. "Quiet!" he screamed.

Rio began walking around the area with his face as close to the sharp debris as he dared. He continued to call Carol's name in hopes she would answer.

"Help me."

Rio stopped and backed up. "Carol?"

He heard something that sounded like a groan and started clearing bleacher boards and support brackets from the area. "Fuck!" he screamed when he realised he'd been standing right over the top of her.

"Can I get a stretcher over here!" he yelled.

Rio continued to slowly uncover Carol's body, making sure he didn't injure her further. *Dammit, I should've been more careful.* He couldn't help but to wonder what his weight had done to her.

It was hard to tell the extent of her injuries upon first look. "What hurts?"

Carol managed to open her eyes, squinting as the sunlight hit her face. Rio moved just enough to shield her from the bright rays and reached for her hand.

"Ca...n't...bre...athe," she panted.

He saw two paramedics working their way towards him with a backboard. "Hurry. I think she has a collapsed lung."

Rio stepped back and let the paramedics take over Carol's care. He watched them work frantically for a few moments before he turned away. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was doing more harm than good as he picked his way through the debris. No doubt he'd either caused the collapsed lung or made it worse.

Frustrated, he grabbed two handfuls of his hair and pulled. The pain brought him back to the problem at hand. A professional rescue crew had just arrived from Sheridan. Maybe it would be better to let them do their work, and just wait for further instructions.

He was on his way to find Nate when he spotted Mario. Other than a scrape on his forehead, he looked fine. Rio pulled him into a hug. "I'm glad you're all right."

Mario nodded. "I was on the grandstand that didn't collapse, but Asa wasn't so lucky."

Rio pulled back. "Is he okay?"

Mario shrugged. "I don't know. They airlifted him to Sheridan. He was in the booth with Nate. I didn't see him, and no one will tell me anything."

That could've been Nate. "Do you want me to find someone to drive you to the hospital?"

Mario shook his head. "I'm sure he has his 'people' there. He doesn't need me there."

"Maybe, maybe not, but I think you'd be better off knowing for sure, don't you?"

Jeb came into view, and Rio held up a hand to Mario. "Wait right here."

He ran over to Jeb. "Do you think you can round up another bus driver?"

"Huh?"

"There are a lot of people here who need to get to their loved ones in Sheridan. I think it'd be better if they didn't drive themselves. I know Nate has one of the busses taking injured people into Cattle Valley, but there should be another one or two around. So, can you find one of the drivers for me?"

Jeb nodded. "Sure. I'll do my best."

"Thanks. And start spreading the word to the families."

Jeb nodded again. "I'm grateful for something constructive to do. I'll admit I feel a bit lost."

Rio understood perfectly. He figured that's how they all felt. "I'll tell Mario to look for the bus."

Rio ran back over to his friend and explained what his plans were. "Don't worry about getting back. If I have to drive the damn bus myself, we'll make sure all of you are taken care of."

"Did you hear Gavin Lively's dead?" Mario asked.

"What?"

Mario nodded. "I guess Ryan found him."

"I found Earl earlier. Have there been any more?"

Mario shook his head. "I haven't heard of any more, but who knows about the people they took in the helicopters."

Mario clamped his mouth shut. Rio watched as his friend struggled to get his emotions under control, no doubt wondering about Asa. Rio pulled Mario into another hug. No words were needed, only support. He tried to give Mario as much as he needed to get himself together.

When Mario stepped back, Rio could tell he'd done just that. "Sorry," Mario mumbled.

"Don't be." He gestured off towards the parking lot. "The bus is somewhere over there. Please get on it. You'll hate yourself if you don't."

Mario nodded and walked away.

Rio wished he could cover his ears and block out the sounds of the day. He wanted nothing more than to go back in time. Should he have been keeping a count of the people

filing into the grandstands? He knew there were twice as many people shoved onto the bleachers than normal. Why hadn't he considered what might happen?

He heard the siren of George Manning's Suburban as it pulled into the parking lot. It wasn't until that moment he realised it was the first of the fire chief that he'd seen. Where the hell had he been?

George jumped out of the SUV and grabbed a large first aid kit. Rio didn't miss the chief's ashen complexion, or the guilt evident in the man's eyes. Rio decided to take a chance and moved towards the upset man.

There was no proof that George and Carol had something going between them, but Rio knew they were at least close friends. He stopped George's charge through the crowd by grabbing his arm.

George spun around like he was ready to punch someone. When he realised it was Rio, his expression gentled.

"I thought you'd want to know. I pulled Carol out a few minutes ago."

"And?"

"They've already airlifted her to Sheridan."

"Is she...?"

Rio shrugged. "I don't know. She wasn't breathing very well. A collapsed lung would be my guess." He didn't tell George about the blood covering her body. From the expression on the man's face, he was barely holding himself together.

"They're getting a bus ready to take people to the hospital to sit and wait for news on their loved ones if you're interested."

George shook his head. "I can't. Not until the last person is taken out of here."

"There are professional rescue crews here now."

George nodded. "I should've been here." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Dammit! I should've been here."

"Don't do that to yourself. You couldn't have foreseen what was gonna happen."

George pulled his arm out of Rio's grasp. "I've got work to do."

Rio watched as George made his way through the mess. He knew George well enough to know something was eating away at him.

"Hey," Nate said as he wrapped his arms around Rio from behind.

Rio turned around and embraced his lover, the news of Asa once again crossing his mind. "I love you."

Nate gazed up into Rio's eyes. "I love you, too."

Rio tried to wipe some of the dried blood from Nate's face. "Have you had someone look at that arm yet?"

Nate shook his head. "It needs stitches, but it can wait."

"I heard about Gavin. I'm sorry, baby."

Nate buried his head against Rio's chest. "I had to tell Neil. I never in my life thought I'd have to look into someone's eyes and tell them the man they were falling in love with was dead."

"Is he okay?"

Nate shook his head "No. He had to be sedated. He kept demanding to see Gavin's body, but I wouldn't tell him where it was."

"That bad?"

Nate nodded. "Yeah."

Rio kissed the top of Nate's head. Gone was the perfectly mussed style his lover favoured. Nate looked like a man who'd been through hell, and Rio guessed he had, as they all had.

He surveyed their surroundings. There was still so much left to do. Hopefully the last of the injured would be uncovered in the next hour. The rescue teams were having trouble getting to the middle section of bleachers. It seemed when the grandstand collapsed, the top had basically folded over onto the middle, burying the entire section under a mountain of debris.

The sun was starting to get lower in the sky. "We should probably get the lights turned on. We might need some portable generators to add light to the specific areas the rescue guys are working on."

"We've got some at the city barn. I'll find someone to go get them. I've already called Sean. He and Erico are coordinating the food. They'll bring some out here for the rescue teams. I told them to go ahead and open Main Street for people to gather. I had to get with Ryan to have the barricades moved away from the front of the clinic. Even though the emergency entrance is around back, the bus is parking in front."

Rio was proud of the way Nate was taking control. Despite what Nate thought of his ability to be mayor, he was proving he had the right stuff when it really counted. He kept his mouth shut though. It wasn't the time or place to praise Nate's leadership skills.

"What's next?"

"I don't know. Get the lights in here, the food, set up a rest area. I need to start a list of the people injured and where they were taken." Nate glanced around. "I'll need help with that. Have you seen Carol anywhere?"

Rio felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. "I'm sorry, baby, Carol was hurt. She was airlifted to Sheridan."

Nate's face went pale. Rio felt his lover's knees begin to buckle and held him up.

"How am I supposed to do this stuff without her?"

A man carrying a news camera caught Rio's eye. "Fuck."

He pulled Nate to the side out of sight. "I should've known it was only a matter of time before the journalists started showing up."

Nate tried to look around Rio. "Why aren't the state police keeping them out?"

"I don't know, but they'll want a statement from either you or Ryan."

"Well, they'll have to wait until the last person is rescued for that."

Chapter Seven

Ryan finally found Nate sitting in one of the city trucks with a cell phone to his ear. He stood between the open door and Nate as he waited for him to end his call. Rio had run home earlier to get the car charger after all three of their phones had run out of juice.

"Okay. Keep me updated." Nate hung up and scribbled something in the spiral notebook in his hand. "That was the hospital. Carol's out of surgery."

"And?" Ryan asked.

"They're optimistic, but the doctor says it's too early to tell. She suffered a lot of internal injuries along with the punctured lung."

"Did you get news on anyone else?"

Nate glanced over his list. "Ezra should make a full recovery. Asa suffered compound fractures to both legs and a broken left clavicle. Eli Sanchez lost two fingers and will have a hell of a scar running up his arm. The doctors said they'd been lucky to save what they did."

Nate flipped the page before tossing the notebook on the seat beside him. "Four dead. Gavin, one of the cowboys from the Back Breaker, Jim Becker, Earl, and..."

Nate wouldn't meet Ryan's gaze. *Shit.* "And who?"

"Rick."

"Rick as in my deputy?"

Nate nodded.

"That can't be right. Rick called in sick. He said he had the flu." Ryan had tried to call him several times since the collapse. Flu or not, he'd needed every available set of hands.

"I'm sorry."

Ryan sat on the ground, his legs no longer able to hold him up. "Did someone call his mom?"

Nate nodded again. "Yeah. I called her."

Ida Buchanon lived in an assisted living complex in Sheridan. Ryan wondered if the staff was aware of her loss. Rick had been her only child and the light of her life. Ryan

couldn't begin to understand how she must be feeling. "I'll go see her first thing in the morning."

"Reverend Sharp's holding a special service at noon. Maybe you could bring her back for that."

"Yeah."

"I'm getting ready to go into town. I think I've done all I can do here. I need to get an updated list from the clinic. Erico said everyone seems to be milling around downtown not sure what to do with themselves. I spoke with the hospital about sending grief counsellors out."

"That's good. I'm sure everyone will appreciate it. I need to stay here, but I'll find Rio to go with you."

"That's okay. You go do what you need to do. I'll find Rio."

Ryan stood and helped Nate out of the truck. He pulled Nate in his arms, mindful of the cut. Ryan once again thanked God for sparing his family. "The first thing I want you to do is have one of the docs stitch up that cut. I just hope like hell you didn't wait too long."

"If I did, I did. I'll come away with a whole lot less than most people. Although you may have to get used to me looking less than perfect." Nate tried to smile, but Ryan saw right through it.

"Do you think you deserve to be scarred? Is that why you waited?"

Nate's head tilted to the side. "What kind of man would I be if I sought treatment for myself when my friends lay buried and hurt? I waited because it was the right thing to do. It had nothing whatsoever to do with wanting a scar. I'm sure God will take care of what I deserve when the time comes."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ryan didn't like the sound of that statement one bit.

"Nothing. I'm gonna find Rio." Nate stood on his toes and gave Ryan a quick kiss. "We'll be in town when you've finished up here."

* * * *

The waiting room was almost empty by the time Rio walked Nate into the clinic. They approached Jill, the receptionist, and Nate reached for the sign-in form.

"I need one of the docs to take a look at my arm after they've seen everyone else," Nate informed her.

Jill's tired eyes went to the bloody make-shift bandage around Nate's upper arm. "I think Isaac's available. I'll call him for you."

Nate gestured to the waiting room. "No. Take these people first."

Jill tried a smile that fell flat. "They've already been seen. I think for some reason they're finding comfort sitting in here. I don't have the heart to shoo them out."

Nate studied the faces in the room. Some he knew in passing, others were complete strangers. He doubted the out of town folks would ever step foot in Cattle Valley again after everything they'd been through.

"Nate?" Isaac called from the doorway.

Nate walked towards Isaac with Rio still at his side. "You can wait here if you want."

Rio shook his head. "No way. I've done my part for everyone else. Now it's time to make sure the man I love is okay."

Nate remembered he left his notebook in the city truck. "Shit. Will you go out and get my list outta the truck?"

"Which room will he be in, Isaac?"

"Four."

Rio nodded and gave Nate a quick kiss. "I'll be right back."

Nate knew it would take Rio several moments because they'd had to park down the block, and he wanted a few minutes with Isaac alone.

Entering the small exam room, Nate took the customary seat on the table and began to unwrap his arm. "Do you have a count on how many people you had through here?"

"Just under a hundred, I'd guess. Jill will have a final count and list of injuries for you later tomorrow. She's pretty wrung out, so I think it would be better for her to get some sleep before making sense of the sign-in sheets."

"Anything serious?" Nate knew the clinic was supposed to receive only the walking wounded, but you never know what might come up upon closer examination.

Isaac hissed when he started washing away the blood on Nate's arm. "This is pretty bad, Nate."

"I'm okay."

Isaac went quiet for a few moments. "You asked me if anything was serious? Well, take a look at your arm. This is the worst injury I've treated. Why in the hell did you let this go? Do you know how easily you could've gone into shock from the loss of blood alone?"

A noise from the doorway caught Nate's attention. Rio stood, rubbing his stomach. *Oh crap.* Was his lover getting ready to throw up?

"It's my fault," Rio mumbled. "I'm the one who got him out of there. I should've insisted he get help right away."

Isaac rolled his eyes, making a disgusted sound in his throat. "Nate's a big boy. He should've known."

Nate stared at Rio while Isaac continued to clean his wound. "Ouch. Fuck!"

Isaac stepped back, still shaking his head. "I'm going to need to deaden the area before I can even get it clean. I hope you don't have a problem with needles."

"Needles? No. I've got no problem with needles. It's the pain they cause that I take issue with." Nate held out his good hand and waited for Rio to join him beside the table.

"You okay?" he asked his big strong lover.

"Are any of us?" Rio shook his head. "I'll get through it."

Nate tried to distract himself from the series of sharp pricks into the cut on his arm. "Hey, doc, while we're here, why don't you look at Rio. He's been having a lot of stomach problems lately."

Isaac didn't take his eyes off what he was doing when he addressed Rio. "What kind of trouble?"

"Throwing up when he gets upset. Popping antacids like crazy," Nate informed Isaac.

"Stop taking antacids, you'll screw up your body. Those damn things are meant for occasional acid reflux. The best thing you can do is lay off the meat for a while. Try to stick to a diet of fruits and vegetables that have natural alkaline in them. If that doesn't help, come back in, and I'll give you some prescription medication." Isaac stepped back and disposed of the needle and syringe.

He turned to Rio and lifted a single black eye brow. "And figure out what the hell is worrying you and deal with it."

Nate watched as Rio's dark complexion went a shade of red.

"I'm trying," Rio said.

"Try harder." Isaac began cleaning Nate's wound again. "Can you feel this?"

Nate shook his head. "Will you be able to stitch it?"

"Yeah. But the way the skin appears ripped, it might not be pretty. If you'd like, I can give you the number for a good plastic surgeon in Sheridan."

"No need. Just do what you can."

"I'm also going to put you on some strong antibiotics. It's infection you'll need to worry about at this point. Have you had a tetanus shot lately?"

"Two years ago."

"How's it going in here?" Dr. Sam Browning asked, sticking his head into the room.

"Okay. Just taking care of our hero here," Isaac answered.

"Don't say that. I'm no hero," Nate spat out.

Isaac paused in his suturing to regard Nate. "That's not what I've heard from the people that've come in and out of here all afternoon and evening. According to them, you kept your head."

Isaac sighed and went back to sewing. "You know I like you, right?"

Nate was confused by the question. "I guess so, why?"

"Because I need you to know that before I say what I'm about to say."

Nate gripped Rio's hand tighter. "Spit it out, Isaac."

"I didn't think you were the best man for the job. I like you, and I think you had the community's best interests at heart, but I wasn't sure you were what we needed to lead this town."

Nate swallowed around the lump in his throat. He'd been right. Despite winning the election, he didn't have the confidence of the people.

"I was wrong," Isaac stated.

"No, you weren't," Nate confessed. "I suck at the whole mayor thing."

"Quade was a great mayor, but he couldn't stand the sight of blood or even the thought of being around sick people. I'm not faulting him, it was just the way he was. How do you think he would've handled this tragedy?" Sam asked, stepping further into the room.

Nate rolled his eyes. "Well it's nice to know that if, God forbid, we ever have another tragedy, I'll be the best man to be mayor."

Isaac shook his head. "You're not listening. Every man brings something different to the table. For Quade, it was his business and engineering skills. You may not have those yet, but they can be learned. What can't be taught is compassion. And you, Mr. Mayor, have that in spades."

"And after what happened today, you're the perfect man to help heal this town," Sam added.

Nate was stunned by the vote of confidence he'd just been given. He felt his eyes begin to burn but quickly blinked away the tears. If he started crying again, he knew he wouldn't stop for days.

"Then get me fixed up and let me get back out there."

Isaac grinned. "A couple more and you'll be finished. Sam, why don't you fill out a prescription for Nate and give Rio a couple of samples until they can get them filled."

Sam gestured for Rio to follow him. Rio gave Nate's hand another squeeze before following the doctor into the hall.

"Casey's having a service at noon."

Isaac nodded. "I heard. Although, from the number of people talking about it, I doubt the church will be big enough."

Nate agreed. He wondered where they could hold a service. "Maybe we could hold it at the park."

Isaac finished tying off the last suture and cut the thread. "That might be the perfect spot."

They'd have to get all the chairs trucked over and set up, but Nate was sure there were plenty of people that would help. "Do you think it's too late to call Casey?"

Isaac shook his head and finished putting a sterile bandage on Nate's arm. "He's probably downtown with the others. You'll just have to find him."

"Done?"

"Yep. Just keep it clean and remember to take the entire prescription of antibiotics. If you notice heat or redness, give me a call or come in."

Nate shook Isaac's hand after getting to his feet. "Thanks for all you've done. I know this day wasn't easy for you either."

"I'll admit I was glad we were treating only minor cuts and scrapes. Physician or not, I don't know if I could've handled an entire day of seeing my friends come in with serious injuries."

"Yeah. Well, I'll see you tomorrow?" Nate asked as he walked into the hall.

"We'll be there."

* * * *

"Hey," Rawley greeted.

Ryan shut the door of his SUV and turned to find Rawley, Jeb, Garron and Sonny standing in front of him. The group of men looked completely worn out.

"How're things going?" Ryan asked, gesturing towards the crowd gathered at one end of the street.

"I don't know. We've done about everything we can do for them. It might be different if we knew 'em better, but we're seen as outsiders and rightly so." Rawley glanced over his shoulder. "I've never seen a closer bunch of people. You should be proud to be a part of this town."

"Believe me, I am. I witnessed the true spirit of Cattle Valley today." Ryan felt himself getting too emotional at the memory of the men and women pitching together to rescue their neighbours and friends.

Jeb stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Ryan. At first Ryan didn't know what to do. He knew he was already on the verge of breaking down, and he still needed to find his men and get them home. He finally settled on giving Jeb a quick hug back. "Thanks."

Jeb pulled back. "We're going back to the lodge for a couple of hours, but we'll be back first thing in the morning to help clean up and get the tables and chairs back to Sheridan for you."

Ryan nodded. "I'd appreciate that. I'm sorry things didn't go like we'd planned, but maybe you could come back next year. I'd bet it'll be the best Cattle Valley Days this town's ever seen."

"We were going to go home tomorrow, but we've talked about it and decided to stay until after the funeral services this week," Garron added.

"Thanks." Ryan hated the thought of burying men so young. "Maybe we could get together for another barbeque out at our place on Monday evening."

Garron nodded. "Just let us know." He pointed towards the parking lot. "Lilly, Ranger and Ryker are waiting in the Suburban, so I guess we'd best get. Nate and Rio are still working."

"Doesn't surprise me a bit." Ryan was so damn proud of his men he could burst.

After a round of handshakes and hugs, his friends walked off towards the parking lot and Ryan set off in the direction of the small crowd.

He found Rio and Nate serving coffee to a large group of people. "Hey," he greeted as he gave each of them a kiss.

"Any word from the inspector?" Nate asked.

Ryan shook his head. "He said he'd send the full report after he did some more investigating. I did get a bit of good news. Pam and the boys have been reunited. It seems after they got their popcorn, they snuck behind the barricades and were out by the bull pens when the collapse happened. One of the cowboys found them standing there and held on to them until someone came to claim them."

"Thank God they weren't where they were supposed to be," Nate said.

Ryan leaned over and whispered in Nate's ear. "What're all these people still doing here?"

Nate surveyed the crowd of around fifty people. "I don't know. Evidently they seem to be drawing some kind of strength from each other."

The new guy in town, Ethan, and Jay were passing out cookies. Ryan thought it was the most he'd ever seen Jay interact with people.

"He's been great," Nate said, evidently reading Ryan's mind again.

"At least he's not hiding in his apartment."

"I guess he's been out here since it happened. Luckily, he wasn't at the rodeo. He'd stayed home to watch Gracie so Hearn and Tyler could get the ball fields ready for tomorrow's tournament final."

Ryan was glad to hear his friends hadn't been at the rodeo. He noticed the dark circles under Nate and Rio's eyes. There was no doubt in his mind that he looked as tired as his men did. "Ready to head home?"

"What about these people?" Nate asked.

Ryan gathered Nate in his arms. "They'll lean on each other if they need to. We have long days ahead of us. There'll be plenty of things to do in the morning, but unless we get a little sleep, we won't be doing anyone any good. Besides, I need to personally inspect both my lovers' bodies for injuries."

"He's right," Rio said, stepping up to put his arms around both Ryan and Nate. "Let's call it a night and go home and take care of each other. I have a lot to be thankful for."

"We all do," Nate agreed. "Let me tell Jay and Sean we're leaving."

Ryan hadn't even noticed Sean. He watched Nate weave through the tables. Sean was sitting with his head propped in his hand, watching Ryan Bronwyn sleep. The antique store owner had a pretty large bandage on his forehead.

Nate bent over Sean and spoke into his ear. Sean nodded and said something back. Nate squeezed Sean's shoulder before making his way back through the area.

"I'm ready," Nate said.

"Why's Ryan asleep at the table? Why isn't he home?"

Nate glanced back over at the pair of men. "Sean doesn't know. He found him asleep earlier. He tried to wake him, but Ryan said he'd rather be here than home alone."

"So Sean's taken up the job of watching him sleep?"

Nate grinned. "I think today might bring a lot of people together."

"Hell. If we were a heterosexual community, we'd have a baby boom in nine and a half months."

Nate wrapped an arm around Ryan's waist. "Take me home."

"It'll be my pleasure."

* * * *

Rio was the first one up the following morning. He quietly got out of bed and made a pot of coffee. While he was waiting, he turned on the small television on the counter. It was the first time he'd caught the news since the previous day's events.

Sure enough, just as he'd feared, Cattle Valley was the main topic of discussion. From the air, the scene looked as bad as it had from the ground. The anchor woman told the

viewers that four people had died and twenty-two still remained hospitalised, one in intensive care.

Rio's stomach dropped. Had Carol or Asa taken a turn for the worse? *Oh shit.* What if Ezra suffered another heart attack?

The segment ended with a shot of Nate looking over the rescue effort with tears in his eyes. *That picture says it all,* Rio thought.

The story on the collapse was quickly followed by news that business owner and billionaire, Asa Montgomery, was injured in the tragedy but was expected to recover. Rio breathed a sigh of relief. At least Mario would be happy.

He switched off the television and set the cups on a tray. After fixing three perfectly prepared cups of coffee, Rio carried them upstairs. He set the tray on the bedside table and crawled back in bed.

Rio snuggled up to Nate and pulled his lover against his chest. The dried cum on Nate's torso reminded Rio of the slow lovemaking of the previous night. Despite the fact they were all exhausted, they all felt the overwhelming need to physically love each other.

The tenderness Ryan displayed as he made love to him still caused a catch in his chest. Ryan was a lover with many facets and Rio enjoyed them all, but the incredible care his lover had taken with him was better than anything he'd ever experienced.

Rio felt Nate's long lashes tickle against his chest as he blinked. "Morning."

Nate scooted up and gave Rio a kiss. "Morning. Do I smell coffee?"

Rio grinned. "Made just the way you like it."

He reached over and picked up the cup, handing it to Nate.

"Mmmm, and served just the way I like it, too."

"Got one of those for me?" Ryan asked.

"Of course." Rio passed Ryan his morning brew.

Nate sat against the headboard. He seemed to be his old self for several moments. Rio knew the second Nate remembered the tragedy of the previous day.

"We should get going," Nate said.

"It's early. We have a few minutes." Rio took a sip of his own coffee.

Nate slurped his coffee making Rio and Ryan laugh.

"In a hurry?" Ryan asked.

Nate passed the empty mug back to Rio. "Yep. There are other things besides caffeine that get me going in the morning."

When Rio turned to put the cup back on its tray, Nate pounced on him. Surprised, Rio glanced over his shoulder. "What're you doing?"

Grinding his morning erection against Rio's ass, Nate chuckled. "What does it feel like I'm doing?"

Rio turned his head in the other direction and looked at Ryan. His lover's face mimicked his own shocked expression. Nate never, ever topped. What the hell was going on?

"You wanna fuck our Rio?" Ryan asked.

"Mmm hmm," Nate answered, reaching for lube.

Ryan's eyebrows rose as he gave Rio a shrug.

A slick finger teased against Rio's hole. It suddenly no longer mattered that Nate was acting completely out of character. Rio rose to his knees, making it easier for his baby to love him.

Ryan positioned himself against the headboard with a leg on either side of Rio's body. It didn't take a brain surgeon to know what his sheriff wanted. As Nate continued to finger his ass, Rio began to nuzzle Ryan's balls.

Ryan moaned and buried his fingers in Rio's hair.

Rio couldn't keep the grin from his face. His men sure did love to control him by his hair. God forbid he ever decide to get it cut. Hell. He'd probably be one of those old guys with long grey hair. Damn, he hated that look, too. Still, better to keep his men happy in the bedroom than worry about what he looked like to the general public.

He felt Nate kneel behind him and prepared himself to be fucked. He could tell by the quick jab of fingers in and out of his ass that Nate was getting himself worked up. "I'm ready," he told Nate.

Rio glanced up at Ryan and grinned. Ryan smiled back and directed Rio's mouth to his cock. "Pushy bastard."

Despite the token protest at his lover's forcefulness, Rio ate it up, both the attitude and the cock in front of him. The crown of Nate's cock breeched his hole. Rio tried to help his lover out by rocking back.

A sharp slap to his ass stopped him. "Hey!"

"Stay still. This is mine," Nate ordered.

Going back down on Ryan's cock, Rio glanced up and rolled his eyes. Between the slap to his ass, and Ryan's firm grip on his hair, he wondered what he'd gotten himself into.

Nate gripped Rio by the hips and surged inside in one hard thrust.

"Fuck," Rio said around the cock in his mouth. One of Ryan's hands released Rio's hair and travelled down to pull at his nipples.

Rio groaned. God, he loved nipple play. Behind him, Nate pulled back before pushing back inside. Each time Nate withdrew, the fucking grew more intense. Rio tickled Ryan's hole with one finger as he held the base of the heavily veined cock with the other.

Ryan began to move his legs. Rio wasn't sure what his lover was up to until he felt bare feet rubbing against his cock. It was like sensory overload. Rio jerked as his release seemed to come out of nowhere. He smiled at the thought of painting his partner's feet with his seed. That was definitely some kinky shit. Who knew that a pair of soft feet could set him off like that?

He was still pondering the question when he felt the first shot of Ryan's cum hit the back of his throat. He pulled back enough to taste the salty elixir that he loved.

Nate began fucking him like a man possessed, changing angles mid-stroke. As soon as the rhythm became erratic, Rio knew his lover was getting ready to fall over the edge. He slurped up the last of Ryan's seed and turned to glance over his shoulder.

"Give it to me, baby."

Nate gave a grunt to rival any of Ryan's as he came. Rio still didn't know what had come over Nate, but if this was the end result, he was just fine with the changes.

Epilogue

One Month Later

"Have you seen this?" Ryan asked, holding up his magazine.

Rio set the free weights he'd been bench pressing in the cradle and sat up. He took the magazine from his lover's hand and whistled. "Holy Shit, Nate's gonna freak."

The front cover was the picture that had already been in the newspapers following the tragedy. The same shot Rio had seen on television the morning after the event, his beautiful Nate standing among the rubble with tears in his eyes. Only this time it was a glossy full page colour picture on the front of one of the biggest news magazines in the country. Rio admitted to himself that the photo still had the ability to choke him up. The expression of complete and utter despair on his partner's face was one Rio never wanted to see again. The headline splashed across the bottom of Nate's picture read, *A Private Community's Nightmare*.

"Check out page twenty-six."

Rio flipped to the indicated section and gasped. "Where'd they get these pictures?"

"I don't know. Either they snuck someone into the church service, or one of our own sold us out."

Rio's gaze once again went back to the spread of pictures. A few shots of the aftermath immediately following the collapse had already been printed in papers across the country. The photos that ate at Rio's insides were the ones of his friends' mourning the loss of four people they'd come to love.

He tossed the magazine to the floor. "That's gonna kill Nate."

"I know. So what are we gonna do about it?" Ryan asked.

"We could buy up every copy in town and hope he never hears about it?" Rio offered.

Ryan reached down and cupped Rio's cheek. "Shame on you. Have you already forgotten our promises to each other to always tell the truth, even when we know someone might get hurt?"

Rio hadn't forgotten, but Nate was finally starting to heal, along with many residents of Cattle Valley. But a promise was a promise. "Where's he at now? Because if he's going to find out, I'd rather it be from us."

"He should be at the office."

"Shit. Mario has a class in a half an hour. He's been so pissed off lately, I refuse to even think of telling the guy to cancel it."

"What's he pissed about?"

Rio shrugged. "He spent two days at the hospital waiting on word about Asa, but every time he asked to see him, Asa refused."

"Fuck. No wonder he's pissed. What the hell is Asa playing at?"

Rio shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe he didn't want Mario to see him helpless like that."

"That's screwed up. So what time?"

"Can you meet me there at noon?" Rio asked.

"Yeah. I have an interview set up at eleven, but I should be finished in plenty of time."

"Still haven't found someone to replace Rick?" Rio knew it wasn't the lack of good candidates applying. They'd probably had every gay cop in the nation apply for the one position available.

"No one will replace Rick," Ryan mumbled.

"I know you miss your friend, but it's time you and Roy stop working twelve-hour shifts seven days a week to make up for his loss."

With his hands on his hips, Ryan gazed out the window. "I know. Actually, I've been thinking about petitioning the city council to hire two deputies instead of just one."

"I hate to say it, but with an article like that one, you might need to think about adding more than two."

Ryan's gaze swung from the window back to Rio. "You think there'll be trouble?"

"Not necessarily, but I think our town has come out of the closet, so to speak. I imagine we'll get lovers and haters alike from now on."

"I hope to hell you're wrong about someone trying to use this to further hurt the people of this community." Ryan's jaw began clenching, which was never a good sign.

The last thing Rio wanted was to upset Ryan. "I'm just saying it might not be a bad idea to be prepared."

Although Ryan was still visibly tense, he nodded. "Agreed."

* * * *

Ryan waited for Rio on the steps of city hall. The interview he'd barely finished in time had gone well. The entire time he talked to the guy, Rio's words of warning continued to plague him.

"Hey," Rio greeted.

Ryan pushed off the side of the building and gave his lover a quick kiss. "You ready to do this?"

Rio held up the magazine Ryan had taken to him earlier. "I'm not ready, but I know it's the right thing to do."

Ryan opened the door and entered the building. He turned right and walked into Carol's office. It still seemed odd not to have the normal smart-ass woman ready with a comeback every time he came through the door.

According to her doctor, it would be at least another month before Carol could even think of returning to her old job. In the meantime, Nate had hired their newest resident, Ethan, to help out.

Ryan waved to Ethan as he strode through to Nate's office. His eyes immediately went to the magazine in the centre of his lover's desk.

"Um, Sheriff? He's not here," Ethan said, following them into the empty space.

"I see that. Where'd that come from?" he asked, pointing towards the magazine.

"It came in the mail. I guess the guy who wrote the article sent it to him," Ethan answered.

Ryan took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "How'd he take it?"

Ethan began to look flustered. "I don't know. I gave him the morning mail. He came out of his office about twenty minutes later and said he'd be back."

That didn't sound like the Nate he knew. "He didn't say anything else? No screaming? No throwing things?"

Ethan shook his head. "Like I said, he just left. I figured he must have a meeting or something."

Ryan looked at Rio. "Where would he go?"

"Home?" Rio offered.

Ryan shook his head. "If he were upset he'd have called us. This sounds more like pissed. You know how quiet he gets when he's really mad about something."

"So where would he go if he was pissed about that article?" Rio ran his hands through his hair. "You don't think he went back there, do you?"

"That's exactly what I think." Ryan turned on his heel and rushed out the door. The three of them had talked at length about what was going to happen to the rodeo grounds. The city council agreed with Nate that they needed to let some time pass before they made any decisions concerning the arena.

Ryan climbed into his SUV. As soon as Rio was in and buckled up, Ryan raced out of town. "What's he thinking?"

"Did you read the article?" Rio asked.

"What? No. I know what happened. I was there," Ryan snarled.

"I know you were. But in the article, the guy basically told readers how to get to the rodeo grounds. It was like he was sending them here to see the damage with their own eyes."

"Fuck!" Ryan growled as he punched his fist against the dash. As soon as they were out of town, he turned on the siren and pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

It took them mere minutes to arrive at the arena, or what was left of it. Sitting in the operator's seat of a city bulldozer, Nate ploughed through the concession stand.

"He's gonna kill himself," Rio yelled and jumped from the SUV before Ryan had a chance to put the vehicle in park.

Ryan threw the car in park and turned off the engine before racing after Rio. "Stop!" he said, wrapping his arms around Rio's waist.

"What?"

"Let him do this."

"You're as crazy as he is. He's not a heavy equipment operator. What if he gets hurt?"

Ryan looked at the determined face of his lover as he mowed down a section of the pens. "He's already hurt. Maybe this will help him heal."

“So we’re just supposed to sit here and watch him?” Rio asked.

“Nope. We go get a couple of the big city trucks and help our mayor clean this place up.”

Ryan caught a glimpse of the old sparkle in Nate’s eyes and knew he was right. “Everything’s gonna be just fine.”

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

Email: carolynne@carolynne.info

Carol loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

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