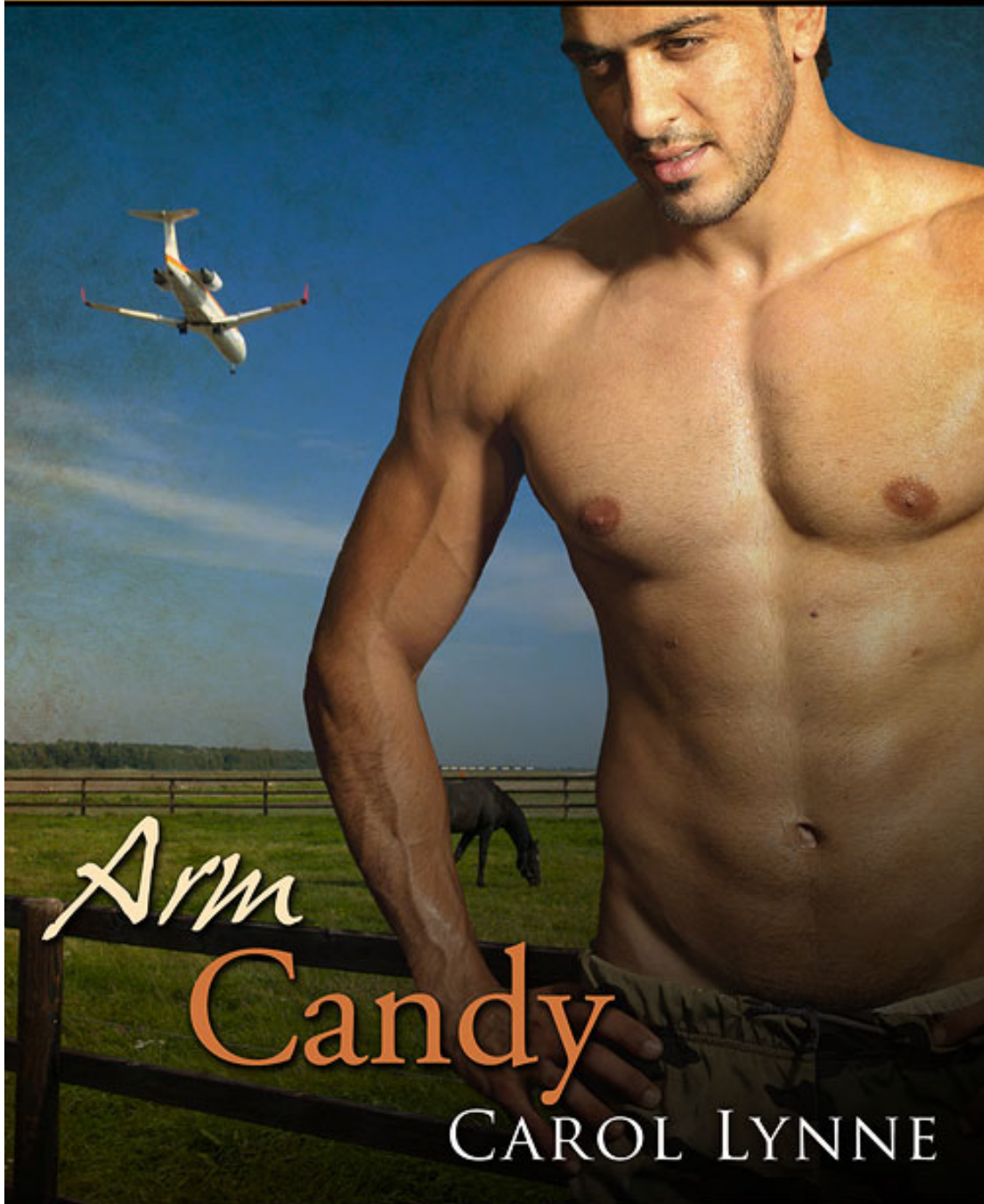




CATTLE VALLEY



Arm Candy

CAROL LYNNE

A Total-E-Bound Publication



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Arm Candy

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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-sizzling*.

Cattle Valley

ARM CANDY

Carol Lynne

Dedication

For my new buddy, Ethan Day. Your kindness and friendship means the world to me.

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Jaguar: Jaguar Cars Ltd/Tata Motors Limited

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Chapter One

Mario Benta was wiping down the exercise bikes when Rio returned from a long lunch. The grin on the big man's face said it all.

"Productive lunch, I take it?" Mario asked.

Rio winked. "Very productive, thank you very much."

Mario tossed the rag over his shoulder and neared the juice counter. "Nate still talking to that architect fella about designing a new arena?"

Rio finished chugging a glass of apple juice before smacking his lips. "Yeah. The big argument now is who's going to pay for it. Nate's insisting on using his own money, but Ryan and I are trying to make him understand that his money is best used for other things, like supporting the shelter in DC."

"As much attention as Cattle Valley has received since that damn article came out, I'd think we could push for corporate sponsors or something." Mario wasn't a businessman, but even he knew the arena would cost millions. There was only one person in town with that kind of money, and if Asa Montgomery hadn't offered to open his wallet by now, it wasn't going to happen.

Mario grabbed the rag from his shoulder and tossed it into the laundry bin. Thinking about Asa in any way had the ability to both depress and piss him off. "Guess I'll run to Deb's and get a bite to eat."

"K," Rio answered as he refilled his juice glass.

Mario was almost out the door when the phone rang. He stopped and turned around as Rio answered.

"Hold on." Rio grinned and held up the phone. "It's Asa."

Mario shook his head. "Tell him I'm out to lunch."

Without waiting, Mario left *The Gym* and climbed into his beat-up pickup. He turned the key and prayed the damn thing would start. He knew it was time to trade the old girl in, but he'd been with Lola for going on thirteen years and he couldn't bear to part with her.

After several attempts, Lola roared to life with a spew of black smoke. He chuckled and shook his head. It was a wonder the environmental activists weren't camped out on his front lawn.

He pulled onto the road and headed for the diner. For over two weeks he'd been avoiding Asa's calls. The first time he'd picked up his home phone and saw the man's name on his caller ID, he'd almost jumped out of his skin.

Admittedly, he was excited at first, but that feeling soon turned into anger. For two days following the grandstand's collapse, he'd waited at the hospital hoping Asa would call for him. Every time he inquired about seeing his friend, he was informed by one of Asa's minions that he didn't want any visitors.

The hurt and anger over the dismissal had Mario letting the call go to his answering machine. Afterward, he'd listened to the message and promptly deleted it. What the hell was wrong with that man? First he'd refused to see him at the hospital, and then he had the nerve to offer Mario a fucking salary to help in his rehabilitation. With all his money, Mario knew Asa could afford a full-time, live-in therapist if he wanted.

What hurt the most was Mario knew he'd have helped Asa for free if he'd just asked instead of treating him like a pest those few days following the tragedy. Now the man couldn't pay him enough for forgiveness.

His cell phone started ringing as he parked in front of the diner. He grabbed it off the seat and looked at the display.

"Hey," he answered.

"I don't know what's going on between you and Asa, but he told me to tell you he'd double it. What the hell's that about?"

"Fucker." Mario took a deep breath. "I'll go over and give him my answer in person."

"Don't say anything you'll regret. I know he hurt you, but he's had a rough time of it," Rio reasoned.

"Later." Mario hung up and headed towards Asa's monstrosity of a house.

How dare that sonofabitch try to sway his decision with more money. Mario pounded his fist against the steering wheel. The way he felt, Asa would be lucky if all Mario gave him was a good tongue lashing because what he really wanted, was to punch the jerk in the face.

He pulled up to the fancy-assed security gate and pushed the call button.

"Yes," an unknown woman's voice answered.

"Mario Benta here to see Asa," Mario barked.

"One moment."

Mario tugged on the small patch of hair under his lower lip, something he often did when he felt stressed. Several seconds later, the black iron gates swung inward.

Pretentious bastard. Mario drove down the long winding drive and pulled under the extended portico that hung over the driveway of the log and stone home. Mario jumped out and climbed the steps.

Before he even had a chance to knock, the door opened and an elderly woman beckoned him inside.

"Please follow me," the woman said.

"Thank you, ma'am."

Mario tried not to look around at the towering wood-beamed ceilings or two-story river rock fireplace. He would not be impressed with anything Asa owned, no way, no how. The woman who Mario assumed was the housekeeper led him to a large glass enclosed room at the back of the house.

"Your guest, sir," she announced.

"Thank you, Ms. Guttenberg."

With his hands fisted at his side, Mario got his first look at Asa since that horrible day. He was surprised to see the usually impeccably groomed man so dishevelled. Not only did it appear that Asa had forgone shaving, but Mario guessed he'd lost a good deal of weight. Who the hell was taking care of the man?

"I see you got my message," Asa greeted with a smirk.

That one facial expression pushed Mario back into the land of pissed. "I got it, and I came over to tell you to blow your offer out your ass. I wouldn't work for you if you tripled the salary."

Asa seemed stunned by Mario's answer, but he evidently had too much pride to argue the point. "Very well. I won't bother you again."

Asa returned his attention to the view out the floor to ceiling windows. Mario studied the object of so many of his fantasies with pity more than anything else. Where were all his groupies? He almost asked, but thought better of it and turned to leave.

"If you change your mind..." Asa started to say.

"I won't." Mario didn't bother waiting for Ms. Guttenberg to show him out. He flew out of the house and jumped into his pickup, leaving the mansion in a cloud of black smoke.

He wasn't sure who he was more pissed at, himself or Asa. The damn guy had hurt his feelings on more than one occasion, yet Mario still felt sorry for him. The popular millionaire not only looked like shit, but Mario had a strong sense that Asa felt like a steaming pile as well.

Mario steered the truck in the direction of *The Gym*, no longer in the mood to eat. As he drove, his anger began to slowly evaporate. Despite everything, he knew he still had feelings for the wealthy bastard. *If only he wasn't such an ass.*

* * * *

"Sir, there's a call for you," Ms. Guttenberg announced, handing Asa the phone.

"Who is it?" he mouthed. Secretly he hoped Mario had finally changed his mind.

"It's your sister," she mouthed back.

Asa rolled his eyes. Not once since the accident had his family called to inquire about his health without finding a way to ask for more money.

"Hey, June," he answered.

"How are you, Asa?" the thirty-four year old mother of five asked.

"Mending. What can I do for you?"

There was a short pause before his sister spoke. "Well, it's not really for me exactly. Dean turns sixteen next month and he needs help buying a car."

"He needs help, or he wants me to buy him a car?" he asked as if he didn't already know the answer.

"Well, it's not like he can get a job without one. He's considering looking for a job after he gets it, but Dean said he could help pay you back, if you insisted."

"What happened to the days of walking the neighbourhood offering to mow people's yards to earn money? That's what I did."

"Yes, we're all quite aware of your self-made status, Asa. We just figured since you bought one for Allan and Julie, that..."

Asa blew out an exaggerated breath. He was so damn tired of the never ending hands being held out. "Tell you what. You tell Dean if he earns five hundred bucks the old fashioned way, I'll get him a car."

"You're not serious?"

"That's the offer, take it or leave it."

There was another pause. "I'll talk to Dean."

"Fine. Let me know what he says." Asa readjusted his right leg to rest more securely on the pillow. "Is there anything else?"

"No."

"I'll talk to you later, sis." Asa hung up and tossed the phone to the table beside him. He felt like a giant ass for refusing his nephew something that wouldn't begin to put a dent in his petty cash drawer, but maybe it would be good for the boy.

His parents had worked their fingers to the bone to give him and his four siblings a place to live and food to eat. Asa knew it was their determination to succeed that had taught him the value of a dollar. What lessons were the new generation of Montgomerys learning?

"Excuse me, sir. Would you like lunch out here or in the dining room?"

Asa grinned. It didn't matter how many times he told Stella to call him Asa, she still insisted on the formalities that she felt went along with her position. "I'm not hungry, but thanks."

He heard that all too familiar click she made when she disapproved of something. "Perhaps I'll check back in an hour to see if you've changed your mind."

"Very well."

Stella retreated to do whatever it was she did, and Asa sank further into his chair. He clasped his hands on his chest and studied the view once more. It was a long way from the basement he'd practically grown up in. With seven people in a three bedroom house, he'd been the odd man out and had been relegated to a corner of the unfinished basement in his family's western Kansas home.

Asa chuckled. Little did his family know he'd taken that forced exile and used it to design his first software programme. He'd always been one of those odd kids who never seemed to fit in. At the age of six, he started taking things apart to see how they worked. By the age of eight, he could put them back together, and by nine, he could make them work again.

Asa sighed. And by the age of twenty-six he was already a millionaire with two deceased parents and a butt load of relatives looking for hand-outs. The siblings and cousins who hadn't given 'the basement dweller' the time of day growing up, suddenly expected him to support them.

The thing that really pissed him off was the fact that he'd actually done it. He'd been so hungry to surround himself with family that he'd allowed them to sponge off him for years. It wasn't until his accident that he'd learned the truth about his family.

Shaking his head, Asa berated himself for the momentary pity party. He deserved everything he got and he knew it. He'd been so blinded by the trendy people that had suddenly fawned all over him, he'd lost sight of what really mattered. It became quite clear after the first week that his so-called friends were getting bored. They'd even had the nerve to ask him if he would send them on a European cruise during his rehabilitation.

Asa knew he was naïve, but he sure as hell wasn't stupid. He'd sent them away on the cruise they'd asked for, but told them not to come back. What good had it done? He was sure they'd already latched on to another gravy train, some other poor sucker looking for friends in all the wrong places.

So here he sat, a forty-three year old man, alone. The house he'd worked his entire life to afford held no joy for him.

Asa's thoughts drifted to Mario. God the man was gorgeous. He'd wanted him since he'd first set eyes on him. It quickly became apparent that Mario was way out of his league.

Not only was Mario hot, but he didn't seem to care a flip about Asa's money. For most people that would be considered a plus, but for Asa it only proved he'd never get a real chance with the guy. Without the money's influence, Asa was an average-looking, middle-aged man with a receding hairline.

He knew offering to hire Mario might blow up in his face. He also knew it was a combination of the need to see the man and being just a tad angry with him, which had prompted the extreme offer.

After his realisation that his so-called friends weren't friends at all, he'd at least hoped the friends he'd made in Cattle Valley would still be there for him. But twelve weeks since the tragedy and Mario never had bothered to inquire about his health. Nate had been around on several occasions, but Asa felt it was more out of guilt than anything else.

"Hell, maybe I should just sell everything and buy a deserted island. At least then I'd have a good excuse for feeling so alone."

* * * *

By the time Mario returned to work, he was confused enough to pull Rio aside the first chance he got.

"What's up?" Rio asked, taking a seat on the couch in his office.

"Have you talked to Asa lately?"

"No, but I know Nate's been out a couple times, why?"

Mario put his feet up on the coffee table, clasping his hands behind his head. "He doesn't look good."

"I'm sure it'll take a while before he's up and around."

"No, it's not that. He just doesn't seem like himself." Mario knew he wasn't making sense. "Okay, you know how usually appearance is everything to that guy? Well, I don't think he's even bothered to shower for a week or so. I know he hasn't shaved."

"You're right. That doesn't sound like him."

"I know, and now I'm getting worried."

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

Mario nodded. "I mean, how many times can you get snubbed by a guy before you give up on him?"

"Other than the hospital, when has he snubbed you?"

"All the time. Like at the festival, when we were sitting in the shade. He was right there, but did he even bother to come over and say hi?"

Rio chuckled. "I don't remember you getting off your ass to go say hi to him either."

"What're you saying?"

Rio shrugged. "Just that the two of you have danced around each other long enough. If you want him, now's the time to get him." Rio winked. "He'll be a hell of a lot easier to run down with two broken legs."

"If he wants me so bad why wouldn't he see me at the hospital?"

"I don't know. Have you ever asked him?"

Mario let out a snort. "Yeah, like that wouldn't sound desperate."

Rio playfully elbowed Mario's side. "It sounds to me like you're both pretty miserable. Why don't you take the chance? What's the worst that can happen?"

Mario began counting his internal arguments off on his fingers. "I end up looking like a fool. I end up with my heart broken," Mario glanced at Rio. "That's a big one. I find out he's using me for sex and the way I look."

"Shit. Not the whole arm candy argument again," Rio sighed.

"Hey. I'm the product of arm candy. I know what it does to a person." Mario bit his lip. Even though Rio was his best friend, spilling his family secrets wasn't something he'd meant to do.

He could feel Rio's eyes on him. Rio was too polite to ask, but Mario knew he either needed to explain the statement or be prepared to receive that look twenty times a day.

"It's nothing big, really. My mom was a beautiful woman, she met a rich man, he took her around to all the biggest parties in town...blah, blah, blah. When she became pregnant with me, he paid her a chunk of money and asked her to go away."

"Fuck. That's shitty. So did he ever bother to see you?"

Mario laughed. "I don't even know who he is. His name's nowhere on my birth certificate." Mario shrugged. "Suits me fine. I didn't need to know someone who'd do something like that to her."

"But now you're painting Asa with the same brush. Maybe he's not like that at all. I know I've never gotten that impression from him."

Mario's fingers went to his soul patch, tugging lightly. Is that what he'd been doing?

He received another elbow to the side. "Just cut the guy a break, will ya?"

Mario felt like he was being backed into a corner. Predictably, he did what he'd always done, came out swinging. "The fucker tried to pay me off."

"How so?" Rio asked. He had that devilish grin plastered to his face which meant he was trying to make a point.

"Trying to hire me at double salary? What would you call that?" Mario sputtered.

"Uhh...a job?"

Mario opened his mouth to argue, but he quickly snapped it shut. If he was honest with himself, it wasn't the job offer that had hurt him. He'd worked with Asa for a year, getting the guy into better shape. It wasn't working with Asa that bothered him. It was being treated like a stud-for-hire, instead of a friend.

A soft knock sounded against the door, getting both men's attention.

"Yes?" Rio called.

The door opened and Pam's cute face lit up with a grin. "Caught the two of you goofing off, didn't I?"

Mario chuckled and got to his feet. Since the tragedy, Pam had decided she needed to get into better shape. "No, just taking a break in between pain-in-the-ass clients."

Pam laughed in return and faked a jab. "Just wait until I get my boxing gloves on, then I'll show you who the pain in the ass is."

Shaking his head, Mario followed Pam out of the office. One thing he'd noticed since the events six weeks earlier was that there were decidedly two different reactions to the tragedy. Some people, like Pam, used the event to re-evaluate their lives. They took stock of what they had and were determined to live every day to its fullest. Others seemed to still be in a state of shock. For some, dealing with the death of a loved one hadn't come easy, for others it was a glimpse into their own mortality.

Mario still didn't know which group he fit into. Maybe putting the past aside would help him deal with the present. Hell, maybe if he did that, he'd have some kind of hope for the future?

As he sparred with Pam, his thoughts kept returning to Asa. Mario guessed that Asa fit into the second category of survivors. Although he'd wager Asa's broken bones were healing nicely, he wasn't as sure about his spirit.

He remembered the feeling that washed over him when he'd heard Asa had been airlifted to the hospital. Those feelings were still inside him, despite the anger he'd suffered afterward. Maybe it was time for a peace offering.

Chapter Two

With the DVD on pause, Mario picked up the phone and punched in Asa's number. He'd gone back and forth with himself the rest of the day and had finally made a decision.

He was momentarily shocked when Asa answered the phone, expecting his housekeeper's voice.

"Hello?"

"It's Mario," he replied.

There was a moment of silence before Asa spoke again. "Have you changed your mind?"

"Yes and no. I'll help you as much as I can, which'll only figure out to a couple hours a night, but in exchange, you have to do something for me."

Again, Asa paused. "What?"

"Help Nate secure corporate donations for the new arena." He may not want to be paid for being a friend, but he wasn't about to let Asa off that easy. As one of the richest men in the country, Asa had connections that could come in handy in their fund raising efforts.

"That's it?"

"Yep. You can keep your salary."

"Why?"

"Because I won't work for you. I'll help a friend, but I won't be an employee."

"Which means you're free to walk away at any time," Asa concluded.

"Don't kid yourself, Ace. I can walk away regardless. This is about more than that, and I think we both know it."

Asa chuckled. "No one's dared call me Ace since I made my first million."

Mario smiled. "Well, Asa's the big jackass billionaire. Ace is my friend that I used to work out with."

"Thanks. I got the hard casts off two weeks ago, but I'll be in the braces until I can build up the muscles again. I've been going to Matt for regular therapy, but a couple hours a week isn't cutting it."

"I figured as much. What about the collar bone? Has that healed?"

"Yep. I've been using a walker to get around."

"Good. We can start on re-strengthening your upper body. I couldn't help but notice you've gotten a little soft. No jab intended," Mario was quick to add.

"None taken. When you spend twelve weeks of your life either in a hospital bed or sitting in a chair, you tend to lose what little muscle mass you've acquired."

"I don't get off until around seven most evenings. Is that going to be a problem?"

"No problem at all, but Ms. Guttenberg's usually gone by then. I'll have her drop a key and the codes to the front gate and alarm system off in the morning."

Mario was touched that Asa trusted him enough to do that. "Thanks."

"I've been spending most of my time either in the sunroom or the office. I'm sure no matter what time you get here, you'll find me in one of those rooms."

Mario realised he had no idea where Asa's office was located in the large home. "Do me a favour and be in the sunroom, at least until I get a tour of the place."

Asa chuckled. "Will do."

Unsure of what else to say, Mario prepared to hang up. "Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow evening."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Should I bring my own equipment?"

"No need. I've got a fairly well stocked weight room."

"Okay. 'Night."

"Good night, Mario. Thanks for doing this," Asa replied.

"I would've done it in a heartbeat if you'd just asked in the first place." As soon as the words had escaped he knew he probably shouldn't have said them, but it was too late.

Several seconds ticked by before Asa answered. "I should've realised that. I'm sorry."

Mario said another goodbye and hung up. It was then that he noticed his cock had hardened at some point during the conversation. Never a man to deny himself the pleasure of a good jack-off session, he opened his jeans and pushed them down and off.

With his movie turned back on, he spat in his hand and began a leisurely stroking, his thoughts switching from a singing Yul Brynner to Asa. He started to wonder, and not for the first time, what it would feel like to be balls deep inside Asa.

His cock jumped in his hand, liking the image very much. Mario moaned and flung his leg over the back of the sofa as his speed increased. He wondered what else Asa would like to have done to him? Was he a gentle lover, or did he enjoy a good hard fuck, Mario's particular favourite activity.

With his right hand busy, Mario moved his left down to manipulate his sac. He cupped the two heavy balls, and began to squeeze. He always enjoyed a bite of pain with his sex, and self-induced was as good as he was likely to get at the moment.

He pictured Asa's mouth clamping down on the head of his cock. He exploded, shooting rope after rope of seed onto his bare chest. With his breathing still laboured, he reached down and ran his fingers through the thick cum before sucking them clean.

The main reason he'd continued to see Erico as long as he had was because of the fantastic sex. Erico was his equal in the bedroom as far as giving and receiving that bite of pain they both seemed to crave.

He was surprised things weren't awkward between them after all the things they'd done together, but they'd parted amicably, and that's the way Mario liked it. He'd never had love in mind when he'd started hooking up with the restaurant owner. They were simply two men looking for sex.

It wasn't until he started giving Asa private martial arts training that his views on sex and love had changed. *Damn him.* Suddenly sex for sex's sake wasn't enough to get him off. He'd embarrassed himself twice with Erico before he'd finally called a halt to their arrangement.

Mario had noticed the way Erico was eyeing Jay the evening of the collapse. With everything Jay had gone through with his ex-lover, and knowing Erico's brand of passion, Mario had quickly informed his old friend that Jay wasn't someone he needed to mess with. He hadn't gone into details with Erico, but he got the feeling the man understood regardless.

With his climax came that sleepy feeling, and Mario eventually rose from the couch and stumbled to his bedroom after turning off the television. The King and I would have to wait for another evening.

* * * *

After washing the last juice glass, Mario turned over *The Gym* to Smitty, the part-timer they'd hired a month earlier.

"Hey, I was wondering if you'd like to pick up a few extra hours for the next month or so?" Mario asked. He'd been thinking all day about working out with Asa, and had come up with a better solution than to have the man exercising so late in the evenings.

"Sure," the young man answered.

"Can you start coming in at four-thirty, or will that compete with your college classes?"

"Nope. I mean, no, it wouldn't get in the way of school. I'm an early riser, so I take the bulk of my classes first thing in the morning."

"Cool. Start tomorrow?"

"No problem."

"Thanks." Mario picked up his gym bag and slung it over his shoulder. He was already hitting speed-dial as he climbed into his pickup.

"Hello?" Rio answered.

"Hey, it's me. Would you mind if I switched a few hours with Smitty while I'm helping Asa?"

"So you've decided to go for it, huh?"

Mario rolled his eyes. "I've decided to help him get back on his feet if that's what you're asking."

"No, that wasn't really what I was asking, but okay." Rio chuckled. "While you're working him out, go for it."

"Smart ass." Mario hung up and started his truck. In the ever-present cloud of black smoke, he tore off towards Asa's place.

Once he arrived at the gate, he pulled the envelope out of his bag and punched in the entry code. He waited for the heavy iron gates to fully open before pulling through. His stomach was doing something strange, and for a moment he thought he might be ill.

It wasn't until he fit the key in the lock that he realised what was wrong. Anticipation. *Fuck!*

The last thing he needed was to hand over power to Asa. If the man saw Mario liked him too early in their newfound arrangement, he was doomed. He knew he had to toughen up and hide his emotions, at least for the time being.

He entered the house and immediately tapped the security code into the unit on the wall before wandering to the back of the house.

Asa was seated in the same chair as the previous day, although Mario was quick to notice the freshly shaved face and combed hair.

"You look a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you," Mario remarked. He stuck out his hand and shook with Asa.

"Don't tell Stella, but I feel a hell of a lot better."

"Stella?" Mario glanced around, expecting to see signs that another woman had been in the house.

"Ms. Guttenberg." Asa carefully lowered his legs to the floor.

Mario could see the strain on the older man's face as he struggled to stand, knocking over his walker in the process.

"Can you help me with that?" Asa asked.

Mario bent and retrieved the walker and set it in front of Asa. "You okay?" he asked, seeing the sweat on Asa's forehead.

"Yeah," Asa replied in a defensive tone.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

Asa shook his head. "No problem. I'm just not used to being damn-near helpless. You don't realise how much you take mobility for granted until it's gone."

Asa took several steps with the aid of his walker. Mario noticed him wavering a bit and rested a hand on the centre of his back to help steady him. "We'll get your mobility back in no time."

"That's what I'm counting on."

Mario could feel the warmth of Asa's skin under his palm and yearned to feel more. Asa led them into a room off the sunroom and turned on a light.

"I admit I haven't been in here in a while."

Mario's jaw dropped as he studied the fully outfitted gym. "You've got everything *The Gym* has, why the hell would you want to work out there instead of here?"

Asa turned a slight shade of red. "It's more fun to work out with someone else."

"Surely you could get one of your friends to exercise with you."

Asa glanced up at Mario. "I thought that's what I'd been doing with you."

For some reason, the statement filled Mario with joy. "That you have."

Deciding to start slow, Mario retrieved two small five-pound hand weights as Asa straddled one of the benches, a braced leg on each side.

"Okay, curl these one at a time to your chest," Mario said as he demonstrated the action.

Although Asa seemed to have no difficulty, Mario didn't even consider moving him up to the next weight. "Good," he commented.

Asa rolled his eyes. "I may not look like it, but I've been lifting weights for several years now."

Mario grinned. He liked to see that the Almighty-Asa had his own insecurities. Mario took a seat on the other end of the bench, facing Asa. "Before your injuries, you were in excellent shape. I'm just trying to help you get back there."

Asa stared down at the bench as he continued to do the arm curls. "Sometimes I don't know why I bother. No amount of working out is going to make me look like you."

Bracing his hands on the bench, Mario leant towards Asa. "I make my living with my body. You do it with your mind. Don't sell yourself short. Don't you think I'd rather be as smart as you? We all want what doesn't come natural."

Asa glanced up and met Mario's gaze. Had Asa's eyes always been so green? Although he didn't say anything, Mario could tell he appreciated the observation. What the hell had happened to the man's self-esteem?

"Take a break whenever you need to. No sense in overdoing it the first night," Mario reminded him.

"I'm okay."

"So what happened to all your friends that were staying with you during the festival?" He hoped he wasn't being too nosy, but he couldn't believe the man's so-called friends would leave Asa in his time of need.

"They got bored and went on a cruise," Asa answered simply.

"Fuckers. They don't sound like my idea of friends."

"You're right, they don't. Which is why I told them not to bother coming back."

Mario wondered where he'd be without the support of his friends. It didn't matter that he'd only known Rio, Ryan and Nate for a short time, they'd become a lifeline while trying to deal with his mom's declining health.

"I guess it's time you made some real friends," he stated.

Asa chuckled. "Know where I can pick up a few?"

"You mean besides right in front of you?"

"Yeah." Asa sobered as he set down the hand weights. "I've never been good at making friends. I'm not sure what it is about me that puts people off, but without buying presents and doling out cash to my family, no one comes around."

Without thinking about the repercussions, Mario reached out and covered Asa's hand with his. "You start by surrounding yourself with real people that don't have a hidden agenda."

"Easy for you to say. Fake friends or not, it was easier than being alone all the time."

Mario rubbed the back of Asa's hand with his thumb. Despite wanting to keep Asa to himself, he knew the man needed more. "I'm going to show you how to be Ace, the friend, instead of Asa the billionaire. You'll have so many friends you won't know what to do with yourself. Hell, I'll probably be pushed to the side once again, but at least I'll be able to prove to you that you are likeable without having to pay for it."

Asa stared at Mario's mouth as he leant forward. Mario's cock began to swell in his workout pants as he smelled Asa's sweet breath. He felt like he was standing on a ledge. Did he let go or hang on to his control?

Asa lifted Mario's hand and placed it behind his head. "Kiss me," Asa begged.

With a soft moan, Mario threaded his fingers through Asa's soft, dark brown hair and closed the distance between them. He lightly brushed his lips over Asa's several times before licking the gorgeous man's sealed mouth with his tongue.

When Asa's mouth opened, allowing entrance, Mario was lost. How long had he dreamt of kissing this man? He wanted more. He wanted everything Asa would give, but he also didn't want to move too fast. What he wanted with Asa was more than a couple of weeks of hot, bone jarring fucking. Besides, Asa wasn't well enough for Mario's brand of sex.

Regardless of his new resolve, Mario allowed himself the erotic kiss. He swept the interior of Asa's mouth a few more times before pulling back. Asa surprised him with a whimper as he leaned further towards Mario, trying to follow his lips.

"Friends don't kiss," Mario reminded Asa before giving him another light kiss.

Asa licked his lips. "What about friends with benefits?"

Mario shook his head. "Not the path I want to follow with you."

Asa's head tilted to the side. "What do you mean?"

Mario slid his hand from the back of Asa's head to cup his cheek. "Friends with benefits is a nice way to say fucking with no strings attached. I can't do that, at least not with you."

Asa rubbed his cheek against Mario's palm. "Is that your way of saying you want strings?"

"Yep, but you're not ready for that, and I'm too afraid of getting hurt to make the leap."

Asa sat back and squared his shoulders in a defensive position. "Who says I'm not ready for that? Do you have any idea how long I've waited for someone to care about me and not my money?"

Mario dropped his hand and sighed. "It's not about your desire for something real. It's about us. Instead of just jumping into a sexual relationship, we need to build a strong foundation. If you're not willing to take the time to do that, then it'll never work."

Mario bowed his head. He caught sight of his erection pressing against the front of his pants. "I need to know it's me you want, and not some warm body."

Asa's laugh caught Mario by surprise. "Look at yourself. How could any man not want you?"

Mario jumped up from the weight bench. He knew Asa probably didn't mean it the way it sounded, but after years of being used for his looks, Mario felt as though he'd been slapped. He picked up the weights and returned them to their position on the stand.

"What?" Asa asked.

"Nothing. I think we're done for the evening. Can you get back to the sunroom on your own?"

"Bullshit. I said something to piss you off. At least have the courtesy to tell me what it was," Asa demanded.

Mario scooped up his bag and turned towards the door. He glanced back over his shoulder at a bewildered Asa. "When you're ready to start something real, let me know. Otherwise, think of me as your trainer and friend, but nothing more."

Mario stormed out of the room with a heavy heart. He could hear Asa's protests as he neared the front door. He stopped at the keypad and reset the alarm before walking out locking up.

Once in his truck, he leaned his forehead against the wheel and took several calming breaths. Had he just thrown away any chance he had had with the stubborn man?

The cell phone in the seat next to him started to ring. He glanced down at the display and read Asa's name. "Shit."

* * * *

For the third time in two hours, Asa tried Mario's number. He'd left messages, but so far nothing. If Mario thought Asa would give up, he didn't know him very well. He hadn't gotten as far as he had in life by being easily put off.

When the call went straight to voicemail, Asa laid back in bed. "It's me. Listen, I didn't want to do this over the phone, but it seems I have no choice. Never in a million years did I think I'd ever get a chance with someone like you. Forgive me for my somewhat paranoid suspicions, but I don't see why you'd even entertain the idea of being with me. I know my money puts you off, and up until now, that's been my only draw. I know you're different. That's why I never thought I had a chance with you."

He knew he'd already made a fool of himself, might as well go all the way. "I can't stop thinking about that kiss. It felt different than any kiss I've ever received. I've been racking my brain trying to figure out why, and the only thing I can come up with is because you were really kissing me, the small town boy from Kansas."

With a heavy sigh, Asa continued, "I want to explore that feeling. Please don't give up on me because I stuck my foot in my mouth."

Asa pushed the end button and set the phone beside him. He was still trying to wrap his mind around Mario's earlier statement. "*When you're ready to start something real, give me a call.*" Hell, what did the man think he'd been doing for the last two hours?

The sound of a car door shutting outside his window, drew his attention. He sat up just as his phone rang. "Hello?" he answered.

"I'm coming in," Mario told him.

"I'm upstairs. First door on your left."

"I'll find you," Mario said before ending the call.

Asa swallowed around the lump in his throat. Was Mario coming up to yell at him, or give him another of those kisses? He tossed the covers back in preparation. He couldn't get out of bed in time to face the man, but he sure as hell didn't want to look like an invalid.

He glanced down at his naked body and thought better of meeting the man nude. He swung the sheet over his groin as he heard Mario bounding up the stairs.

His first glimpse of his visitor still didn't give him the answers he needed. With a determined expression, Mario stalked towards the bed, letting the black leather jacket fall to the floor.

"Are you still mad?" Asa couldn't help but to ask.

Mario's dark eyes began to roam Asa's body. Without saying a word, Mario pulled off his boots and stripped the tight black T-shirt from his body, giving Asa a glorious view of the bronzed, sculpted chest hidden underneath.

Like a panther stalking his prey, Mario knelt on the bed and slowly made his way up Asa's body until he towered over him, face to face.

"Why is it that I can't stay away from you?" Mario asked, seconds before he slammed his mouth against Asa's.

Asa accepted Mario's offered tongue with enthusiasm. He spread his legs as much as he could in anticipation. He moaned into Mario's mouth as he ran his hands from the man's neck down to the dark brown pebbled nipples. Cupping Mario's pecs in his hands, he squeezed.

Fuck, I want all of this man.

Mario broke the kiss and gazed into Asa's eyes. "One step at a time, right?"

Asa wasn't sure how to answer. He knew Mario wanted to take things slow, but he was tired of denying himself. "Depends on how many steps we can climb in a day."

Before Mario could pull back further, Asa covered the thick ridge of Mario's cock with his hand, kneading it through the hotter-than-fuck leather pants. "I won't pretend that I don't want you."

Mario moved his hips, grinding himself slowly against Asa's hand. "Good, then I won't have to pretend you don't have a definite effect on me."

"So where does that leave us?" Asa asked as his free hand went to work on Mario's zipper.

Mario shut his eyes and closed the distance between their bodies, trapping Asa's hands between them. With his face buried in the pillow beside Asa's head, he groaned. "I don't know. For the first time in my life, I don't know what to do with my urges."

Asa nuzzled his face against the side of Mario's head. "I won't ask you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

Mario turned his head and kissed him. "That's part of the problem. Everything feels comfortable with you, too comfortable."

"So why is it a problem?" Asa asked. His lips brushed Mario's as he spoke.

Mario rolled off to the side and flung his arm over his face. "I want this to be different."

"And you don't think it can be if we jump into sex," Asa surmised.

With his arm still shielding him, Mario shook his head. "I don't know. Believe me, I wish I did."

Without being able to comfortably roll to his side, Asa brushed Mario's chest with the back of his hand. "Where'd you grow up?"

"Huh?" Mario asked as he uncovered his face.

"Well, you want to get to know me, so let's start. So, tell me where you grew up?"

Mario rolled to his side and propped his head on his hand. "Actually, I grew up in basic training, but I lived in Atlantic City until I was of age."

"Atlantic City? You mean people are really raised there?" Asa realised how it sounded as soon as the words were out of his mouth. "Sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

Mario leaned towards Asa and kissed his temple. "I know you didn't. My life was anything but ordinary. Just one of the many reasons I enlisted in the Marines as soon as I graduated."

Asa continued to brush his hand across Mario's chest as he tried to imagine the gorgeous man in uniform. "What about your family? They still live in New Jersey?"

"There's just my mom and me, and yeah, she still lives in the home where I grew up." Mario's free hand began to wander its way through the tufts of Asa's chest hair. "How come I never realised you were so furry?"

Asa had gone through periods in his life where he'd either trimmed or waxed the hair on his chest, but because he hadn't had a lover in such a long time, he'd decided it was a waste. "Does it bother you?"

Mario answered by leaning over to run his tongue through the thick black and grey hair surrounding Asa's nipple. Asa couldn't hold back the moan as Mario's teeth gently clamped down on the pebbled nub.

"I'll take that as a no," Asa answered for Mario. "At least I don't have back hair," he joked.

Mario released Asa's nipple and grinned. "On you, I would imagine even back hair being sexy."

Asa snorted. "I've never been called sexy in my life, even when I was in my prime."

Mario's hand made its way down Asa's chest to slip beneath the sheet. He groaned as Mario tugged at the hair surrounding his cock.

"I find you incredibly sexy," Mario informed him as he wrapped his hand around Asa's erection.

Asa squeezed his eyes shut. "Uhhh, it's been a while. You might not want to do that."

Mario chuckled. "You mean this?" he asked, pumping Asa's shaft several times.

Asa's breath caught in his chest. "Yeah, that."

Mario released his hold. "Okay."

Asa was about to protest when Mario jumped out of bed and removed his clothes. "Wh-what are you doing?"

Gloriously naked, Mario crawled back on the bed and straddled Asa's hips. He leant down to press his freshly waxed chest against Asa's. "I may not be able to fuck you, but I can sure join in the fun."

Asa was surprised at how comfortable the position was. Although Mario made sure not to put pressure on Asa's legs, he could still feel the hard ridge of his new lover's erection as it pressed against his own.

Mario took Asa's mouth in another heated kiss as he began to move. *Shit*. Asa knew he was going to blow at any moment. He thrust his tongue into Mario's mouth and cupped the man's gorgeous ass with his hands.

He couldn't believe things had heated between them to this degree. Only hours before, Asa thought he'd never have a chance with the man on top of him, but here he was, with Mario's cock grinding against his own.

Asa gasped as the first string of cum shot between them. "Oh, fuck," he groaned. It felt like his balls were being turned inside out with the force of his climax.

Above him, Mario went rigid and threw his head back as his seed began to mix with Asa's.

Asa moved his hands up to wrap around Mario's waist as they both tried to regain their breath. "Needed that..." Asa panted.

"Yeah," Mario panted in return.

It was several moments before Mario eventually lifted himself off of Asa. "I'll get us a washcloth."

Asa watched Mario's muscular ass as it disappeared into the bathroom. He couldn't help but wonder if things would be awkward for them after their moment of passion. He didn't have to worry for long.

Mario reappeared brandishing a warm washcloth with an incredibly mischievous smile on his face.

"What?" Asa asked.

Mario shook his head and started cleaning the drying cum from Asa's groin and chest. It wasn't easy getting the globules out of the pubic hair, but Mario seemed to have infinite patience.

Mario tossed the rag to the floor and pulled the sheet up over both of them. Asa still couldn't get over the smirk on his lover's face. "What?" he asked again.

"I like the chair you've got in your shower."

Asa thought about the shower aid he'd been given by the visiting nurse. "It makes it possible for me to clean myself with the hand spray. Why's it so funny?"

Mario snuggled closer, kissing Asa's temple. "Because I can think of a few other things I'd like to use it for."

Asa was confused until he pictured the chair in his mind once again. It was a simple white plastic commode-style chair. *Oh*. Asa's eyes felt like they were about to pop out of his head. The seat had a hole in it so it could also be used as a toilet if a plastic bucket was attached.

"I'm not sure exactly what you have in mind, but I'm not into the whole piss and poop thing," Asa clarified.

Mario started laughing so hard, he had to wipe the tears from his eyes. "Don't worry, babe, neither am I."

Asa's confusion deepened. "So what else do you want to use it for?"

Mario put a finger to Asa's lips to silence him. "Go to sleep. There'll be plenty of time for games when you're better."

Games? He'd never had a lover who was into sexual games. Asa wondered if he'd enjoy playing. He drifted to sleep wrapped in Mario's arms with a grin on his face.

Chapter Three

Mario woke to the sound of someone vacuuming. He sat up and eased out of bed.

"You running off?" Asa asked.

Mario shut the bedroom door and clicked the lock into place. "Just didn't want to frighten poor Ms. Guttenberg with our nakedness." He sauntered back to bed, pleased when Asa flipped back the covers, exposing his morning erection.

"Is that for me?" Mario teased, stroking his own hard cock.

"No one else."

Mario licked his lips at the sight of the thick, ruddy-hued cock. "Do you always sleep nude?"

"Always," Asa replied, crooking his finger at Mario.

Before Mario could settle beside Asa, the man dug in the bedside drawer and held out an envelope.

"What's this?" Mario was ashamed to admit his immediate thought was that Asa was handing him a bunch of cash for services rendered.

"Open it."

With trepidation, Mario opened the envelope and reached inside. It was a report on the blood work Asa had while he was in the hospital. Tossing the paper to the floor, Mario kissed the man beside him.

"I guess all that's left is for me to prove I'm clean."

"You don't have to do anything right away. I mean, it'll be a few weeks before we can do much, but I thought you deserved to know," Asa explained.

"Are you kidding?" Mario chuckled as he made his way down Asa's body until he was level with the gorgeous cock he'd been eyeing earlier. "I like my dick sucked way too much to wait any longer than I have to." He stuck out his tongue and licked up the length of Asa's shaft to scoop up a drop of pre-cum as it dripped down the crown. "I'm hoping you feel the same."

Asa reached down and ran his fingers through Mario's hair. "I do."

Mario could tell Asa wanted to say more but had stopped himself. "What?"

"I need you to know something about me," Asa began.

Mario could tell showing weakness wasn't something Asa was comfortable with. He assumed it was the cut-throat business world that had shaped that part of him. Deciding the blow job could wait, Mario scooted back up the bed to rest his head on the pillow beside Asa's.

"Talk to me."

Asa turned his head just enough so that Mario couldn't see his eyes. "I may be a hell of a lot older than you are, but I'm sure you have me beat in the experience department. I guess I'm just afraid of disappointing you."

"You kiddin' me? With all those sexy guys you always seem to have around. I mean, didn't...you know...?"

Asa cleared his throat. "Rarely were any of them in my bed, unless of course they wanted something. Then it didn't really matter how I performed as long as I gave them a cheque."

Mario's heart broke at the statement. Who the hell were these jackasses who could use Asa's loneliness against him in such a callous manner?

He straddled Asa's torso and leaned down so the man couldn't help but look at him. "The only thing I want from you is you. Got that?"

Asa nodded.

"As far as pleasing me, I can tell you that you've already done that, so don't worry about it."

Mario could tell Asa wasn't convinced. He didn't usually open himself up to his lovers after such a short period of time, but Asa was the exception to all his previous rules. "I've fucked a lot of guys, and I've done a lot of things, but I've never made love, so we're even on that front. Believe me. I want to please you as much as you want to please me."

"One step at a time, right?" Asa grinned.

"Exactly."

* * * *

To make up for being late to work, Mario stopped at the bakery. Yeah, he knew it was counterproductive to eat sweets and then spend the rest of the day working out, but at least he burned off the calories.

"Hey, Kyle," he said as he walked up to the counter. "You got anything good today?"

It was an ongoing joke between the two of them and Kyle chuckled. "Hey, yourself. I've got an old leather shoe in the back I could slap some icing on?"

Mario rubbed his chin. "No. I'm not really in the mood for shoe. How about half a dozen of those Bavarian cream, chocolate long johns."

Kyle whistled. "Someone's kissing ass this morning."

"Yep, and why do it half-way." He leaned one elbow on the counter and rested his chin on his hand as Kyle folded a box and carefully placed his pastries inside. The man was a wonder. Had it only been a year since he'd gotten out of the wheelchair? Although Kyle still moved slow and had been known to use the wheelchair from time to time, he got around with a cane for the most part. Mario imagined Gill had a lot to do with that. Keeping up with the ex-sports star couldn't be easy.

As Kyle worked, Mario glanced around the bakery. "How's your tenant working out?"

"Ethan? He's okay. Quiet."

Mario glanced up as if he could see into the apartment overhead. "Sucks for the guy that he moved to town just before the collapse."

Kyle set the box on the counter. "Why do you say that?"

Mario shrugged. "He didn't get a chance to experience the real Cattle Valley before everything happened."

"Maybe not, but I think he saw the best part of the people living here."

Mario thought of the way residents had stepped up to help their neighbours since the tragedy. "Yeah. You're right."

"Speaking of...how's Asa?"

"Healing. He was lucky. The doctors think he'll come out with only a slight limp, but I'm gonna try everything I can to eliminate even that."

Kyle rang up the doughnuts and took the money Mario held out. "Just be patient with him. It's a tough row to hoe when you haven't used your leg muscles in a while. You'll have to remember to give him plenty of rubdowns."

"I can do that."

Kyle grinned. "It's nice the two of you have made up."

Surprised at the statement, Mario's eyes rounded. "Have my feelings been that transparent?"

"Only to people who know you. Since the collapse, you've been about as low as a man can get. I figured it had something to do with Asa. I even asked Nate about it."

Mario rolled his eyes. Nate was known for spilling the goods when asked. "I still don't know why Asa refused to see me when he was in the hospital, but I'm trying to put that behind me." Mario shrugged. "We're working on it at least."

"Good. And I happen to know Asa loves my cinnamon rolls."

Mario chuckled. "Who doesn't. But it's a thought. I may be back sometime this weekend to pick up a batch."

Kyle glanced out the front wall of windows. "Possible storm coming in the next day or so. Maybe a big batch of your chilli's in order."

Mario grinned at the thought of spending the weekend with Asa. October was a little early in the year for a big snow, but stranger things had happened. If he was stuck indoors, being with Asa suited him just fine.

"Good idea. Can you make me up a batch of rolls for Friday afternoon?" The last thing he'd want was to get out of Asa's bed on Saturday morning to drive into town.

"Sure." Kyle wrote a note to himself. "Anything else?"

Mario thought about how much weight Asa had lost. "Too early in the season for pecan pie?"

"Nope. I started making them about three weeks ago. You just haven't been around enough."

Mario winked. "I haven't been in the mood for company, but hopefully that's about to change."

Before Mario could make it out the door, Nate walked in.

"Hey," Nate greeted. "Heard you're helping Asa."

Mario nodded. "Just started." He glanced at the clock over the counter. "If I don't get going with these doughnuts, I'm gonna be in the dog house with Rio."

Nate's eyebrows lifted as he peered into the box. He wrinkled his nose and refastened the box without reaching inside. "Not what I'm in the mood for."

"Gee, sorry to disappoint."

"I heard from Carol. She said they should be back in town by Thanksgiving."

"That's good."

"And George wanted me to check with you to make sure Leo was settling into his house okay."

Mario shrugged. "I guess so. I don't see much of him. We had a couple beers together on the porch, but not since the weather turned cold."

Nate nodded.

Mario grinned and shook his head. "You're not getting gossip from me, Nate, so give it up."

With a resigned sigh, Nate chuckled. "Old habits and all that."

Balancing the box in one hand, Mario opened the door. "Catch up with you later."

"Sure." Nate waved and strode towards the counter.

Despite what they'd both implied, Mario knew Nate had changed since the tragedy. He laughed to himself as he neared *The Gym*. It was like watching a boy become a man right before your eyes. He knew Nate wouldn't appreciate that analogy, but Mario knew his friend had grown as a person since Cattle Valley Days.

He parked in his usual spot and slung his gym bag over his shoulder before lifting the box of goodies from the seat. Stepping into work, he glanced around for Rio. The coast clear, he set the doughnuts under the counter and scurried off towards the locker room to change.

"Stop right there."

Squaring his shoulders, Mario turned around to face his boss. "I brought doughnuts."

Rio crossed his arms. "The only excuse I'll accept is that you finally worked things out with Asa."

Mario grinned. "Why else would I be late?"

Laughing, Rio picked Mario off the ground and swung him back and forth.

"Gee, Boss, if I'd known you'd get this excited about it, I wouldn't have bothered stopping at the bakery."

Rio released Mario and turned towards the juice counter. "What kind?"

"Filled long johns." Mario chuckled as Rio raced for the box of sweets.

"You're forgiven," Rio said around a bite of doughnut.

"Yeah. I know how easy you are." Mario selected one of the long johns and poured himself a glass of orange juice.

“Shhh, don’t let that get around. I have the reputation of being a bad boy.”

Mario shook his head. The only people in town who thought Rio was a bad boy were the ones who hadn’t met him yet.

* * * *

By the time Friday night rolled around, the first snow of the season was falling. Mario picked up two things before heading out to Asa’s. He glanced at the box of cinnamon rolls sitting beside him on the seat.

Although he couldn’t wait to dig into them, it was the sheet of paper in his pocket that had him truly excited. Mario’s dick perked up just thinking about the weekend ahead. He couldn’t wait to feel Asa’s lips wrapped around his cock.

As he drove, the roads outside of town started to drift. He was glad he’d brought clothes for the entire weekend. Once safely inside Asa’s house, he didn’t need to stick his head out the door until Monday morning. An entire weekend of loving and getting to know the man better was the perfect way to spend his time.

He pulled his old truck under the portico and slung his bag over his shoulder before reaching back in for the cinnamon rolls and groceries.

Letting himself into the house, Mario disengaged and then reset the alarm before heading towards the kitchen. “Honey, I’m home.”

Mario heard Asa’s chuckle. The sound was sweet music to his ears. From the sound of it, he doubted his lover had done much laughing over the previous years.

After setting the box of rolls on the counter, he went in search of Asa. He found him, as usual, in the sunroom. Earlier in the week, Asa had asked Mario to help him set up an office in the three-sided glass room. Since then, Asa had started working again, which had helped the man’s overall mood even more.

Mario had quickly discovered Asa thrived on challenges. Not only in regards to his company, but with his therapy as well. Although a full recovery was still months away, he was regaining more strength daily.

“How was your day?” Asa stopped tapping on the keyboard and held his hand out to Mario.

"Okay. Long. As soon as the snow started, all I wanted was to be out here with you." Mario bent and gave Asa a deep kiss. His cock hardened when Asa's hand worked its way down Mario's spine to land on his ass.

Mario broke the kiss and stood, but noticed Asa's hand still remained on his butt. "Feeling frisky are we?"

Asa grinned. "Always am when you're around, and sometimes when you're not."

"Yeah? And what do you do with yourself when I'm not around?" Mario repositioned himself to sit on the edge of Asa's desk.

"I sit here in this chair, look out that window and imagine you under the desk sucking me off." As he spoke, Asa's hands rubbed up and down Mario's legs, from knee to groin.

"And what do you do while you're imagining this little scenario?"

"I push down my sweats, take my cock in hand and pretend it's your mouth."

Mario knew he'd have to make a point of fulfilling Asa's fantasy sometime during their weekend. "Has Ms. Guttenberg ever caught you while you're in here beating yourself off?"

"No. Thank God. I don't know that I'd be able to look her in the face if she did. Although I have to admit, part of the thrill is the potential of getting caught." Asa's hands began kneading the erection trapped behind Mario's leather pants. "Damn. Do you have any idea how sexy you are in these?"

"I know you think they're sexy which is why I specifically went home after work and changed into them. I brought a few other outfits I thought you might enjoy as well."

Asa licked his lips. "Sexier than these?"

Mario shrugged. "I don't know. You'll have to be the judge of that."

Asa's attention appeared to be squarely focused on the ridge behind Mario's fly. Mario reached into his pocket and withdrew the paper he'd been dying to show his lover. "Picked this up before coming over."

Asa glanced up at Mario. "Yeah? What's that?"

"Something that says you can eat more than chilli and cinnamon rolls this weekend."

Asa's eyebrows shot up. "Seriously? How'd you get the results so fast?"

Mario watched as Asa popped the snap on his leather pants. "I think the good doctors at the clinic know the importance of speedy lab results."

Asa seemed mesmerised as he slide Mario's zipper down. "Holy fuck."

Mario grinned. "Another little present for you."

Asa rubbed his hand over the leather thong Mario had worn just for him. "There's nothing little about it."

The compliment caused Mario's cock to jump, spilling a good amount of pre-cum into the soft black leather pouch. Asa groaned and bent to rub his mouth and cheeks over the hard ridge.

With his legs sticking straight out, Mario knew his lover couldn't be comfortable in his current position. "Why don't we move to the couch?"

Asa glanced up and grinned. "Because I'm afraid if I move, you'll cover yourself back up."

Mario shed his jacket and T-shirt in no time. "Would you like me to continue?"

Asa sat back in his chair and crossed his hands over his chest. "Please do."

Mario lifted his foot to rest on the chair between Asa's legs. "Help me?"

Asa's shaking but nimble fingers, untied the laces of Mario's black boot before pulling it off. Mario switched feet and his lover did the same to the other boot. Standing, Mario turned around and slowly lowered his leather pants, giving Asa a prime view of his naked ass.

He stood and turned slowly, giving Asa a wicked smile. "Follow me."

"Anywhere." Although Asa said it under his breath, Mario heard it loud and clear.

Mario set Asa's walker in front of him and helped his lover to his feet. Once Asa was ready, Mario slowly moved to the deep chenille sofa in the room. The setup was absolutely perfect.

While Asa stretched out on the couch, Mario walked over to the large stone fireplace and tossed in a few more logs. The room was a marvel in construction. For such a large space filled with windows, the room was surprisingly warm. He decided that was a good thing as he slowly began to undress his lover.

"Maybe we should just stay naked all weekend," he commented as he removed Asa's underwear. When Asa's cock sprang free, Mario couldn't help but lean in and capture the glistening head with his mouth.

"Oh, shit," Asa moaned, digging his fingers into Mario's hair.

Mario grinned around the fat cock in his mouth. Yep, it was going to be a fun filled weekend.

The alarm on Mario's watch woke him Monday morning. He groaned and rolled back over to snuggle against Asa's warmth.

"Is it Monday already?" Asa mumbled, still half-asleep.

Mario answered with a grunt, burying his face against his lover's neck. Although he knew Asa's driveway had been ploughed, there was no telling what shape the rest of the roads into town would be.

Although he'd come more that weekend than he ever had, Mario's cock began to fill as he inhaled the scent of sweet cum on Asa's skin. He wondered what their weekends would be like once Asa was healed enough to fuck. Between rubbing and sucking each other off, they'd somehow managed to find time to get to know each other a little more.

He still couldn't believe he'd told Asa about his mother and her drinking problem. Leave it to Asa to take the news in stride, offering support without condemning. The more he got to know the real Asa, the more he fell in love with him.

"Can't you call in?" Asa tilted his head to the side to give Mario enough room to latch on to the soft skin of his neck.

Mario was too busy sucking up a mark on his lover's neck to answer. It didn't matter that he was the only one who'd see the numerous love bites covering Asa's body, Mario knew they were there. Besides, they both knew Mario had to go to work.

Giving the tortured skin a soft kiss to soothe it, Mario scooted down to Asa's chest. He grinned and shook his head at the numerous dark bruises visible through the black and silver hair. "Make sure you don't walk around the house without a shirt on."

Asa chuckled. "I'd give Ms. Guttenberg a heart attack." Asa threaded his fingers through Mario's hair. "I've never been as fulfilled as I am right now."

Mario glanced up and stared into Asa's eyes. He felt the same way, but it was too early in their relationship for him to fully admit his feelings. Instead, he played it off. "Just wait until you're well enough to wrap those legs around my neck."

Like he usually did when Mario spoke so directly, Asa blushed. "Why do you think I've been training so hard?"

Mario spit in his hand and reached between Asa's legs to the neglected pucker of his lover's ass. "You have any toys?"

Asa stilled. "Why?"

Was Asa embarrassed? "You may not be able to bear weight or lift your legs, but I think I've got plenty of room to fuck you with a plug or a dildo."

"You would do that?"

"Hell, yes. How long's it been since this pretty hole was filled?" Mario pushed his index finger in to the first knuckle.

"Too long. Nothing breathing for about eight months, nothing at all since the accident," Asa admitted, hissing as Mario pushed further inside.

Keeping his finger where it was, Mario sat up. "So where's the non-breathing cock?"

Asa nodded towards the bedside table. "Bottom, in the back. Lube's in the top drawer."

Mario removed his hand from between Asa's legs and crawled to the other side of the bed. He pulled open the bottom drawer first, finding a nice-sized light brown dildo. The heavy veins moulded into the silicon reminded Mario of his own cock. Hell, come to think of it... "This damn near matches my cock, same colour and everything."

He glanced at Asa, surprised to see the man's face had turned bright red. Is that the reason Asa had bought it? Mario knew it was too much to hope for and instead of setting himself up to be hurt, he let it drop.

Holding the dildo in one hand, he quickly located the lube and returned to his position beside Asa's hip. He set the dildo aside, and slicked his finger. The first one slid in easily, but the second finger took a little more time.

With his free hand, Mario rubbed the hair on Asa's chest, stopping to pinch at the bruises surrounding his nipples. Asa moaned, as Mario began to saw his fingers in and out of Asa's hole.

"Feels so good."

Once Mario felt Asa was sufficiently stretched, he picked up the dildo and applied a good amount of lube to the tip and shaft, leaving enough room for him to hold onto the base. Mario positioned the mushroom-shaped head at Asa's entrance and slowly pushed inside.

"Fuck!" Asa yelled.

"Want me to slow down?"

Asa shook his head. "Hell, no."

With a little work, Mario managed to fully seat the dildo, leaving only enough room for him to grip the end. He moved the artificial cock out slowly before surging back inside.

Asa's shoulder lurched off the bed in pleasure. "Faster," he begged.

Mario did as asked, setting a steady rhythm in and out of Asa's ass. He used his free hand to wrap around his own cock as he watched Asa jack himself to the pace Mario had set with the dildo.

He could feel the sweat begin to drip from his forehead as he moved both hands as fast as he could. "I'm gonna come," he warned.

Asa nodded and howled, his cock erupting in thick ropes of seed. Knowing he'd get to lap the thick cum from Asa's body, Mario tugged on his cock twice more before he shot.

Mario reached over the side of the bed and grabbed the towel they'd used only hours before. He turned back to Asa and paused. "What's wrong?"

With his arm slung over his face, Asa shook his head. "I can't believe I let you do that. What's even more embarrassing is how much I enjoyed you doing it."

Mario stretched out beside Asa and rested his head on his lover's chest, drawing his fingers through the pools of slowly drying cum. "Never be embarrassed to do what feels good. As long as you trust the partner you're with, and are agreeable, there is nothing off limits."

Asa uncovered his face and stared into Mario's eyes. "You have no idea how many years I've hidden that side of myself."

"What do you mean? Do you think there's something wrong with pleasuring yourself?" He couldn't imagine a man who was so confident in the boardroom, being so insecure in the bedroom. Their weekend together had been fantastic. He hadn't seen this side of Asa that he was displaying after their wonderful session with the dildo.

Asa groaned and turned his head away. "Dildos are for geeks like me who can't get laid on a regular basis."

"Bullshit. Dildos are for pleasure, whether you're alone or with a partner." Mario rested his head on Asa's shoulder. "Making love to you, in any form, is beautiful."

Asa turned and kissed Mario's forehead. "You're going to be late for work."

Mario sighed. "I don't care. I'm not leaving until you realise what we just did was sexy and fun, and absolutely nothing to be ashamed of."

Asa kept quiet for several moments before he began to chuckle. "You know, this conversation would probably go a lot better if I didn't still have a dildo up my ass."

Chapter Four

Mario fiddled with his silverware. *Why are there so many forks?*

"Does this place make you uncomfortable?" Asa asked.

Mario started to deny the question but knew his lover needed to know the truth. "Yeah. But this evening is for celebrating. What better place in Cattle Valley than *The Canoe*."

Asa reached for Mario's hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't think of your past with Erico when I suggested it."

"Erico?" Mario shook his head. "Me being uncomfortable has nothing to do with Erico. Sure we...dated, but we parted as friends."

"Speak of the devil," Asa mumbled.

Mario glanced up. Erico was making the rounds, giving each diner a few seconds of his time. Mario knew it was Erico's favourite time of the evening. He squeezed Asa's hand. "He may come off as a hot-headed ass, but he's really a nice guy once you get past the crusty outer shell."

Asa shook his head, eyes still on the owner and chef of *The Canoe*. "I don't know anything about his temperament. I guess it's his sexual accessibility to anyone looking for a good time that I've always had a problem with."

Even though Mario knew he shouldn't let the comment bother him, it did. Everyone in town knew the two of them once had a thing going. Did Asa think of him as a slut, or did his lover think he'd just been used by Erico, because neither was true.

Before he could correct Asa's way of thinking, Erico stepped up to their table. "Mario! I'm surprised to see you here. I thought you hated fine dining."

Mario didn't miss the way Asa and Erico stared at each other. He expected the two men to draw their weapons at any moment. "We're celebrating. After weeks of hard work, Asa's on to the next step in his recovery."

"I guess I'm just surprised to see the two of you together after what happened. But it's good. Congratulations."

Although Erico said the words, Mario didn't know how sincere his old friend was. Come to think of it, something was definitely off with Erico. Mario brushed his foot against Asa's. "Yep. No more braces."

Erico glanced at the walker next to the table.

"I'll still need that for a while," Asa answered the unspoken question.

"Well, if anyone can get you into shape, it's our Mario." Erico flashed a forced smile.

"Yes, my Mario is quite a task master."

Mario bit his lip to keep from laughing as Asa staked his claim. One look at Erico, and Mario's mirth faded. Yep, there was definitely something wrong with Erico. "Are you going home for Thanksgiving?"

Erico shook his head. "Can't. I lost another chef."

Mario knew how much Erico's family meant to him. The hot-blooded Latin usually only got home on Thanksgiving and Easter. *Maybe that's what's bothering him?* "Why don't you just close the place for a couple days?"

"No. Too many people have already booked Thanksgiving Day reservations. I'm trying to find another chef. Who knows, maybe I'll be able to get home for Christmas."

"Good luck." If they had been alone, Mario would have suggested Erico keep his dick in his pants with the next chef, but the tension between Asa and his friend was already palpable.

Erico nodded. "Well, enjoy your dinner."

Mario watched as Erico seemed to hurry back to the kitchen. He wasn't sure if it was the lack of a backup chef or his need to hide his emotions. He returned his attention to Asa. Suddenly, it was his lover who looked uncomfortable. "Please don't worry about him. What we had was over a long time ago."

"Why didn't you tell me you hated this place?"

Mario shrugged. "Like I told you, the evening isn't about me."

"Where do you usually go?"

"Depends on my mood. Sometimes I go up to the Grizzly Bar, sometimes Debs, but mostly I tend to hang out at O'Brien's. Sean and Jay have both become pretty good friends."

"Jay, that's the girly-looking fellow, right?"

Mario wondered how many times people had used those words to describe Jay. Like Erico, Jay was so much more than his appearance. "Yeah. I can't wait to introduce you to him. He has to have one of the purest souls of anyone I've ever met."

"No time like the present."

"Huh?"

Asa brought out his wallet and tossed some bills onto the table. "Let's get out of here and go to O'Brien's."

Mario was all for eating at O'Brien's, it was the money being left by Asa that bothered him. He dug out his own wallet and handed the money on the table back to his lover. "I invited you out. I'll pay for it."

Asa opened his mouth. Mario knew his lover intended to argue the point, so he held up his hand. "Please."

Asa finally nodded and reached for his walker. Mario helped steady Asa with a hand on Asa's lower back. Once outside, he gestured to the car they'd driven into town. Mario admitted to himself that he liked the way the sleek Jaguar drove, but, like *The Canoe*, it made him feel uncomfortable.

He helped his lover into the car before folding the walker and stowing it in the trunk. According to Asa's doctor, Asa wouldn't be able to use a cane for at least another month, maybe longer. Mario knew Asa took the doctor's words as a challenge. Like he did in business, Asa would push himself to the brink of exhaustion in order to exceed expectations.

Mario folded himself into the low-slung car and turned to give Asa a kiss. "I think my truck fits my size better."

Asa grinned. "Although you look damn good in this car, I might need to consider buying a sedan to better accommodate your size."

"Or, we could start taking my truck once you're able to climb into it." Part of him knew the statement was a test, but he needed to know how Asa would handle their obvious class differences.

"It's got a bench seat, right?" Asa surprised Mario by asking.

"Uh, yeah."

"I'm all for bench seats. They don't make many of them anymore. The closer I can ride to you the better. This damn console between us is driving me nuts."

Good answer. Mario grinned and leant over said console for a kiss. "I'll remember that."

"So what did Erico mean when he said he was surprised to see us together after what happened?" Asa asked.

Mario started the car, appreciating the purr of the engine as he waited for the heater to kick in. "He was talking about the hospital thing." He shrugged. Things were so good between him and Asa, he hated to bring up bad memories. "Don't worry about it. I've gotten over it."

"Over what?"

"Your refusal to see me right after the collapse."

"What? I didn't even know you came by."

Mario let out a snort. "I did a hell of a lot more than that. I slept in the damn waiting room for days, hoping you'd call for me." The memories still caused an ache in his gut.

Asa reached out and gripped Mario's thigh. "I didn't know. I was so upset that you never came. Who told you I didn't want to see you?"

Mario shrugged again. "One of your flunkies."

Asa's hand turned into a fist. "It tore me up that..."

Mario stopped Asa with a kiss. "It doesn't matter anymore. Those assholes are gone and we're together."

He pulled out and drove towards O'Brien's. "The food is a lot better than you might think, much better than when it was Brewster's. Jay's done a damn good job revamping the menu. Of course the food's not fancy, but there's usually a lot of it and it's good."

"Just how often do you normally eat out, because you sound like an expert."

Mario shrugged and pulled in to a parking spot a couple of stores down from O'Brien's. "Before I started hanging out at Casa Montgomery every night, I'd eat out four, maybe five, times a week. Most of the time, I'd just stop and get something to go."

He started to get out, but Asa stopped him. "That's why you were so angry when I asked you to help in my rehabilitation."

Mario shook his head. "Yeah, but I really don't wanna go into it. It was the hurt talking. Not my heart."

"I'm so sorry. We both could have been saved pain if only..."

Asa's grumbling stomach interrupted the touching moment. Mario leant over the console and gave his lover another kiss. "We were both duped. Let's just move on."

Asa nodded.

Feeling better, Mario unfolded himself from the car and retrieved Asa's walker. By the time he reached the passenger door, Asa already had it open and was standing beside the car, bracing his hands on the still-open door.

Mario rolled his eyes and shook his head. Only hours after the doctor had initiated the challenge, Asa was already testing his limits. Mario set the walker in front of his lover and waited for Asa to clear the door so he could shut it.

They'd barely reached the sidewalk when Asa's phone began to ring. Mario knew enough to slow to a stop. Asa rarely let a ringing phone go unanswered. In his professional life, an unanswered question could mean thousands of dollars. Mario did his best to block some of the brutal wind from blowing on Asa as his lover answered.

"Hello?"

Asa sighed and rolled his eyes. "Can I call you later, sis? I'm right in the middle of something."

Mario began to rub Asa's back to keep his muscles warm.

"Well, I'm sorry he wants an answer now, he'll have to wait until I get home."

Mario couldn't help but notice the slight flare of Asa's nostrils as his voice grew in volume. "Look, I'll call back later. End of subject."

Asa ended the call and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

"Everything okay?" Mario asked.

"Yeah. I'll tell you about it once we get out of this fucking cold." Asa gripped the walker with both hands as they slowly made their way to O'Brien's.

Mario found them a booth and stowed Asa's walker out of the way. Ethan walked up to the table with a couple of menus. "When did you start working here? Walk out on Nate already?"

Ethan laughed. "Naw. Just helping out a couple nights a week. Not much else to do besides sit in my apartment anyway."

Mario declined a menu, but Asa took his. "I'll have a Bud Light Lime for now."

Ethan nodded and looked at Asa.

"White Russian, please," Asa ordered.

"Coming up."

Ethan left and Asa opened his menu. "So, what would you recommend?"

"Their steaks are always top quality, but I think you can't go wrong with whatever pasta dish Jay's whipped up for the special."

"Sounds good to me." Asa closed his menu and set it to the side. "You know I've been in here a couple of times for Taco Tuesday, but I guess I never thought about them having food the rest of the week," Asa said with a chuckle.

"Well, now you know." Mario threaded his fingers through Asa's. "So, you were going to tell me about the phone call?"

Asa grunted. "It was my sister. My nephew's trying to go around an agreement we made several months ago."

"What kind of agreement?" Mario leaned back as Ethan walked up to the table with their drinks.

"Have you decided?" Ethan asked.

"We'll have two specials." Mario picked up Asa's menu and handed it to Ethan.

"Great choice. The three cheese ziti is exceptional."

As soon as Ethan walked off, Mario returned his attention to Asa. "Sorry."

Asa waved away Mario's apology. "One of my nephews wants me to buy him a car. I told him if he managed to work and save five hundred dollars, I'd get him one. Well, he's never bothered to do anything to earn the money, so he's begging my sister to put up his share. I tried to tell her that was not the agreement. My whole thing is teaching the kid that you need to work for stuff, but maybe I'm being a hard ass. We all know the cost of a car isn't going to put a dent in my bank account."

Mario thought of his mother. She'd been handed expensive gifts by rich men and he knew where that had gotten her. He didn't want to tell Asa what to do, it wasn't his family after all, but he also didn't want Asa to be taken advantage of.

In the end, Mario decided to tell Asa what he thought, without just coming out and telling him. "My mom worked as a cocktail waitress in one casino or another. She had one boyfriend who bought her a Mercedes. So, for the couple of months she dated the guy, she drove around in style. One day the guy left, like they all did, and mom was back to looking for a replacement. I remember waiting for her to pick me up from school. It was starting to get late, and I figured she must've forgotten me, so I started to walk towards home. I found her beside the road in tears. Her beloved Mercedes had died and she had no idea what to do."

Mario finished off his beer and signalled for another. "Turned out the car needed some work done. It wasn't much, maybe a few hundred dollars worth of repairs, but Mom didn't have that kind of money. She ended up selling the car for pennies on the dollar because she didn't even have the few hundred dollars it would've taken to repair the damn thing."

Ethan stepped up to the table with a fresh beer. "Thanks."

Asa cleared his throat. "I know there's a lesson in there. Why don't you just come out and tell me what you want me to know."

Mario shrugged. "Just that a nice car doesn't do a person any good if they don't have the money to maintain it. It's the 'you can give a man a fish' story. If you buy your nephew a car, how will he maintain it? Will you be expected to pay for that, too? Because I guarantee if he gets that car, the incentive to find a job will vanish."

"So, what would you propose I do? I know giving my family money isn't helping them, but I've done it so long, how do I stop?"

Once again, Mario thought of his mother. "Start with your nephew. Explain to him, or your sister, that you'll buy him a safe, used car that he can afford the insurance and maintenance on."

"And what happens when they try to argue that I bought the other kids new cars?"

For a businessman, Asa just didn't seem to get it. "It's your money. If you had an employee who just expected a raise every year without putting in the effort to do a good job, would you give it to him?"

"No."

"What if he argued and said your decision wasn't fair because you gave so-and-so a raise?" Mario could see the light dawning in Asa's eyes.

"I wouldn't let an employee argue with me and still remain an employee."

"Exactly. If your family doesn't like the way you're willing to help, tough. My mom never learned to save or how to take care of herself. It was easy for her to get money from rich men when she was younger. Now she's a sixty-year-old alcoholic pawning pieces of her jewellery every month in order to pay utilities and have some left over for booze."

Asa squeezed Mario's hand in sympathy, but Mario didn't need it. He'd come to terms with the way his mother was years earlier. "All I'm saying is what happens to them if you suddenly lose all your money? Will they be able to take care of themselves?"

"No. I doubt they would. But I have so much of it. Isn't it a little shitty to not give the people I care about some of what I have an abundance of?"

"I'm not saying a nice gift from time to time would be a bad thing. All I'm suggesting is that you make sure they can take care of themselves without those gifts."

Mario could see the wheels churning in Asa's head. He knew his lover had a lot to think about. He was so concerned about Asa, he didn't see Jay coming until two steaming plates of ziti were set down in front of them. "Wow, they let you out of the kitchen."

Jay smiled. "I'm all caught up for the moment so I thought I'd say hi."

Mario scooted over. "Have a seat."

Jay glanced at Asa and then back to Mario. "Are you sure it's okay?"

"Sure," Asa answered for Mario. "I'm Asa Montgomery." Asa stuck his hand out and Jay gave it a hesitant shake.

"Jay De Luca." Jay released Asa's hand and sat beside Mario. "Don't let me stop you from eating. I just needed to rest my feet."

Mario stabbed some of the cheesy ziti onto his fork and blew on it before putting it into his mouth. "Mmm mmm mmm."

Jay ducked his head, his cheeks turning a cute shade of pink. "Glad you like it."

Mario knew Jay had been kicked out of his house at a young age and had wound up on the streets before he found a home at the shelter in DC. He couldn't imagine how the man had learnt to cook so well. "So, whose recipe is this?"

"My nana's. She taught me how to make pasta before I could even see the top of the counter. Nana bought a special step-stool just for me."

Mario's chest tightened at the peaceful expression on Jay's face as he spoke of his grandmother. He didn't need to ask if the woman was still alive. No grandmother who cared enough to teach a boy to cook would allow him to be thrown out on the streets because of his sexuality.

"Where're you from?" Asa asked.

"I came here from Washington, DC."

Mario noticed Jay didn't say he was from DC, just that he'd arrived from DC. The man truly was a mystery. It didn't help Jay was so incredibly shy he didn't often speak to anyone, but Mario thought over the months they'd become friends he would've learned more than he actually had about the man.

He decided to steer the topic away from Jay's past. "I see you got Ethan to come to work here."

Jay automatically studied the room until his gaze landed on Ethan. "Yeah."

Mario grinned and bumped Jay with his shoulder. "You sweet on him?"

Jay looked surprised. "No. We're friends. He needed to get out of his apartment more. When he's alone, he gets paranoid, thinking he hears noises and stuff." Jay shrugged. "I tried to tell him it was probably just the bakery oven cooling down, but I don't think he believes me."

"So who are you sweet on?" Asa asked.

Mario would have to remember to speak to Asa about Jay's past. He didn't fault his lover for being inquisitive, he had wondered the same thing, but Mario knew it was the quickest way to shut Jay down.

"No one."

Hmmm, interesting. Mario could tell by the way Jay squared his shoulders his statement wasn't true. It was also obvious Jay didn't like the attraction he felt for whoever it was.

Ethan strolled by the table. "I'm getting ready to take an order."

"Okay," Jay answered.

"Before you have to go, let me say this is the best damn pasta I've had since my trip to Italy years ago. If you ever decide to strike out on your own, let me know."

"Thanks, but I'm happy here. Erico's already been hounding me about working for him, but Sean's been really good to me."

"Don't let Erico get to you. He's a persistent bastard when he wants something." Mario noticed the subtle tick of Jay's jaw as it clenched.

"Don't worry. I'm used to dealing with people like him." Jay stood and tapped his fingers on the table. "It was nice meeting you, Asa."

"Pleasure was mine," Asa replied.

"See you Tuesday?" Jay asked Mario.

"I'm sure I'll be here, but you're always too busy to talk. Maybe I'll stop by during the day sometime soon so we can catch up."

"Sounds good." Jay waved and walked off towards the kitchen.

"You were right. He does seem like a nice kid."

Mario took another bite of his dinner. Maybe he should also stop back by *The Canoe* sometime soon and have another chat with Erico about that wide berth he was supposed to keep when it came to Jay. "He's the kinda guy you want to protect. Ya know? Jay's been through enough for his age. It's time he finally found some peace and happiness."

Chapter Five

"Man, it's really coming down." Mario couldn't get over the amount of snow falling.

"And we're supposed to get another six inches before it stops," Rio said, coming up behind Mario to look out the front window.

Mario hoped Asa made it home from his board meeting okay. Even though he'd hired a temporary driver to get him to and from the office, the thought of Asa's car winding up in a ditch had him worried. "I think I'll give Asa a call."

Rio's big hand mussed Mario's hair. "It's cute the way you worry over him. I've always taken Asa as the kind of man who could take care of himself."

Mario knew the truth. Asa may be able to handle himself in the business world, but his lover was incredibly insecure when it came to handling things in his personal life. "In some things, but luckily he has me to help him with the rest."

He excused himself to the office and placed the call.

"Hey," Asa answered.

"Hi. Just making sure you got home okay."

"Barely. The roads between here and town are horrendous. I felt bad about sending Max out into this mess, but Ms. Guttenberg needed to get home, and I didn't want her driving at all, so Max ended up taking her."

"So you're alone?" The idea didn't sit well with Mario.

"Yes and that's exactly the way it's going to stay. I won't have you risking your life to babysit me. I'll be fine."

"What if I'd rather fuck you than babysit you?"

"What if I'd rather have you around to fuck me later than to go to your funeral?" Asa fired back.

"Okay. I get it. But don't think this is going to be a regular thing. If I have to buy a damn plough to hitch to the front of my truck, I'll do it. No way am I going through this all winter. As a matter of fact, maybe you should plan on staying with me in town when we know a storm's coming in."

"You wouldn't mind?" Asa startled Mario by asking.

"Why the hell would I mind? I've spent damn near every night at your place for going on two months." Mario knew Asa's insecurities were once again popping up.

"Okay, then, that would be great. I've never stayed at a lover's house before."

Mario shook his head. Of course Asa hadn't stayed with any of his lovers, because they'd all been too busy trying to get money and gifts in return for sex. Hell, half the guys probably didn't even have a fucking house in the first place.

"As soon as the roads clear enough for me to get through, I'll be out."

"Don't even attempt it until the snow stops and the roads are ploughed," Asa warned.

"Fine, but I can't promise not to harass the city until it gets done."

Asa chuckled. "Call me later?"

"Of course. Keep warm."

"I will. Bye."

Mario hung up and smiled. Had he ever been so happy? He knew the answer right away. No. He just hoped nothing happened to fuck up what he'd finally found.

* * * *

After work, Mario noticed how empty the parking lot outside of *The Canoe* looked. He decided to make a stop and have that chat with Erico.

Pulling his stalking cap over his ears, he braved the blowing snow and made his way around the corner of the building to the restaurant. The new hostess perked up when Mario walked in. "Hi, Ellen, is Erico busy?"

She glanced around the almost-empty restaurant. "He's not busy cooking, that's for sure. He's been doing phone interviews all day. I'll let him know you're here."

Mario nodded and gestured towards the bar. "I'll have a beer and wait."

There was only one individual in the bar area, and luckily, it was someone Mario knew. He took a stool next to the high school football coach and pounded him on the back. "How're ya doing, Kenny?"

"I'm okay, how about you?"

"I'd be doing fantastic if it weren't for the crappy weather outside."

"I hear ya. Why do you think I'm here instead of at practice?" Kenny chuckled.

Mario and Kenny had worked out many times together, so he knew about Kenny's crush on a fellow teacher. "Any news on the Eli front?"

Kenny shook his head and took another drink of his beer. "Nope. He still treats me like a former student. I swear the guy'll never get over it."

"Eli's probably never had to deal with a similar situation before. Most kids grow up and leave town."

"Yeah." Kenny nodded. "Leave it to the Trenton's to raise a queer."

Mario knew Kenny didn't get along with his fathers and mother. One of the first ménage families to settle in Cattle Valley, Jefferson, Lisa and Martin Trenton had so much love for each other they didn't seem to have any left over for their only child. As a result, Kenny was treated as an afterthought in his own home growing up.

"All I'm saying is maybe you should ask him out instead of waiting for Eli to come to you."

Kenny shook his head. "I don't handle rejection well. Better to love from afar than be avoided."

How long had Mario had the same philosophy when it came to Asa? "Loving from a distance sucks. I should know, been there, done that."

Kenny grinned. "Yeah, but I've heard around town that you've been spending an awful lot of time with your secret obsession."

"Fully fledged obsession now." Mario grinned back. "And all because I finally got the guts to make my move."

"I hear you. I'll give it some thought."

"Hey!" Erico greeted, coming around behind the bar.

"Finally," Mario teased. "What does a guy have to do to get a beer around here?"

"Get off your ass and come around and get it yourself. I sent Mark home early." Without asking what he wanted, Erico opened the cooler and handed Mario his favourite beer.

"You'd better make sure Kenny doesn't want anything else because I need to talk to you in private."

Erico whistled. "Sounds fun."

Kenny finished off his beer and tossed a couple of bills on the bar. "Thanks, but I'd better get home while I still can."

"Bye, buddy." Mario waved as Kenny made his way out of the room. He turned back to Erico. Instead of beating around the bush, he decided to come right out with it. "I heard through the grapevine that you've been bugging Jay to come work for you."

"Fucking gossipmongers."

Mario snorted. "Yeah, like you don't gossip as much as anyone else in town."

"Whatever. So you've come to warn me, is that it?"

Mario rested his forearms on the bar and leant forward. "I thought I told you to keep your dick away from Jay."

"How can you jump from me wanting him to work here to me wanting in his ass?"

"Because I know you, remember? I happen to know you've fucked every single sous-chef you've ever had."

Erico crossed his arms. "Not *every* one. Besides, who could blame me? I'm stuck here fifteen, sixteen fucking hours a day."

Mario knew Erico's reasoning was valid, but he also knew his old lover's sexual appetites. "Jay is not the man for you."

"Why? You think my big cock would split that tiny ass of his in two?" Erico smirked as he said it, and Mario nearly jumped over the bar.

He knew it was an automatic defence tactic on Erico's part, which calmed him down quickly. One of the reasons Mario knew it would never last between the two of them was because Erico refused to acknowledge he had emotions.

If Mario hadn't known Erico as well as he did, he wouldn't have even noticed the differences in the man since the grandstand collapse. Erico might be able to fool most people, but Mario had finally figured out his secret. Erico used sex to keep people from getting close. Mario didn't know who'd hurt his ex-lover, but it had definitely left scars.

"He's a friend of mine, and I'm asking you to please stop it. Jay's been hurt enough. Leave it alone."

A clouded expression crossed Erico's face before he quickly recovered. "I'll stop bugging him to work for me. That's all I'm promising."

Mario shook his head. "Not good enough. I want you to promise me you won't play games with him. Believe me, you're way out of his league. It wouldn't be a fair matchup."

Erico didn't agree, but Mario knew his ex was thinking about every word Mario had said. He guessed that was the best he could hope for at the moment. He pulled his wallet out of his coat pocket, but Erico pushed the wallet back against Mario's chest.

"Keep your money. It's a sad day when I can't buy an old friend a drink."

Mario stuffed the billfold back into his pocket. "See? That's the first time you've ever referred to me as a friend." Mario leant across the counter again, inches from Erico's gorgeous face. "I know there are emotions in there. Maybe it's time you let them out."

Erico laughed and took a step back. "Get out of here, you ass."

Mario left the restaurant feeling conflicted. Even though he knew Erico wasn't what Jay needed, he'd begun to believe maybe Jay was just what Erico needed.

* * * *

Asa had his suitcase packed and sitting by the door when Mario arrived. He'd become so used to having Mario with him in the evenings it had driven him crazy to be alone for even one night.

He opened the door and gestured to his suitcase. "Before you ask, I'm not moving in. I just thought it would be handy to keep a few sets of clothes at your place in case another sudden storm comes up."

Mario answered Asa with a deep kiss. "Bring your whole damn closet if you want."

"I don't think that's necessary, but thanks for the offer."

Mario lifted the suitcase. "You ready?"

"Yes. I just need to set the alarm." Asa waited for Mario to walk out before tapping the code in and locking the door. "I finally get to ride next to you."

"Yep, but with the roads the way they are, no funny business. We'll have to wait for a nicer day to play bob for the salami while I'm driving."

Asa coughed. He'd never met anyone who could talk as crudely as Mario did and yet turn him on at the same time. With his walker, Asa slowly made his way to the truck. He hadn't told Mario, but he'd been practicing with his cane. Despite what the doctors predicted, Asa knew he'd be finished with the walker in the next week or so.

Asa steeled himself for the approaching embarrassment. "Will you show me how strong you are?"

Even though he tried to make light of the situation, Asa felt uncomfortable as soon as Mario lifted him off his feet. He even received a gentle kiss as he was set gently into the seat. "Thanks."

"My pleasure." Mario kissed him again. "Definitely, my pleasure."

Asa scooted to the centre of the bench seat and fastened his lap belt. He knew it was risky in the current weather conditions, but he really needed to feel Mario's body heat at his side. Funny how quickly he was becoming addicted to his lover's warmth and smell. He'd slept the previous night with his head buried in Mario's pillow to try and convince his brain Mario was sleeping next to him.

Once Mario cleared the gate and turned onto the county road, Asa put his hand on his lover's thigh. "You'll be here for Thanksgiving, right?"

Mario glanced at Asa before returning his eyes to the road. "I've been arguing with my mom about that for over a week now. For some reason, she has it in her head that we need to try and become a family again. Don't ask me what the hell she's thinking. We've never been a family."

Asa knew Mario's mom was suffering from cirrhosis of the liver. "Maybe she wants to make amends before it's too late?"

Mario shrugged. "Who the hell knows what she wants. All I know is it's my first year to spend Thanksgiving with you, and that's what I plan to do."

Asa thought of his own family, gathering for the annual holiday. He knew he wasn't welcome to join them like in years past. He'd followed his gut instinct and had cut them off from his money nearly two weeks earlier. It had been the last time any of his siblings had spoken to him.

He didn't want Mario to cut himself off from the only family he had in order to be with him. "If you don't mind me tagging along, I'll go to Atlantic City with you."

Mario released the steering wheel long enough to squeeze Asa's hand. "Thanks, baby, but I would never subject you to my mother."

"Unless you're planning to get rid of me sometime soon, I'll need to meet her sooner or later." Asa turned and kissed Mario on the cheek. "Come on, it'll be fun. We can spend the day with your mom, take in a show or two, gamble..."

"I'll think about it," Mario finally answered, cutting Asa off.

They drove the rest of the way into town in companionable silence. It wasn't until they were driving down one of the side streets that Asa realised he'd never even seen where Mario lived. He was surprised when they pulled into the driveway of a small pale yellow bungalow.

"That porch is fantastic." He wondered if it was too cold to sit on the swing, snuggled under a blanket with his man.

"It's not much, but it's mine," Mario said, opening his door.

As Mario lifted the walker out of the truck bed, Asa thought of all the things he could've said to the statement but didn't. He kept hoping someday Mario would understand Asa didn't give a shit what Mario had or didn't. He just wanted the man.

Mario opened the passenger door and helped Asa down. Asa could tell Mario had taken special care to shovel the driveway and sidewalk. It was yet another reason Asa loved the man so much. Mario continued to do things for him without expecting anything in return.

"Watch these steps. They're clear, but they're pretty steep," Mario warned him.

Asa knew his lover wanted to carry him up the steps, but with a few folks in the neighbourhood, no doubt, peeking out their windows there was no way he was going to allow that.

By the time Asa made it into the living room, he was winded. He'd had a temporary elevator installed at his house, so stairs weren't something he was used to tackling. "Maybe we should make steps part of my therapy."

"Maybe you're right," Mario agreed, stomping the snow from his feet before taking off his boots. He held out his hand and took Asa's coat, hanging it on the coat rack to dry alongside his. "Hang on a sec, and I'll help you with those shoes."

"I love this place." Although Asa's house was everything he'd dreamt of, Mario's home had a completely different feel to it. *Honey*. He could definitely see the two of them curled up on the couch watching television as the storms raged outside.

Mario helped Asa off with his boots and put them on a mat next to the front door. "Would you like to lie down?"

Asa held out his arms and waited for Mario to come to him. "That depends on whether you're ready to lie down? I've missed you."

Mario ran the tip of his tongue around Asa's lips before delving in for a kiss. Asa could feel his lover's cock hardening against him and moaned. "You haven't shown me the master bedroom."

Mario chuckled and gestured towards the hall. "I don't really have a master bedroom, more like a Master's bedroom. The bathroom's in the hall."

The term Master brought up all kinds of images, and Asa was suddenly worried. He knew Mario had been gentle with him during his recovery, but every time they'd fooled around, he could feel the power in his lover dying to be set free. *What if I'm not enough to satisfy him?*

He pulled back and reached for his walker. "Lead me to your lair."

"You make me sound like a damn vampire," Mario said with a chuckle as they made their way to the bedroom.

Like the living room, the bedroom was decorated in warm tones of brown, cream and loden green. Asa set his walker to the side and began to undress.

"Your balance is really improving."

Asa pulled the thick sweater over his head before removing his T-shirt. "I've been practicing."

"You're not overdoing it, are you?" Mario asked, pushing his jeans and underwear down.

The sight of Mario's body always left Asa breathless. What in the hell did such a gorgeous man see in him? Asa was so flustered he had a hard time stepping out of his jeans. He would have ended up ass over teakettle if it hadn't been for Mario's strong arms reaching out to catch him at the last moment.

"Easy there, babe." Mario pulled back the covers while keeping an arm around Asa's waist.

Once Asa was comfortably in bed, Mario bent down and kissed him again, the wicked tongue of his lover promising an eventful afternoon. Mario broke the kiss and stood. "I'm gonna grab a couple bottles of water and a towel. Be right back."

Asa's gaze zeroed in on Mario's ass as he walked from the room and down the hall. The dips on the sides of Mario's muscled ass were begging for Asa's touch. His body shivered as he thought of spending an entire day in bed.

The room only had a few pictures, but Asa spotted an eight by ten of a woman that had to be Mario's mother with an eleven or twelve year old boy in her arms. Asa fisted his hand at the overwhelming unhappiness in the boy's eyes. Although they were the same big brown eyes he'd come to love, they looked totally different.

Unable to handle the boy's obvious distress any longer, Asa focused on the woman in the portrait. Mario had been right, his mom had been stunning. What surprised Asa the most was the woman's colouring. With platinum blonde hair and bright green eyes, Mario's mom looked nothing like her son.

Mario came back into the room, a towel draped over his shoulder and two big bottles of water in hand. He must have noticed the direction of Asa's attention because he stopped and turned towards the photo propped on the dresser.

"Quite a contrast, huh?"

Asa nodded and rolled to his side, lifting the blankets to welcome Mario. "What's your mom's name?"

"Angela," Mario answered, still studying the picture. He turned away and set the bottles on the table before sliding in beside Asa. "She doesn't look like that anymore."

Asa moulded his body against Mario's. "Because of her cirrhosis?"

Mario shook his head. "Because of the booze." He kissed Asa's forehead. "She's not always easy to be around. Are you sure you want to meet her?"

Asa nodded. He needed to know what put that sadness into the boy's eyes if he ever hoped to fully understand his lover. "I do."

Mario pulled back enough to stare into Asa's eyes. "How handy are you with a hammer?"

Surprised, Asa chuckled. "Why? You putting me to work?"

"Maybe. There always seems to be something that needs repairing when I go back. It's the reason I make myself visit once a year."

It was clear to Asa just talking about his mother was depressing Mario. He decided to do something to get that spark of lust back into his lover's eyes instead of the sadness that seemed to be taking its place.

Asa ran his hand down Mario's body to land on his hip. He dipped his fingers into the hollowed area he'd ogled minutes before. "Are you ever going to fuck me?"

Mario's eyes rounded. "Hell, yes, but I've been waiting for your muscles to strengthen and limber up."

Asa carefully wrapped his leg around Mario's. "See? No pain."

Even though the statement wasn't exactly true, Asa knew they both needed the togetherness that only making love with someone could bring. The tightness of his muscles pulling at the new position was a small sacrifice.

Mario licked at one of the bruises he'd made a few days earlier. "You'll tell me if it starts to hurt, right? Because I don't mind waiting."

Asa reached between them and took Mario's erection in hand. "Of course you do, we both do, but I think my body's finally healed enough to cooperate."

Blindly reaching back, Mario managed to open his bedside drawer and remove a bottle of lube. "Would I sound like an ass if I told you I was nervous?"

"Why would you be nervous? You've fucked a lot more guys than I have."

Mario popped the top on the bottle and squirted some lube onto his fingers. Before answering Asa's question, Mario ran his slicked middle finger down the crease of Asa's ass. "Fucked being the operative word. I told you when we first got together I'd never made love. Hurting you is in no way an option when we're together."

As he talked, Mario pressed the pad of his finger against Asa's hole until it pushed inside. "A good hard fuck has always been my way in the past, but I think it was because the only emotion involved was lust."

"Did I say I didn't enjoy it hard?" Asa asked, moving his hips in hopes of getting another finger inside of him.

Mario leant in and kissed Asa as he added another blissful digit. Evidently, Mario had done enough talking for the moment. Their kiss became a sloppy feast of tongue, teeth and grunts.

When Asa knew he was sufficiently stretched, he reached for the bottle of lube and applied a good amount to the cock still in his hand.

Mario broke the kiss and grinned. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Yeah. Fuck me already."

Mario removed his fingers and sat up. He reached for the four fluffy pillows on the king sized bed and stacked them beside Asa. "I think it'll be easiest on your legs if we try to keep them straight."

Asa agreed and rolled over, the pile of pillows nestled under his cock. "You'd better put that towel between my dick and your bedding or it's going to get soaked."

Mario spread Asa's legs and manoeuvred himself between them. "Soak away. I can't think of a better smell to bury my face in at night than your cum."

God. He loved the way Mario talked. Asa glanced over his shoulder at Mario. The man had his cock in his hand, spreading the lube just the way he wanted it. "Now," Asa urged.

He felt the kiss of Mario's cockhead against his hole moments before the big monster began to slowly push its way inside. Asa was suddenly thankful they'd continued to play with the dildo. He made a mental note to increase the size of his toy to better fit the size of his lover's cock.

Mario rocked back and forth until his dick was completely seated. Asa could feel Mario's heavy sac brush against him and groaned. With one arm wrapped around Asa's waist to help hold him up, Mario began to saw in and out of his ass.

"You feel so good," Mario moaned.

Asa was so full of cock he could barely manage a nod. Mario was such a tight fit that Asa could swear he felt each vein as it slid against his inner walls. *More.* Oh fuck he wanted more.

As Mario's speed increased, Asa could only imagine what it would feel like for his lover to go all out on him. Never had he been fucked with such intensity. The difference between Mario and Asa's other lovers was obvious within the first few seconds. Asa tried to push the thoughts of his past lovers using him to get what they wanted. It was clear to him that he'd never really been fucked at all, just toyed with until he came.

The arm holding him up moved to press against Asa's erection as Mario nailed his prostate. "Oh, shit."

Without warning, Asa came, shooting his seed onto Mario's arm and the pillow underneath. His eyes rolled back in his head at the intensity of the orgasm. He felt his muscles tighten as the climax worked its way through his body.

Mario began to grunt loudly with each thrust, still keeping a tight arm around Asa. "Gonna come."

Asa was speared twice more before the long shaft was buried to the hilt.

"Fuuuckk," Mario howled as he came. Without putting pressure on Asa's legs, Mario draped his torso over Asa's back.

Asa shivered as drops of Mario's sweat, ran down his side to the mattress below. His legs were starting to protest the position, but Mario felt too good inside of him to say a word. However, after a few minutes more, Asa's left calf seized.

"Oh! Shit! Cramp!" he yelled.

Mario was immediately off Asa's back. "Where, baby?"

"Left calf," Asa panted.

Mario's skilful hands began massaging the spasming muscle until the Charlie horse disappeared. "Thanks."

Mario continued to rub the sore muscle for several moments before reaching over the side of the bed for the towel. He began to clean Asa before taking care of himself. "You should've told me your muscles were feeling tight before you got that."

"I know, but you felt so good."

Mario tossed the towel to the floor and gently pulled the pillows out from under Asa. Once they were lying in each other's arms again, Mario kissed him. "It felt good to me, too, but it wasn't worth hurting you. It's important to me that we're totally honest with each other."

Asa nuzzled his face against Mario's neck. "I promise."

Chapter Six

Mario hated to admit it, but he'd enjoyed travelling in Asa's private plane. Besides being able to fuck his lover while flying across the country, Mario enjoyed not having to wait for his bags once they arrived in Atlantic City.

As promised, there was a rental car waiting for them and they were soon off towards his mom's house. Mario hoped like hell his mom hadn't dipped into the vodka yet. He knew he was taking a huge chance by bringing Asa to Atlantic City. Despite the fact his mom was his mom, she wasn't nearly as important to him than the man sitting next to him.

Mario pulled the rented Jaguar into the driveway of the home he'd grown up in. Although the neighbourhood was still in good shape, the houses were starting to show their age. He noticed one of the shutters on the front of his mom's house had come loose and was now propped against the white, vinyl siding he'd had installed a few years earlier.

He gripped the steering wheel and once again prayed his mom would behave herself. When he'd phoned to let her know he was bringing Asa, Angela Benta had asked all sorts of questions.

Evidently the thought of her son sleeping with another man under her roof hadn't sat well. That was, until she found out exactly who the man was. Although Asa Montgomery wasn't exactly a household name, most people had read at least enough about him in the papers and magazines to know who he was. Mario's mom was no different. Suddenly she promised to welcome Mario's lover with open arms.

He released the wheel and leant over to kiss Asa. "Don't forget. You promised to let me know if you become uncomfortable. We can always go to a hotel..."

"I'll be fine," Asa said, cutting Mario off. "You worry too much. I grew up in a house almost exactly like this."

Mario shook his head. "I guarantee you didn't grow up in a house anything like this one."

He started to open the trunk to retrieve their luggage, but stopped himself. Better to get the initial introductions out of the way before taking the suitcases in. If his mom was drunk, no way was Mario subjecting Asa to it.

Mario heard the passenger door open and watched as Asa climbed out of the car. Although Asa had been getting around with a cane, Mario was afraid the flight combined with the wild sex they'd had on the plane might have tired his lover. "Do you want the walker?"

Asa shook his head and held up the expensive mahogany and brass cane. "No thanks. I'm good."

Mario grinned and walked around the car to give Asa another quick kiss. "You certainly are."

Asa blushed, the red tingeing not only his cheeks but the top of his ears. "Make sure you don't say stuff like that in front of your mom."

"I'll be a good boy. I promise."

* * * *

Asa took the offered glass of iced tea from Angela. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Angela sat in a well-worn chair next to his and crossed her hands in her lap. Although he could tell that she had, in fact, been drinking, she wasn't drunk like he knew Mario had feared. Asa was still trying to get over the shock of his first look at the fifty-eight year old woman. Mario had been right. Angela Benta looked nothing like the photo on Mario's dresser. It was obvious the years of living inside a bottle had not been kind to her.

Not only did the woman probably weigh less than a hundred pounds, Asa would've guessed she was closer to seventy than sixty.

"So, my son seems quite smitten with you."

Asa nodded. "I hope so."

Even though he'd assured Mario he'd be fine while Mario ran to the hardware store, Asa was beginning to wonder. There was something in Angela's bloodshot eyes that unsettled him.

"He's never brought a boyfriend home before. Do you think he's ashamed of me?"

Asa bit the inside of his cheek. He knew better than to answer Angela's question. Deciding to change the subject, he searched his mind for something else to say. "Mario tells

me you used to work in some of the biggest casinos in Atlantic City. That must've been an exciting life. I bet you met all kinds of people."

Angela's wrinkled face brightened. "Oh yes. I was quite the looker in my day. Even though I was just a waitress, it seemed the wealthiest men loved to come on to me. Some of them married, some of them not. It didn't matter to me though because I always knew they'd be gone when their vacation ended." She shrugged her bony shoulders. "Such is life in Atlantic City. You learn quickly to take advantage of a situation like that."

Asa couldn't believe the pride in the woman's voice about what she'd done. He decided to probe a bit into Mario's childhood to see if his instincts about the sad boy in the portrait were accurate. "Did you usually work days or evenings when Mario was growing up?"

"Days, definitely. It left my evenings free."

Asa smiled. Maybe Angela wasn't as bad a mother as he'd thought. He sipped at his tea and half-watched the programme running on TV.

"You know I used to tell Mario that when I got old, he'd have to take care of me. He's done a pretty good job. If only he had the extra money to help me buy my medicine he would be the perfect son. Still, I guess it's enough that he pays for my utilities and food. I just wish there was enough left over for my meds."

Asa knew Mario sent his mother everything he could. When his lover had mentioned it, Asa found it commendable, but he hadn't realised at the time Mario was paying for so much of his mother's living expenses.

"I know he sends what he can."

"Yeah, I'm sure he does. Although with a rich boyfriend, he should have more money to spare before long. I just hope my health continues to stay the way it is until I can get my medicine."

The hair on the back of Asa's neck prickled. He knew exactly what Angela was doing, but he also knew how Mario would react if he found out. "How much do you need?"

"Oh, not much, really. My medicine comes to almost three hundred a month, but I'm hoping he'll be able to send me closer to five hundred. I sacrificed so much for him in the past. I would hope I'd be worth at least that much to him."

Asa inwardly sighed. He knew Angela would spend the extra money on nothing but liquor. *Think. Think.* "I could probably help you out on two conditions."

"And they are?" Angela asked with a completely innocent expression on her aging face.

"You never mention a word of this to Mario, and you remain sober until after we leave." Although he worried he was making the wrong decision, he thought Mario deserved at least one holiday with his mother that wasn't mired in alcohol.

Angela's big smile quickly turned down. "Exactly how long are you staying?"

"Here?" Asa glanced at his watch. He knew they'd need to stay through the Thanksgiving dinner or Mario would get suspicious. "For about another twenty-two hours, but we'll be in Atlantic City until Monday."

Angela seemed to think about life without a bottle for the next twenty-two hours. She eventually nodded. "You've got a deal."

* * * *

Mario stared at the ceiling of his boyhood bedroom. It was still unbelievable to him that his mom had remained sober. He thought Asa had got along well with her, but his lover had just suggested they check into one of the casinos for the remainder of their holiday weekend.

"Did she say something to you?" Mario knew there had to be an incident behind Asa's sudden change in attitude.

Asa rolled onto his back, away from Mario. "I think she's trying very hard not to drink with us here. I just thought we shouldn't push our luck beyond Thanksgiving dinner. Why? Don't you want to do a bit of gambling while we're here?"

Mario knew most people would let the explanation go. He agreed that his mom was trying hard not to drink, but Mario couldn't help thinking there was more to it. "Promise me she didn't say anything to you?"

Asa sighed and propped his head up on his hand. "She told me some stuff about her younger days."

"The days when she'd fuck any man with an extra dollar to spend on her?" Mario added.

"Yeah, something like that. Although I was surprised to hear she worked days so she had her nights free for you."

Mario couldn't help but laugh. "She worked days so she could troll the casinos at night. Men tend to be loose with their money when they're horny and drunk."

Asa stiffened. "What about you?"

"What about me? I spent the majority of my nights locked in the car in one parking lot or another. She was nice enough to provide me a flashlight, though, so I could get my homework done."

Asa said nothing for several moments. He eventually snuggled against Mario's side. "I have a confession to make."

Mario had a feeling there was more going on than what Asa had led him to believe. "Spill."

"Well, your mom was hinting that she was going to start hitting you up for more money because you didn't send her enough to pay for her medication. I knew you already sent her as much as you could, so I made a deal with her."

Mario felt bile start to rise in his throat. "First of all, I don't send my mom any money. I pay her utilities directly to the companies. There's a store down the street that calls me when she goes in, and I authorise the grocery bill, which I pay. I tried to buy her medication the same way, but I found out she was selling the drugs for cash as soon as she got them, so I stopped. Do I feel like shit for it? Yeah. But what else am I supposed to do?"

Asa hugged him. "I'm so sorry."

"Now, I need to know what kind of deal you made with her. I assume it's the reason she's not wasted?"

Asa nodded. "I told her I'd help her out if she stayed sober while we were here. I thought you deserved a holiday to remember with her."

"Oh, I'll remember it, believe me." *Fuck*. He couldn't believe his mom had once again managed to shame him. "Get up. We're gettin' outta here."

Asa sat up. "Please, don't be mad at me."

Mario cupped Asa's cheek and kissed him. "I'm not mad at you. I should've known before I brought you that she'd find a way to exploit your tenderness."

He started to get off the bed, but Asa grabbed his arm. "Please, Mario. Let's just make it through Thanksgiving dinner. You never know when it might be the last one with her."

How could he possibly make Asa understand what he was feeling? He'd taken care of his mother since he was old enough to earn a paycheque, and he was tired of it. He knew not liking his mother was expected after the way she'd treated him growing up, but in that moment, Mario realised he didn't even love her.

For years he'd done the exact thing he'd admonished Asa for, and it was time to put a stop to it. "I'm done here. There's nothing left for me. Thanksgiving should be spent at home with the people you love. Please, can we just go?"

Asa reached for his cell phone on the nightstand. "I told my pilot to head on home for the holiday. But if we call now, I'm sure we can find a commercial flight out and be in Cattle Valley in time for Thanksgiving dinner."

"Go ahead and make the call, but see if we can get a flight out in the morning instead." Asa nodded and Mario stood and began getting dressed. He knew he'd have to come back and have a talk with his mom, but he wanted to get Asa out of the line of his wrath before that happened.

* * * *

"Okay. We'll be there. Thanks." Asa hung up the phone and glanced at the clock. Their flight was in less than two hours, and Mario still wasn't back. Asa cursed himself for the hundredth time since waking up alone.

He heard the keycard slide through the security lock, then the door opened. Asa stood and made his way to an exhausted-looking Mario. He didn't ask his lover if he was okay, he knew he wasn't. Instead, Asa wrapped his arms around Mario and held him.

He knew Mario was the real deal. The one person he'd searched for his entire life. "I love you," he whispered.

Mario hugged Asa closer. "You have no idea how much I needed to hear that."

"I'll tell you every hour of every day, for the rest of my life, if it'll make you happy."

Mario pulled away far enough to look Asa in the eyes. "As much as I love hearing it, it's you feeling it that makes me happy. I love you, too."

"I hate to cut this short, but if we don't leave now, we're going to miss our plane, and we have somewhere to be once we get home."

"Yeah? Where're we going?" Mario asked, picking up Asa's suitcase.

"It's a surprise." Asa gave Mario a quick kiss before picking up his cane and heading towards the door. He could tell Mario didn't feel like talking about his trip back to his mom's, so Asa didn't ask.

* * * *

"It's official, I'm getting soft," Mario muttered once they were on the plane.

Asa reached over and rubbed Mario's stomach. "Don't feel soft to me."

Mario batted Asa's hand away. "It's not funny. A month ago I would've been pissed off that you bought first class tickets without asking, but all I'm feeling now is thankful. I never noticed how cramped I was back in coach."

Asa chuckled and took the glass of orange juice from the stewardess as Mario took his coffee and thanked the woman.

"There are a couple of things you need to learn about me," Asa began. "I don't know if you're aware of this, but I make more money than most folks..."

"You make more money than most countries," Mario butted in.

"Okay, yeah, you're right. Just so you get my point. Anyway, I've worked damn hard for a lot of years to get where I am in life. I won't apologise for spending it. Why the hell would I sit back in coach when I can ride up here?"

Mario held up his hands. "Hey. Don't shoot. I said I liked it up here."

Asa rolled his eyes and bumped his shoulder against Mario. "I know you did. Sorry. I guess I always need to apologise for having money when I'm around you."

Mario knew he was the one who made Asa feel that way. His past had taught him not to trust people with money, but he knew Asa was different. He reached over and threaded his fingers through Asa's. "I'll try not to make you feel that way anymore."

Asa half-turned in his seat to face Mario. "I don't know how things went with your mom, but can I put an offer on the table?"

Mario knew the word offer usually came with money. The argument with his mom hadn't been pretty. By the time he'd returned to the house after getting Asa settled at the hotel, his mom was drunk. Why he'd been surprised he still didn't know.

One look at the dishevelled woman and all the old hurt rose to the surface. For the first time in his life, Mario told his mother exactly what he thought of her.

"I'm not taking your money, Asa."

"I'm not offering you my money. I'm offering to pay for rehabilitation for your mom if you're both in agreement."

Mario's first instinct was to turn Asa down, but the thought of his mom as he'd left her earlier stopped him. He knew there was no way in the world he'd ever earn enough money to get his mom the help she needed. Putting down the bottle after over thirty years of putting it first, wouldn't be easy. If she was even willing to go through a proper rehabilitation programme, it would be damn expensive.

He squeezed the hand in his. He'd never accepted help in his life, but there was always a first time. "If she's willing to take you up on your offer, so am I."

Asa leant his head against Mario's shoulder. "Thank you."

"No, baby, thank you."

The plane taxied down the runway and took off. Mario watched his hometown from the air, knowing he'd probably never be back. "I told her I hated her."

"Huh?" Asa asked, leaning over closer to Mario.

He turned to address the man he loved. "My mom. I told her I hated her. I accused her of having me just to get money from my father."

"What did she say?"

Mario shrugged. "Nothing. Not a god damn thing."

Asa's eyes filled with tears. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, so am I."

"Would you do me another favour?"

Mario nodded.

"Let me be the one to discuss rehab with your mom?"

"Why would you do that?"

"Because I think it would be easier for both of you if I did. And because I love you with all my heart, and I refuse to let that woman hurt you again."

The gesture meant more than money ever could. Mario realised that was the difference between Asa and the other rich men that had traipsed in and out of his life. Asa was a good man who happened to have money. He didn't let his wealth define the kind of person he was.

Mario gave Asa a simple nod before changing the subject. "Enough about depressing stuff, we've gotta figure out where the hell to buy a turkey when we get home."

"No we don't. We're going to Rio, Ryan and Nate's for Thanksgiving."

"What?"

Asa grinned. "You told me Thanksgiving was about being around the people that you love, well, I called Rio earlier and asked him if he had room for two more. Since they'd already planned to have a houseful, he said they wouldn't even notice us."

Mario laughed. "Yeah, that sounds just like something he'd say." He leaned in and gave Asa a quick, discreet kiss. "Thanks."

Chapter Seven

Mario listened to his messages as the plane came to a stop.

"Hey, it's Rio. We've had a slight change in plans as you can probably tell by looking out the window. Anyway, don't worry, I'm sending someone to pick you guys up. We'll wait on ya to get here before we dig in. See you in a bit."

"Rio's sending someone to pick us up," Mario informed Asa. He stuck his phone in his pocket and helped Asa to his feet. "Okay?"

Asa nodded and reached in the overhead compartment for his cane. "Just a little stiff, but I'll work it out."

Mario squeezed in behind his lover and rested his hands on Asa's hips. He knew people tended to bump and rush others as they were departing and the last thing they needed was for Asa to get knocked down. He kept himself between Asa and the other passengers until they were safely in the terminal.

"Wow," Mario exclaimed, getting his first look out of the big airport windows. Snow had covered the ground when they'd left the previous day, but evidently an unexpected storm had blown in.

"We're lucky they were able to clear the runway so fast."

"I just hope whoever's coming to get us makes it okay." Mario rested a hand on the small of Asa's back as they neared the baggage claim area.

Turning the corner, Mario stopped dead in his tracks. "Holy shit. Would you look at what the cat dragged in."

Quade Madison waved and made his way over. "Hey, strangers."

Mario greeted his old friend with a bear hug. He stepped back and shook his head. "You look damn good. Evidently the sun and surf are agreeing with you."

Quade smiled. "I'm a man in love. What else can I say?"

Mario reached out and wrapped an arm around Asa. "I know the feeling."

Asa reached out and shook Quade's hand. "Nice to see you again, Mayor."

"You, too, but it's just Quade now. I think Nate's earned the right to that title."

"That he has," Asa agreed.

The baggage conveyor started to roll, getting Mario's attention. "Come on, old man, you can help me with the luggage."

As they waited for their bags, Mario couldn't get over Quade's appearance. "So what're you doing here? I thought Kai's season ran through mid-December or something like that."

"It does, but he pulled a muscle in the last tournament. He was hoping it'd be healed by now, but it looks like he may be out for the rest of the season."

"So you decided to trade the sun in for snow?" Asa questioned.

"Actually, it was Kai's idea. We were in Australia when the collapse happened. Guess he knew how upset I was that I wasn't here with my people. So yesterday, out of the blue, he surprised me with tickets to Wyoming. Evidently he's been working with Erico on the surprise for a couple weeks."

"Erico? That bastard didn't say a word to me about it. No wonder he didn't go home for Thanksgiving. Had I known, I sure as hell wouldn't have gone to Atlantic City." Mario felt Asa's hand on his back, his lover offering silent support.

"Well, we're planning to stay for a while, so I would've seen you when you got back anyway."

"How long're you staying?" Mario asked, spotting Asa's bag.

"Through the holidays. Guy's giving me a special rate on a suite at the lodge."

Mario lifted Asa's suitcase and set it on the floor, before reaching back and retrieving his own. "Okay, that's it."

Without being asked, Quade picked up Asa's suitcase as they headed out of the building. "My rental's over there."

Mario turned towards Asa. "It still looks pretty icy. Why don't you stay here and we'll pull up front."

Asa seemed to study the pavement for several moments before eventually nodding. "Do you want to leave the suitcases with me?"

Mario gave Asa a quick kiss. "That's okay. Why don't you wait inside out of the cold?"

Asa rolled his eyes but turned and went back inside.

Mario grinned at Quade. "I'll probably hear about that later."

Quade chuckled. "Tell me about it. Kai's always yelling at me for mothering him."

"So...what's the real reason you're in town?" Mario knew how much Quade loved Cattle Valley, but a simple visit didn't usually last for six weeks.

"We thought it was important to show our support for our friends."

"And?"

Quade shook his head and sighed. "And Nate asked if I could help him learn more of the business side of being mayor. I haven't told him the truth yet."

"Which is?" Mario prompted as they reached the SUV and put the luggage in the back.

"That the people I put in place while in office do most of the work. The important thing he needs to learn is not to micromanage the different departments."

Mario laughed. He knew how stressed Nate had been over running the city. Nate had told him on more than one occasion that Quade made the job look easy. Now Mario knew why.

Quade started the vehicle and glanced at Mario. "Is this thing with Montgomery serious?"

"As a heart attack," Mario responded. "He's everything I could've asked for in a partner. Why? Do you know something I don't?"

"No. Just checking."

Mario narrowed his eyes. He could tell there was something else Quade wanted to say. "I've known you for years, Quade. And I know there's something on your mind, so out with it."

Quade backed out of the parking spot. "I'm worried about Erico."

"Erico? It's been over between us for a long time. I doubt you have reason to worry."

Quade shook his head. "It's not that. He doesn't look right. I think something's going on with him."

"Oh. Yeah, the collapse really shook him up, I think. He'll be okay in time."

"Maybe that's all it is, but I'm afraid it's something more serious."

Quade pulled up in front of the terminal, and Mario jumped out to help Asa. His lover gave him a stare, daring him to try and lift him into the four-wheel drive SUV. Mario knew better than to embarrass Asa, so he put a steadying hand on his back as the man climbed in.

Once he was comfortably seated, Asa smiled. "Thanks," he whispered.

Mario leaned in and gave Asa a quick kiss. "Anything for you, babe."

"I'll hold you to that."

"I know you will." Mario shut the door and got back in the front passenger seat. "Let's go home."

* * * *

After Quade dropped them off at Asa's private landing strip to retrieve Mario's truck, they decided to stop by Mario's house to freshen up.

Asa opened his suitcase and stared at the clothes inside. "So do you think since dinner's at *The Canoe* instead of Rio's we should dress up?"

Mario paused in the process of stepping out of his khaki pants. "It's Thanksgiving. You should wear what makes you feel good."

Asa's attention was focused on the rising cock trapped behind a tight pair of black boxer briefs. Before his injuries, Asa would've sunk to his knees in front of Mario and worshipped the erection with fervour, but things had changed. He settled on the mattress between the two suitcases. "Come here."

Mario kicked off his pants and walked over to stand between Asa's spread legs. "See something that interests you?"

"You know I do." Asa ran a hand over the front of Mario's underwear before pulling them down far enough to get to the hidden package. He ran his tongue up the heavily veined length while maintaining eye contact with the man he loved.

Mario moaned when Asa captured the weeping head in his mouth, taking the length as far down his throat as he could. "Fuck, baby."

Asa backed off enough to suckle at the ruddy-coloured crown of his lover's cock. Since dating Mario, Asa had become much better at giving head and his efforts hadn't gone unnoticed.

Mario reached down and began unzipping Asa's dress pants. Asa managed to lift his hips enough for Mario to push his clothes out of the way without releasing the cock in his mouth.

Without words, he signalled for Mario to put his foot up on the bed. The new position allowed Asa to run a finger between the cheeks of Mario's ass. Although Mario was strictly a top, Asa had discovered his lover did enjoy anal play at times. The arrangement was perfect for Asa, who preferred to bottom but liked giving Mario pleasure.

Mario grasped Asa's hand and brought it to his mouth. Two fingers were sucked into Mario's mouth before being returned to his ass. "Do it," Mario begged.

As Asa pushed his middle finger through the ring of muscle, Mario placed a hand on the back of Asa's head and began to thrust in and out of his mouth.

"Yeah. So good, baby."

Asa opened his throat and allowed Mario to fuck his mouth as he added the second finger. He sawed in and out of Mario's ass as copious amounts of pre-cum ran down his throat. He brushed the smooth walnut-sized gland, causing Mario's rhythm to falter.

"Shit!" Mario howled as he erupted down Asa's throat.

Asa pulled back, tasting the thick cum as it shot from Mario's cock. He'd sworn on more than one occasion he could die a happy man with the taste of Mario's seed.

Mario's hand returned to jack Asa's erection seconds before he stepped back and knelt between Asa's legs. It didn't take long once Mario's mouth enveloped Asa's dick for him to slip over the edge.

Asa buried his fingers in Mario's hair as he emptied his balls. By the time the last string of cum left his cock, Asa was ready for a nap. He fell back onto the bed and closed his eyes.

Mario's tongue working its way up Asa's body was the only thing keeping him awake. "Sleepy," Asa mumbled.

"Sorry, babe, but they're waiting for us."

Asa groaned and opened his eyes. At least with the big dinner being at *The Canoe*, they wouldn't be expected to stay and watch the traditional afternoon football games. "Promise me an after-feast nap?"

Mario swiped his tongue across Asa's lips before delving inside. Asa returned the kiss, sucking Mario's tongue as it swept the interior of his mouth.

Mario broke the kiss and stood up, holding a hand out to Asa. "Come on. The sooner we eat, the sooner you can get your nap."

He took Mario's hand and allowed his lover to pull him up. "Will you put on those black leather pants I fell in love with?"

"Hey, I thought you fell in love with me, not my pants."

Asa grinned and nipped Mario's chin. "I did fall in love with you. The pants just sealed the deal."

* * * *

"Hey, Leo, sit with us," Mario called to a good-looking older gentleman Asa didn't know.

Carrying a plate loaded with food, Leo sat across the table from Asa. "Hi, I don't think we've met. I'm Leo Burkowski, the new assistant fire chief."

Asa held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Leo. I'm Asa Montgomery."

Leo grinned. "I know. I've seen your picture in Newsweek. It's nice to finally meet you."

Mario took a bite of his roll. "Leo's renting the house next door to me."

Asa nodded and tasted his stuffing. He was worried when they'd first stepped in to *The Canoe*. He'd lived in Cattle Valley for quite a few years, but it dawned on him as Mario hugged and greeted people that he knew only a handful of its residents. It made him realise he'd shut himself away for too long.

As the conversation at the table continued, Asa discovered just how much he longed to build the kind of friendships Mario had. His lover was so easy around everyone in the room that a small part of Asa felt jealous. The ease in which Mario joked with Leo was the perfect example. Even though Asa knew in his heart Mario wouldn't stray, the insecurities he'd always struggled with started to rise to the surface.

"Excuse me." Asa wiped his mouth and stood.

Mario reached out and put a hand on Asa's leg. "Want me to get you something else?"

"No. I've had enough. I think I'll give my spot up to someone else who needs it." Asa picked up his half-eaten plate and carried it to the cart set up for dirty dishes. He scraped the remainder of his food into a plastic bucket before stacking his plate with the others.

Wandering into the bar area, he spotted a man sitting by himself, looking as lonely as he felt. He took the stool next to Erico. "I figured you'd be busy in the kitchen."

Erico glanced over and slowly shook his head. "I was, but I decided to take a break. Where's Mario?"

Asa gestured over his shoulder in the direction of the dining room. "Still eating."

Erico met Asa's gaze. "He seems happy. That's good. He deserves it."

"Yes he does," Asa agreed. He noticed the sheen of sweat on Erico's face and the pallid complexion of his normally olive skin. "You feeling okay?"

"Yeah. Guess I'm trying to fight off a flu bug or something."

Asa searched for something else to say. "Hey, any luck finding another chef?"

Erico shook his head. "No. I'm looking for someone who'll stay this time around. Someone I can train and trust enough so I can take some time off."

"You'll find him."

"Yeah."

Erico pushed himself away from the bar. "Guess I'd better get back in there." He started to walk away but stopped and turned back to Asa. "It was nice talking to you."

"You, too."

After Erico left, Asa tried to figure out what to do next.

"Hey, what're you doing in here by yourself?"

Asa glanced over his shoulder to find Rio standing behind him. "Needed a break."

Rio sat down on the stool Erico had vacated moments before. "What's going on?"

"Nothing, it's just..." He waved his hand. "I realised I don't really know anyone, so I came in here."

"And how's that plan workin' for ya? Getting to know people in here are you?"

Asa playfully punched Rio in the shoulder. "It's not that I don't want to get to know people, it's just...hell, I don't know. I'm always worried people will like me for my money and not me. I guess deep down, I just don't have the need to have a ton of friends. Besides, I think Mario has enough for both of us. I don't begrudge him that at all, it's the way he is, but I don't know that it's for me. Am I making sense?"

"Perfect sense." Rio rubbed his thumb across a scratch in the top of the bar. "You can love someone without being their clone. Take my relationship for example. I love my men to death, but I make certain allowances. Ryan likes to think he's in charge, so I give him that. It makes him feel secure. Nate? Well, Nate likes to be the centre of attention, so I try to make sure I hold the spotlight on him." Rio shrugged. "There's no *one* answer. Does Mario want you to make friends?"

"I don't know. I think he wants me to get out more, meet people. And part of me wants that too, but there's another part that's happy with just spending time with Mario."

"Yeah, but you can't expect to spend every minute of every day with him. You'll both eventually need a break. What happens to you if Mario decides to do something with a group of his friends? Do you think he'd be able to just leave you at home by yourself? That's

why it's important to form relationships beyond what the two of you have at home. Just because you become a couple, doesn't mean you need to give up your individuality."

Asa understood most of what Rio was talking about. Maybe he didn't need to be the social creature Mario was, maybe making one or two friends would be enough for him? "So how do I go about making these friends?"

Rio shrugged. "You become more approachable would be my first suggestion."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, you don't sit at a bar by yourself. You mingle. You join in on a simple conversation. You won't make friends overnight, but you can set the ground work."

Asa stood and picked up his cane. "Guess there's no time like the present, huh?"

Rio squeezed Asa's shoulder. "Hey, if I can do it, so can you."

* * * *

Mario was getting ready to go look for Asa when he spotted his lover across the room, talking to Jay, who, as usual, was surrounded by kids. Mario smiled as Gracie began pulling on Asa's pant leg.

Evidently, she was finally able to get his lover's attention away from Jay long enough to listen to her, because a second later, the pretty little girl was in Asa's arms. Mario was surprised at the ease Asa showed handling the child.

"I'll talk to you guys later," he said to the group of men. He strolled over to the children's table and came up behind Asa, kissing his man on the neck.

"Hey, you trying to steal my boyfriend?" he asked Gracie.

"Nope. Just borrowing him," Gracie stated in a matter of fact tone.

Mario laughed. It was obvious Gracie had been around grown-ups. "You sound like your Dad."

Asa leaned back against Mario. "Pretty little thing, isn't she?"

Mario reached out and pinched the end of Gracie's nose. "Yeah, and I've a feeling she knows it, don't ya?"

"Well, Daddy says women are supposed to pretend they don't know how beautiful they are, but then he calls me beautiful all the time, so how am I not supposed to know?"

Mario laughed again. "You've got a point."

Gracie spotted someone else she thought looked like fun and squirmed out of Asa's arms. "See ya," she called as she sprinted off towards Ryan.

Nuzzling Asa's ear, Mario whispered. "Are your legs holding up okay?"

Asa turned his head and kissed Mario. "I could probably use a rest."

Mario pulled out two chairs beside Jay. "Have a seat." Mario took the one between Asa and Jay and sat down.

"How're you doing?" he asked Jay.

"Good," he answered as Joey bounced around on his lap.

It wasn't the first time Mario noticed how comfortable Jay was around kids. As a matter of fact, Jay seemed to prefer their company to other adults. He wondered why that was. From what he knew, Jay didn't have younger siblings, but then, maybe Jay simply didn't talk about them.

"Has Erico eased up on you?"

"How'd you know?" Jay's jaw dropped. "You didn't yell at him, did you?"

"Let's just say we had a little chat."

"Was he mad?"

Mario wondered why he seemed to care so much how Erico reacted. "Mad? No."

"Then what?" Jay continued to prod for answers.

Interesting. Mario decided to be honest with Jay, but not in front of the kids. "You got a moment?"

Jay seemed surprised, but eventually nodded and passed Joey to Asa. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all." Asa turned the baby around to face him. "We'll make funny faces at each other while you're gone."

Mario led Jay into the hostess area of the restaurant. He noticed Jay was down and decided to question him about it. "Something wrong?"

Jay shook his head, his long hair covering his face from Mario's sight. Mario couldn't get over how much Jay resembled a child who expected to be scolded. "Hey," he said, tilting Jay's chin up. "I just wanted to talk to you away from the kids."

"You're not mad?"

"Why the hell would I be mad?"

Jay shrugged. "I know Erico's your friend."

"Yeah, and so are you."

"Thanks."

They'd gotten so far off the subject, Mario wasn't sure how to get back on track. "Erico's a good guy, despite what some people think, but I don't know that he's the right man for you."

Jay immediately began to deny he had thoughts of Erico, firming Mario's suspicion to the contrary. "I'm not interested in Erico. I'm not interested in anyone."

"Well, just keep in mind what I said." He started to walk off, but a hand to his arm stopped him. Mario knew how rare it was for Jay to initiate contact. He turned, noticing the sadness in the big brown eyes that stared back at him.

"I lied."

Mario nodded but kept his mouth shut, hoping Jay would confide in him.

"Why do I always feel attracted to bad people?"

"I told you, Erico isn't bad." He hated that Erico was misunderstood by most people. He couldn't blame them, it took him a long time to see Erico's true colours, and his friend didn't give anyone the chance to get close enough.

"He's strong."

Mario thought of Erico's size. Although he was fit, Erico wasn't nearly as muscled as the majority of the men in town. "I guess so."

Jay nodded. "That's what I thought."

What would it be like to live in fear? Jay had suffered more than anyone should at the hands of other people. He wondered how he could help the small, seemingly fragile, man. "Have you ever considered learning to box, or one of the martial arts? As a matter of fact, martial arts may be perfect for you. It requires skill rather than size or strength."

"Of which I have neither," Jay sighed. "I hate this. I'm so tired of being afraid to date again. Ethan's been wonderful to have around, but he's more a brother." Jay's face flushed. "I get...lonely."

"Perfectly understandable. How about I make you a deal? You come to Asa's house on your nights off. I'll start training you, and you'll pay me back by cooking us dinner."

Jay's big brown eyes lit up. "Are you serious? You really think I could learn that stuff?"

"I'm positive. Do we have a deal?" Mario stuck out his hand.

After a brief pause, Jay reached out and shook it. Mario couldn't get over how small-boned the man's hands were. He started to rethink his promise, but decided teaching Jay a

little self-defence couldn't hurt. If nothing else, Mario hoped it would give Jay more confidence.

"Okay. Um. My next day off is Sunday. Is that too soon?"

"No. Sunday should be fine. If the weather gets too bad, we can do it at *The Gym* instead of having you drive out to Asa's house."

The light in Jay's eyes faded. "I forgot. I...uh...don't have a car."

Shit. Mario hadn't thought of that. "Don't worry. We'll work something out."

"Do you think I could invite Ethan? You know, he could use some training, too. And I bet he even has the money to pay."

Mario also knew about the guy who'd been threatening Ethan in DC. "Sure. But don't mention the money thing. We'll figure out something for him to do in trade."

"Thanks. I'm going to go tell him if that's okay?"

"Sure." Mario watched Jay walk away with a spring in his step that Mario hadn't seen before. The car situation might be a problem unless he could talk Rio into just letting him use *The Gym* for the classes. "Well? There's only one way to find out."

He found Rio helping Erico wrap up leftovers in individual containers. "You got a second?"

Rio glanced up and grinned. "I dunno. Will it get me out of leftover duty?"

"No," Erico said, butting into the conversation.

"I need your permission to teach Jay and Ethan some self-defence techniques at *The Gym* after-hours."

"Shouldn't be a problem, but I need to check with Ryan. He's the one who deals with all the insurance issues. Hold on. I'll go find him. Feel free to continue on in my place."

Mario chuckled and started adding cranberry sauce to the foam containers. "I knew he'd figure out a way to get out of work."

"Is there something going on between Jay and Ethan?" Erico asked.

"No. They're friends, but they both need to learn to defend themselves."

"Why?"

"Why? Because they're both tired of being afraid all the time." Finished with the cranberry sauce, Mario started on stuffing.

"But what's Jay afraid of?"

"Being abused again. You can't blame the kid after what he's been through."

When Erico said nothing more, Mario glanced up. His old friend's hands were shaking as he held the carving knife. "Erico?"

"Who did it?"

"You don't know?" *Fuck*. He figured Erico knew. The conversation with Jay earlier was the only reason he decided to fill Erico in on Jay's past. "He was kicked out of his house when he was fourteen. Ended up at a shelter in DC at fifteen that friends of ours run. Before he came to Cattle Valley an ex was stalking him. Guess it was pretty bad. He ended up in the hospital twice. Finally, our friends decided to send him here."

"That's why you warned me away."

Mario knew it was a realisation more than a question. "Yeah. Sorry, I guess I thought you knew his story."

Erico set the knife down and stared Mario in the eyes. "You think I'd hurt him?"

"No. Not in a million years." He thought about telling Erico about the conversation with Jay earlier but decided against it. No sense leading Erico on. Mario doubted Jay would ever be ready for the likes of the handsome restaurant owner.

"He's afraid of anyone bigger than he is," Mario said in way of explanation.

"He's not afraid of you, or Ryan, or Rio."

"We're not single men. I guess what I'm trying to say is that Jay's afraid to date. I'm gonna try and give him some self-confidence by teaching him a few tricks to defend himself in case he's ever put in that position again."

Erico nodded. "I'm glad you told me." He cleared his throat. "If you'll excuse me, I need to check on something in my office."

Mario watched him go, fighting the urge to follow. Who was this new Erico? Mario had seen more emotion in his old friend over the past two weeks than he'd seen in all the time he'd known him.

"It's a go," Rio announced, stepping back up to the table.

"Thanks. I was going to have them come out to Asa's house, but I forgot neither of them had cars. This way I'll be able to pick them up if the weather's bad."

With the last of the leftovers put in their containers, Mario grabbed two of the boxes and nodded his goodbye to Rio. "See ya Monday, boss."

"If I can still walk by then. Nate said he's got something extra special planned for the rest of the weekend."

"Ooh, extra special, huh?"

Rio chuckled. "Yep. Something about alternative uses for pumpkin pie."

"I'll pray for ya, man."

"Thanks."

Mario found Asa talking with Pete Nash, one of Cattle Valley's newest deputies. "You ready?"

"Yes. It was nice to meet you," Asa said to Pete.

"You, too."

Asa started to follow Mario to the door. "Wait! Did you get some of that left-over pumpkin pie?"

Mario's jaw dropped. "Please tell me you haven't been talking to Nate?"

Asa flashed him a wicked grin. "It wasn't just me who heard it. Why do you think I asked if there was any pie left? I figured there'd be a stampede at the dessert table."

Mario held up the foam containers. "Two pieces. Whatcha gonna do with them?"

"Take me home, and I'll show you."

Epilogue

"I can't do this."

"Yes you can, Angela." Asa shook his head as his secretary came into the office. Alice dutifully retreated and shut the door. "It's been over five weeks since you've had a drink. You're on your way. Don't give up now. Not on yourself, not on your dream to make things up to your son."

A sob sounded from Angela's end of the phone. "You have no idea how hard it is."

"You're right, I don't. That's why you're in the treatment centre with people who do understand what you're going through. Open up to them. They'll help you get through the rough patches."

"Did you ask Mario about coming to see me?"

Asa leant back in his chair and rubbed his eyes. How did he tell the woman who was working so hard to get sober that her son hadn't even begun to forgive her? "I'm sorry. He's just not ready yet. Mario has a lot of past hurt and anger to deal with, it's taken a lifetime to build up, and you can't expect it to disappear in five weeks."

"Then why're you being so nice to me?" she asked.

"Because I love your son more than anything in the world. Mario deserves a real mother, and I'm doing everything in my power to see that he gets one."

"Then what's in it for me?"

"A longer life? A son who's proud of you?"

"But what'll I get if I finish the treatment? I need some incentive, Asa."

Asa's chest tightened. He finally understood why his lover had refused to believe his mother could ever stay sober. "If living and loving your son aren't enough, I've got nothing else to give you."

Without waiting for an answer, Asa regretfully hung up the phone. In his heart, he knew without the incentive of money, Angela would check herself out of the facility and be drunk before dinner. Money truly was the only thing Mario's mom cared about. So how was he going to tell his lover?

* * * *

Mario was in the middle of *The King and I* when Asa walked in the door. His lover looked completely beat. Mario put the movie on pause and stood to give Asa a welcoming hug. "Did you get the fire put out?"

"Yes. It seems even New Years Eve isn't sacred to gamers."

"Why don't you go take a shower and get into something comfortable? I've got a big night of movie and junk food planned."

Asa yawned and nodded as he shuffled to the bedroom.

Before seeing how tired Asa was, Mario had planned to talk to his billionaire lover about picking up after himself. He knew Asa was used to Ms. Guttenberg following him around all day, but she wasn't here and Mario refused to clean up after a grown man.

He heard the water turn on as his phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Benta?"

"Yes. This is Mario Benta. May I help you?" He sat back down on the couch and reached for the remote.

"This is Cathryn Malloy at the Sea Side Treatment Centre. I'm sorry to inform you that your mother checked herself out a few moments ago. We tried everything in our power to convince her to stay, but she refused. Since Mr. Montgomery set it up so she was admitted in a voluntary capacity, we couldn't force her to stay."

Mario squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay, Ms. Malloy. Thank you for letting us know."

"If there's anything else we can do, please, don't hesitate to call."

"Thanks again." Mario hung up. *Damn her!* He threw the phone against the wall, breaking it in three places. How was he supposed to tell Asa? His lover had been so convinced...

"Fuck!" he yelled and kicked the coffee table, sending the heavy wood and iron piece of furniture across the room.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Asa asked, standing in the living room dripping onto the hardwood floor. "I thought maybe someone had broken in and was attacking you."

Mario smiled at the picture Asa made, soap still covering his body, small bubbles slowly making their way down his furry chest. "And what? You decided to race out here and defend me? Naked?"

Asa glanced down, suddenly realising his own nudity. "Shit." He turned and fled back to the shower, favouring his right leg more than his left.

Mario studied the closed bathroom door and sighed. "And that is the reason I love you so much, Mr. Montgomery."

Shedding his clothes as he went, Mario made his way into the bathroom and opened the shower door. "Room in here for me?"

Asa crooked his finger at Mario. "Only if you promise not to throw another tantrum."

"I'll be good. Promise." Mario ran his hands through the mat of hair on Asa's chest. His lover was covered in hickeys and hot as hell.

"I know you'll be good. The question is, how good?"

Mario moved until they were chest to chest. He picked up the bar of soap and began washing his way down Asa's back, paying particular attention to his lover's ass. "We've never fucked in the shower. You think your legs are up to it?"

Asa lifted his leg and rested his foot on the narrow ledge, opening himself to Mario's touch. "I sure as hell hope so. I think about it every day when I'm in here."

Mario introduced a soapy finger to Asa's hole. "You like that?" he asked, inserting another almost immediately.

"You know I do."

Once Mario slid two fingers easily in and out of Asa's ass, he smacked him on the butt. "Turn around and hold onto the wall."

As Asa did as asked, Mario readjusted the shower spray. "Mmm mmm mmm."

He'd never tire of being inside of his lover. Mario soaped his cock and slowly pushed in to the hilt. "Damn you're hot, baby."

Asa grunted and started rocking back and forth on Mario's dick.

Mario gripped Asa's hips and started to move. The slap of wet skin, as his groin met Asa's ass, was deafening in the small bathroom, the sound music to Mario's ears. "You think your legs can hold for the fucking of your life?"

"Don't hold back with me," Asa growled.

Mario pulled out of Asa's ass and applied more soap to his cock, before slamming back in. He rested one hand on Asa's hip and one on his shoulder to keep his lover from taking a header into the tiled wall and began to move.

As he pounded the sweet ass wrapped around his cock, Mario tilted his head back, lost in sensation. With every thrust he let out a grunt, filling the room with even more noise. This is what he'd missed. As much as he enjoyed making love to Asa, nothing replaced a good, bone rattling fuck.

Dipping his head forward, Mario bent over and took a quick bite of Asa's shoulder blade. Asa's cries of pleasure worked their way through Mario like a soothing balm. The hurt and disappointment of minutes earlier disappeared as his lover came, shooting thick strands of cum across the dark blue tiles.

Asa's legs started to shake, and Mario wrapped both arms around him to hold him steady. "Almost," he whispered.

With his lover in his arms, Mario buried himself balls deep and erupted. "Love you," he whispered in Asa's ear as he came.

* * * *

Wrapped in a thick terrycloth robe, Mario handed Asa a bowl of popcorn before shucking his robe and snuggling under the heavy blanket.

"How many times have you seen this movie?" Asa asked, grabbing a handful of the buttery popcorn.

"Why? You have something against Yul Brynner?"

"Not really. I mean, I like *The King and I* as much as the next person, but *Westworld*? Seriously?"

Mario shrugged. "It was one of my favourites as a kid."

Asa squirmed beside him. "Did you get to see it at the theatre?"

"No. I didn't step foot into a movie theatre until I left home. But I remember a really bad day at home. Mom was drunk, crying over one man or another. I had a small thirteen-inch black and white television in my room. Anyway, this particular day, there was a Yul Brynner marathon on TV. I blocked out the entire day with *The King and I*, *Westworld*, *The Ten Commandments* and *The Magnificent Seven*. I guess he became my hero that day."

Asa rested his head on Mario's shoulder. "You use Yul to escape."

Mario had never really thought of it like that before. "Yeah. Guess I do."

"I talked to your mom earlier."

"You did?"

Asa nodded. "I don't think she's going to stick with the treatment."

"She didn't. I got a call while you were in the shower from Cathryn. That's what the tantrum was about."

"I'm sorry."

Mario reached out and took the bowl of popcorn from Asa's lap. He set it on the coffee table before pulling Asa into his arms. "No. I'm the one who should be sorry. I know how hard you tried with her. I'm beyond pissed at her for letting you down."

"Maybe eventually, she'll be ready to try again?"

Mario knew in his heart that would never happen. His mom would end up dying alone, with a bottle in her hand. The big question was where. "Although I feel like completely cutting her out of my life, I don't know that I can. I mean, I don't care to ever see her again, but I won't be able to live with myself if I know she's living on the streets somewhere."

"I've been thinking about the same thing," Asa admitted.

"Yeah? And what did you come up with, because I don't know that I can deal with it every month. It's not the money that's the problem, it's talking to her. I just don't think I can do it anymore."

"I completely agree. I'd like to hire an accountant to deal with her living expenses. I think a place to live and food to eat is all we should provide. If she wants her liquor, she'll have to find another way."

"How much will an accountant charge to do that?" Mario wasn't exactly hurting for money, but he sure didn't have a lot extra each month.

Asa sat up and stared Mario in the eyes. "Do you really love me?"

Mario let out an inward sigh. Were his lover's insecurities rearing their ugly heads again? "You know I do. I love you more than anything in this world, including myself."

Asa straddled Mario's lap. "Do you love me enough to stay with me forever?"

Mario ran his hands down Asa's nude body to land on his ass. He squeezed the twin globes and rubbed his lips softly across Asa's. "That's what I'm counting on."

"Good. Then money isn't an issue between us anymore. I may always make more than you do, but after today, I won't have more than you do. I want us to live together as true partners."

"I don't want your money, Asa."

"I know. Which is why I trust you with it. We pool our resources and live our lives not worrying about it. It's what would happen if we got married, so what's the difference?"

"The difference is most wealthy people have prenups signed before getting married."

"And with anyone else, I probably would, too. But you're not anyone else." Asa kissed him. "You're the man who truly loves Ace, the basement dweller, and not Asa, the business tycoon."

Hearing Asa refer to himself as a basement dweller still made Mario uncomfortable. He knew his lover used the title to put himself down. Mario suspected years of being referred to as a geek by his family was behind the low self-esteem. He knew the rift between Asa and his family still bothered him.

"You know you're going to have to deal with your family sooner or later."

Asa shrugged. "I've made financial provisions for them. It would be callous of me not to. But like your relationship with your mom, sometimes it's better to not deal directly with the people who have the ability to hurt you the most."

Mario nodded in agreement. "You don't have to worry about me, babe. I'd cut off my arm before I ever intentionally hurt you."

"Yep." Asa agreed, using one of Mario's favourite words. "And that's what makes me the richest man in the world."

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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Cattle Valley: Eye of the Beholder
Cattle Valley: Cattle Valley Days
Cattle Valley: Bent-Not Broken
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Legend Anthology: Healing Doctor Ryan
Joey's First Time
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