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Through the Montana Mist  
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# THROUGH THE MONTANA MIST

CAROL LYNNE

## *Chapter One*

Caleb Sterling sat smashed between the window and his partner of eight years, Jeff Bingman. He tried to bite his tongue as Jeff's elbow continued to dig into his ribs. Completely oblivious to his discomfort, his partner talked to the man on the other side of him who'd introduced himself as Mitch.

Caleb tried once again to move closer to the window as Jeff began gesturing wildly in the confined space of the van. He returned his attention to the gorgeous view out the large window. How could he have lived twenty-nine years and not have witnessed the beautiful scenery of Montana?

The trip to Justice River Ranch had been his idea. Jeff had been under an incredible amount of pressure at work and their relationship had become...strained. Caleb hoped Jeff could let go and rediscover the man he used to be before taking the New Haven Assistant District Attorney position.

"Are you pouting?" Jeff said in his ear.

Caleb turned away from the view and shook his head. "Just enjoying the scenery."

Jeff squeezed Caleb's thigh. "This is going to be good for us. I can feel it."

Caleb smiled and nodded his agreement. He hoped it was the stress of the job that had his partner on edge all the time. Caleb really didn't know how much longer he could handle the life he'd been forced to live lately.

Jeff once again began talking to Mitch, and Caleb returned his attention to the landscape. His fingers itched for his charcoals. He couldn't wait to try and capture the beauty onto paper. The rolling green hills were cut by creeks, the morning mist still clinging to the surface of the water.

The van turned off the main road and Griggs, a handsome Native American with long hair and a bright smile, announced they'd officially arrived at the Justice River Ranch.

Caleb felt light creep into his soul. What was it about the place that made him feel so free? He wanted to jump out of the van, spin around on one of the rolling hills and sing *The Sound of Music* at the top of his lungs. He couldn't keep the giggle out of his voice at the thought of him in a dress and bobbed hair like Maria.

"Something funny?"

Caleb couldn't take his eyes off the view to look at Jeff. "Just feeling happy and silly. I like this place."

Jeff leaned over Caleb's body to peer out the window. "Looks like Connecticut to me."

Caleb rolled his eyes. Montana was nothing like home in his mind. Here, there were endless possibilities. He couldn't have described it to Jeff, but he felt...free.

After a rough drive down the dirt road, the van stopped in front of a rustic-looking barn. Caleb wondered if the structure was really as old as it appeared. He noticed the way the light created shadows between the rough hewn logs that made up the barn.

"Do you think I'll have time to draw sometime today?"

"You're the one with the itinerary." Jeff scooted out of the seat while Caleb continued to study the barn through the window.

A fist slamming against the side of the van, snapped him out of his observations. Caleb jumped and gave Jeff an apologetic smile. He slid his way down the bench seat and out into the fresh air. It was even more breathtaking than he could ever have hoped.

He sought out Jeff and stood beside his partner as two men introduced themselves as Deacon and Ray. They started to give the gathered group a rundown of the day's activities, culminating in an evening ride.

By his calculations, he'd have at least ninety minutes of free time to sketch. Caleb grinned and reached for Jeff's hand. Of course Jeff shook Caleb's touch off and gave him an admonishing stare.

Caleb gave an inward sigh. Jeff didn't believe in public displays of affection, but he'd hoped it would be different here. They were completely surrounded by gay men, some of whom had their arms wrapped around their loved ones.

After the owners of the ranch finished their welcoming greeting, the guests were told they could either walk to their assigned cabins or jump back into the van with their luggage. Before they made their decisions, Ray ran down a list of guests and their assigned cabins.

Caleb tugged on Jeff's shirt. "I think they made a mistake. I signed us up for the big summer cabin."

Jeff glanced at him. "I called and changed that to a private cabin."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I was paying for it, so I didn't think I needed your permission."

Caleb glanced away and rubbed at the tightening in his chest. He knew he didn't have room to complain. Jeff was right. He was paying for their trip.

They were all given a photocopied map of the ranch and its buildings. Caleb couldn't help but notice how far from the other guests their assigned home for the week would be. He tried to look on the bright side. Although their cabin was closest to the barn and other ranch buildings, it at least backed up to a small meadow with a scenic backdrop of snowcapped mountains.

Caleb tried to tell himself it was Jeff's desire to reignite things between them that had led him to requesting the change in accommodations. At least he'd be able to sketch in the mornings before Jeff rolled out of bed.



As he waited for his suitcase to be unloaded from the back of the van, Caleb caught sight of the biggest man he'd ever seen. There was something about the man, an almost lonely expression on his face as he leaned against the porch railing of a cabin.

"What're you looking at?" Jeff asked, a strong hand on Caleb's arm.

"Nothing." He tried to hide. "Just trying to figure out which one of those buildings is the cookhouse."

Jeff pointed toward the large brass bell outside the building on the left. "That one."

"Oh. Thanks."

Jeff gave him a narrowed eyed gaze and picked up his suitcase. "Get your shit and let's go."

Because they'd been the first to load into the van, Caleb's suitcase was on the bottom. He felt sorry for Griggs, who had to unload everyone else's luggage to get to his.

"Thank you," he told Griggs.

With Jeff already on his way toward their cabin, Caleb struggled to roll his over-sized suitcase across the rough ground. He hoped his art supplies had made the trip unscathed. Panic started to set in at the thought something could've happened to them. Drawing was his life, his only real passion. It was what made him get out of bed in the morning, much to Jeff's disappointment.

When his suitcase tipped to its side for the third time, Caleb wanted to give up. He struggled to upright the hard-sided piece of luggage when a large hand reached for it. Caleb looked up into the biggest chocolate brown eyes he'd ever seen.

"Thanks." He started to take the handle, but the big man shook his head.

"I'll get it to your cabin. I'm Tyson, by the way."

"Caleb." He bit his lip and glanced toward the cabin. "That's okay."

Tyson's gorgeous face cocked to the side. The closely-cropped goatee looked almost auburn in the bright light of the sunny day.

"I work here," Tyson said in way of explanation.

Not wanting to draw attention to himself so early in his stay, Caleb eventually nodded. The big man lifted the suitcase off the ground with ease. What had been a struggle for Caleb, Tyson handled like a toy.

He walked beside Tyson toward the house. At least Jeff had left the door open for him. With a deep breath, he entered the small, one-room cabin. "You can set it anywhere."

Tyson lifted the suitcase and placed it on one of the straight-backed chairs beside the door. He held out his hand and strode toward Jeff.

"I'm Tyson."

Jeff glanced at Caleb before taking the man's hand. "Jeff Bingman."

Tyson stood in the center of the large room for several moments. "Well, I'll leave you two to unpack."

Caleb smiled as Tyson passed him. "Thanks again for your help."

"No problem. If you need anything while you're here, I'm in the house across the road."

Caleb shut the door behind Tyson and turned to regard his partner. "I struggled to get my suitcase across the rough road."

"Sure you did. I'm sure you batted those pretty long lashes and Tyson came running."

"It wasn't like that. I..."

"Save it," Jeff barked. He turned and began carefully unpacking his clothes, putting them into the dresser in neat color-coordinated piles.

Caleb unlatched his suitcase and unpacked his art supplies. Despite a few casualties, his charcoals had made the trip pretty much intact. He hesitated to ask Jeff about using one of the drawers, so he just closed the suitcase and slid the entire thing under the bed. Later, he'd check to see if any of the drawers were free, but he knew from experience now was not the time to ask.

He picked up his pad and a few sharpened pencils and took a deep breath. "Would you mind if I went out on the porch and did some sketching?"

Jeff didn't answer. With his back to Caleb, he waved.

With a resigned shrug, Caleb opened the door and went out to the porch. There were two Adirondack chairs and a small table. He got comfortable and studied the barn. Although the light had changed, it was still a remarkable building.

His pencil began to fly across the paper in long lines. If he sketched the building now, he'd be able to add the shading later.

"Caleb!"

Startled, Caleb jumped, dropping his pencil. "Sorry, Jeff. Did you ask me something?"

Already changed into a pair of jeans and an expensive sports shirt, Jeff put his hands on his hips. "I didn't spend this kind of money for you to sit around drawing your little pictures all day."

Caleb ground his teeth and closed his sketch pad. "You feel like exploring until dinner?"

"No. I feel like fucking you. Get in here."

"But it's such a pretty day. Wouldn't you rather wait until later to go to bed?" He could tell by the expression on Jeff's face it wouldn't be a gentle coupling and his body was finally recovering from the argument they'd had the previous week.

"Who said anything about going to bed? There are plenty of things in here to bend you over. Now get that ass of yours in here so I can unwind from the trip."

With unsteady legs, Caleb got to his feet and set his sketch pad and pencil on the chair. He took a deep breath as he entered their home away from home for the next week.



Tyson took his usual spot at the end of the far table. The dining room was filling quickly with the lot of new guests. He smiled and nodded as several men acknowledged him.

He was saved when Griggs and Bridger sat across from him. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy meeting the new men who visited the ranch each week, but he wanted to concentrate on Caleb.

There was something about him that made Tyson uneasy. He guessed it was the sudden look of panic in his big brown eyes when Tyson offered to carry his bag. The man he'd been wondering about walked into the cookhouse, asshole boyfriend in tow.

Tyson had no doubt Jeff was a jerk. He'd known the type. Could tell by the way Jeff had tried to size him up in one glance when he'd met him.

He tried his best not to be too obvious as he watched the slight, blond haired man walk the buffet line. At one point, Jeff nudged his side and Tyson could swear he saw the smaller man flinch. Was it out of fear or pain?

Griggs started chuckling. "A piece of candy catch your eye?"

Tyson glanced away from Caleb as Jeff directed him to a spot at one of the long tables. He wasn't about to voice his worries. Working at the Justice River was the most enjoyable job he'd ever had. Accusing a guest on a hunch would for sure get him fired.

"No. Just watching for the line to end so I can go back for seconds."

Tyson tried to finish his supper, but the downward cast of Caleb's eyes as he picked at his plate was tearing him up. "Mind if I go on the ride with you after dinner?"

Griggs seemed surprised. "Not at all. I'm not sure if King is corralled though."

Tyson stood and picked up his plate. "I'll go find out. If he isn't, I'll take the four-wheeler out and drive him in if that's okay."

Griggs nodded as he swallowed his bite of food. "The saddle for King is in the employee tack nook."

"Thanks."

Tyson carried his plate to the clean-up station and scraped his leftovers into the bucket. He felt eyes on him and turned to find Jeff staring straight at him. Tyson didn't school his features for the benefit of the guest. He narrowed his gaze and met Jeff's apparent challenge.

Like all bullies, Jeff proved himself to be all bark and looked away first. With a satisfied grin, Tyson walked out of the cookhouse and straight to the barn. If he had to follow Caleb around the rest of the week he would. Although he couldn't do much for the smaller man once he left, he could at least make his vacation safer.



"Dammit," Jeff cursed as he tried to regain control of his horse.



When the horse wrangler, Griggs, had given them instructions on the basics of riding, Jeff hadn't paid a bit of attention. Caleb secretly hoped the horse would dump Jeff on his ass. He used the brief break in Jeff's concentration to glance over his shoulder at Tyson, surprised to find the man looking right at him. He smiled and turned back around.

Tyson was not only the tallest, strongest man Caleb had ever been around, but he was riding the biggest horse he'd ever seen. Commotion beside him brought his attention back to Jeff. "Try not holding the reins so tight."

Jeff shot him a look that meant trouble. Caleb really wasn't trying to pick a fight, especially after their earlier round of rough sex, but he knew what it was doing to Jeff to look like he didn't know what he was doing. There was no doubt in Caleb's mind he'd be at the receiving end of Jeff's frustrations later in the evening.

Caleb bit his lip and tried to concentrate on Chavez, the brown and white gelding he'd been assigned. It had been quite a few years since he'd been on the back of a horse, and the hard saddle combined with his already sore ass made each step Chavez took pure misery for him.

He was wondering if he could bring a pillow along to sit on the next time he rode, when Jeff's horse bumped Chavez. The impact startled Caleb whose leg was pressed between the two horses. He jumped in his saddle and looked at Jeff. He could tell by his partner's expression the collision hadn't been an accident.

"Why'd you do that?"

"To bring you out of La-La Land." Jeff grabbed the reins out of Caleb's hands and pulled their horses even closer. He glanced around to make sure no one was close before speaking. "What the hell's going on between you and that giant back there?"

Caleb didn't bother looking behind him. He knew exactly who Jeff was referring to. "Nothing's going on. Hell I'm too sore to even think about doing anything."

"And that's the way you'll stay while we're here."

Caleb glanced at his long-time partner. "Why do you do it? Things used to be so nice between us. What's happened?"

For the first time in months, Caleb actually witnessed sorrow in Jeff's expression. "I guess I just need to feel it more now than I used to."

"But it hurts," Caleb mumbled as he broke eye contact.

"I don't mean to hurt you. You know that, right?"

Caleb didn't believe his partner. Jeff was always so focused on his own pleasure he didn't seem to care who was under him. The real problem is the pain and humiliation Jeff had begun to inflict on him in the bedroom was bleeding out into their daily lives.

"I'm not happy," Caleb finally admitted. He'd wanted to tell Jeff for the last couple of months, but had tried to ride it out. Caleb had hoped things would change once Jeff's last case was over. Unfortunately, even though Jeff had won the tough case, it hadn't improved his mood.

"Is that why you're already looking for a replacement for me?" Jeff gestured with his head toward Tyson.

It was just like Jeff to twist things to make Caleb feel guilty. "There's nothing going on!"

Jeff's dark eyebrows shot up. Caleb never yelled at his partner, and it was obvious Jeff didn't appreciate the sudden outburst. He shot Caleb a narrow-eyed glance and backed off, choosing to join one of the other guests.

Caleb couldn't help but notice it was, Mitch, the same man who had occupied Jeff's attention in the van. Maybe Jeff would get lucky, and Caleb's problems would be over. He'd never broken up with someone and didn't really know how. Hurting people had never come easy to him, like it obviously did for Jeff.

Griggs turned his horse around and motioned for the group to do the same. Caleb almost cried out in relief as they headed back to the barn. What had made him think he could do this? They had only been riding for about twenty minutes and already Caleb knew he wouldn't be able to spend an entire week on horseback.

He managed to get his horse turned around and came face to face with Tyson.

"You doing okay?" Tyson turned his horse to walk along side of Chavez.

Caleb glanced at Jeff, who was still engaged in conversation with his new friend. He returned his attention to Tyson. "I'm hurting. Guess I'm not used to being in the saddle."

"You could probably ask Griggs if you could walk Chavez back to the barn."

"No." God, that would really set Jeff off. "I'll make it. I'm not so sure how I'll do it tomorrow, but one day at a time I guess."

As they rode back as a group, Caleb tried to subtly move away from Tyson. He didn't want to hurt the nice man's feelings, but it was an act of self-preservation. He gave Tyson an apologetic smile as he steered his horse to catch up with Jeff.



Tyson was getting undressed for bed when he heard the sound of breaking glass. He quickly pulled his jeans back on, stepped into his boots and ran out to the porch. Through the moonlit night, he could see someone stumbling down the road with another shadow close on his heels.

"Wait!" Tyson recognized Jeff's voice.

*Caleb.* Tyson ran toward the stumbling man, reaching him before Jeff caught up. "Caleb."

Caleb turned. Even in the moonlight, Tyson could see the rivulets of blood running down the man's neck. Fuck. "What happened to you?"

Before Caleb could get a word out, he collapsed against Tyson's chest. Tyson easily swung Caleb up into his arms despite a fuming, protesting Jeff beside him. Jeff grabbed Tyson's arm.

"If you want to keep that hand, I'd suggest you remove it," Tyson growled.

"He tripped and hit his head on the window," Jeff sputtered.

Tyson started toward his pickup. Before he reached it, Caleb's big brown eyes opened. "Where am I?"

"We need to get you to a hospital."

Caleb reached up, his hand coming back covered in blood. "I hit my head."

"I tried to tell him you'd tripped and fell into the window," Jeff cut in.

Caleb was quiet while Tyson loaded him into the truck. "Yeah. That's what happened."

Once Tyson had Caleb settled, he ran back into his small house and grabbed a towel. He started to run back out to the truck, but stopped and picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Ray, it's Tyson. One of the guests has been hurt. I'm taking him to the emergency clinic in Red Lodge."

"What happened?"

"Caleb's cut the back of his head open. His partner claims he tripped and fell against the window. I'll call you from town when I find out more."

"Okay. If he doesn't have insurance, make sure you have the clinic bill Justice River."

"Will do, boss." Tyson hung up and ran out to the truck. He wasn't happy to see Jeff in the passenger seat, but unless Caleb protested, he couldn't do much about it. He climbed behind the wheel and carefully tucked the towel against the back of Caleb's head.

"Thanks," Caleb murmured.

Jeff stared at Tyson and took over Caleb's care. Tyson stared right back at the man. "You'd better hope I never find out the truth behind what happened."

## *Chapter Two*

"Are you coming to breakfast?" Jeff asked.

"I'm not hungry. I think I'll go back to sleep." Caleb couldn't even bring himself to look at Jeff after what had happened the night before.

"Should I bring something back for you?"

Caleb closed his eyes. This was typical Jeff behavior the day after he let his anger get the best of him. If Caleb thought Jeff really was sorry, it would be easier to forgive him, but his partner was only sorry until Caleb got over the hurt and anger he felt.

"No thanks," he dismissed Jeff's concerns.

"Okay, well, I'll be back."

The door opened and shut and Caleb was finally alone. He swung the covers back and padded to the small bathroom. He lifted the toilet lid and took care of his full bladder as he braced one hand against the wall.

He hadn't been simply putting Jeff off. He felt like shit. He shook off and tucked his flaccid cock back into his underwear. Stepping to the sink, he tried to look at the back of his head in the mirror. Although he couldn't see it, he felt the small shaved patch of hair. His finger roamed carefully over the five short rows of stitches.

A knock on the door pulled him away from the beaten reflection that stared back at him. He knew it wasn't Jeff because his partner wouldn't bother to knock. As Caleb passed the bed, he grabbed a short cotton robe from the foot of the bed and shrugged into it as he opened the door.

Tyson and Griggs stood on the covered porch. Caleb noticed the toolbox in Tyson's large hand.

"Uh, hi," Caleb greeted, tying his robe.

"How're you feeling?" Tyson asked.

"Okay, I guess."

Tyson gestured to the broken window someone had sealed with a piece of cardboard the previous night. "We thought we'd get started on fixing your window."

"Oh." Caleb sighed. All he wanted was to sleep and he knew he wouldn't be able to accomplish that with Tyson and Griggs working.

His worries must have shown on his face because Tyson was quick to put his mind at ease. "I thought you could move over to my cabin while we work."

Caleb smiled at the thoughtful offer. "Thanks. My head is killing me."

He stepped back into the cabin. "Let me get some sweats on and grab my medicine."

"Have you eaten?" Griggs asked.

"No, I'm not hungry."

Griggs shook his head. "I wouldn't advise taking medicine on an empty stomach. I'll run over and grab some toast or something."

Caleb picked up the bottle of pain pills from the side table. The small picture on the side of the container did, in fact, tell him to take with food. "Thanks. I'd appreciate that."

Griggs ran off and Caleb suddenly realized he was left alone with Tyson. He knew he couldn't let Jeff catch him alone with the man they'd fought over the night before. Caleb started to retrieve his suitcase from under the bed to get to his sweats, when a wave of dizziness threatened to overwhelm him.

A strong arm wrapped around his waist and settled him against Tyson's massive chest. "Easy there."

Caleb gestured to the bed. "I need my clothes."

Tyson settled Caleb onto the bed and knelt on the floor. "Why do you have your clothes under here instead of in the dresser?"

Caleb bit his bottom lip. "I think Jeff's clothes pretty much filled the dresser."

After pulling out the suitcase, Tyson turned and started opening the drawers on the antique oak dresser. Caleb couldn't even look. He knew exactly what Tyson would see. Jeff didn't believe in stacking his clothes over two high because he said it made them wrinkle. Each drawer contained four items of clothing.

Tyson snorted and shook his head. He turned back to the suitcase and dug out a pair of Caleb's faded blue sweat pants.

Caleb went to take them out of Tyson's hand, but the bigger man held on. When Caleb glanced up, he met Tyson's gaze.

"You don't have to stay here. You know that, right?"

Caleb looked away when he felt the sting of tears. "I heard Deacon say they were booked solid."

"Yeah, but if you want out of this cabin, I'll find something for you. If nothing else, you can stay at my place. I only have a one bedroom, but my couch folds out into a lumpy bed." He finished the offer with a crooked grin. "I'd feel better if I knew you were safe."

"I'm safe. Last night..." Caleb stopped and shook his head. "It was an accident."

Caleb stood and turned his back to the handsome man as he pulled his sweats on under his robe. He pointed toward the messy mound of clothes in his suitcase. "Will you hand me that red T-shirt?"

Tyson not only handed over the T-shirt but a clean pair of socks as well, just as Griggs stepped back into the cabin and held up his hands. "Toast and hot tea."

Caleb started to pull off his robe, but stopped himself. "I'll be right back."



He retreated to the bathroom and let the robe drop to the floor. As he unfolded the T-shirt, he caught sight of the fading bruises on his sides and back. The large purple mark on his chest attested to the force in which he was pushed the previous night.

Caleb sighed. He wondered if he should take Tyson up on his offer of a different place to stay. He heard Jeff's voice grumbling on the other side of the door and quickly hung his robe and walked out into the main room of the cabin.

Jeff stood red-faced in the center of the room.

"Hey," Caleb said, taking the attention away from Tyson and Griggs.

"Good, you're dressed. Get your boots on and let's go," Jeff ordered.

"Go where?"

Jeff looked at him like he was crazy. "Cody's taking us up the mountain in the van. Everyone's gathering at the barn."

Now it was Caleb's turn to look at Jeff like he'd lost it. "I can't go. My head feels like it's about to fall off my shoulders."

"Well you can't stay around here." Jeff's gaze went from Caleb to Tyson and back to Caleb.

"I'll be working to fix the window most of the day. I told Caleb he could crash at my place while I work."

Jeff started to shake his head but stopped. "I'll stay back with you."

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation before Caleb could voice his protest. Griggs opened the door and Mitch smiled at them.

"You coming?" Mitch asked Jeff.

Jeff glanced over his shoulder at Caleb. "I can't. I should stay back with Caleb."

Caleb jumped at the chance to get rid of Jeff for the day. "You should go. I'm going to take some of my pain medicine and sleep anyway."

Caleb watched as Jeff's fingers began tapping against his thigh, a sure sign his partner was feeling stressed. Caleb walked to stand beside Jeff. He put a hand on his lover's arm. "This vacation was about you. Go. I'll be fine."

Jeff looked right at Tyson before giving Caleb a kiss. "Take care of yourself."

"I will."

Jeff grabbed his new cowboy hat off the peg beside the door and left with Mitch. As soon as the door shut, Caleb breathed a sigh of relief. He finally picked up his tea and took a sip.

"I should probably go so you two can get to work."

Tyson looked at Griggs. "I'm going to help him settle in. Go ahead and start clearing the furniture away from the window."

Griggs grinned. "Will do."

Tyson led Caleb across the ranch road to the small cabin beside the cookhouse. Once inside, Caleb was surprised by the warmth of the place. Although it was obvious the

house was as old as most of the other buildings on the ranch, Tyson's cabin felt like a home. The colors were warm. Jeff had insisted on a beige and white color-scheme for their own house. The result was a show stopper, but not something Caleb cared to live in.

"It's nice."

"Thanks." Tyson walked into the adjoining room. "Just make yourself comfortable. There's a small kitchen in here and then the bedroom and bathroom are down that hall."

After Tyson left, Caleb borrowed a pillow from the bedroom and a quilt from the linen closet and carried them to the couch. He quickly finished his now-cold tea and hastily ate the two slices of toast before taking a pain pill along with one of the antibiotics the doctor had given him.

He went over to shut the curtains and stopped. Tyson was already hard at work on the window. Caleb stood mesmerized at the flexing muscles under Tyson's tight white T-shirt.

*What the hell am I doing?* Caleb shut the curtains and carefully lay on the sofa, throwing the cover over the lower-half of his body. He turned to rest the side of his head on the pillow, catching a whiff of Tyson's musky cologne.

What would it be like to have a man who cared as much about his comfort as Tyson seemed to? Caleb fell asleep with that very thought running through his head.



Wrapped in a blanket, Caleb sat in one of the Adirondack chairs on the porch. The sun had set hours ago and still no sign of Jeff. Caleb knew Cody had come back with the rest of the guests well before supper, but so far, Jeff had chosen to disappear.

He'd caught a snippet of conversation in the dining room that had him wondering. He also took the time to notice Mitch was also nowhere to be seen. As the hours passed, so did his resolve to try to salvage what was left of his relationship.

Boots shuffling on the dirt road caught his attention. He gazed in the direction and moments later, Jeff came into view. If the weaving was any indication, he'd been drinking. Another strike as far as Caleb was concerned. Jeff always got nastier when he'd been drinking, and the last thing Caleb wanted was to end up on the receiving end of his partner's temper.

Caleb made himself as small as possible and tucked further into the shadows. He watched Jeff stagger onto the porch, completely oblivious to Caleb's presence. As soon as Jeff stepped into the cabin, Caleb stood, grabbed his sketch pad and started to walk across the road.

He'd seen Tyson's light turn off almost an hour earlier, so he knew he'd be waking the man. He just hoped Tyson wouldn't be angry.

"Caleb!" Jeff screamed, coming out onto the porch.

Caleb's steps faltered at Jeff's commanding voice. The door of Tyson's house opened and he stood in nothing but a pair of short boxer-briefs.

"Caleb?"

"Caleb! Get back over here!" Jeff continued to scream.

Confused, Caleb glanced over his shoulder at the drunk man stepping off the porch. He knew if he went forward, his life would forever change. There would be no turning back to his old life.

"Come on Caleb. Let me help you." There was a gentle expression on Tyson's face as he held his hand out.

Caleb squared his shoulders and jogged the remaining distance to the safety of Tyson's porch.

"Is that offer still open to sleep on your couch?"

"Caleb! Get your ass back over here," Jeff slurred.

Tyson stepped back and pulled Caleb inside. "Stay here."

Caleb grabbed at Tyson's arm. "He's drunk."

"I don't give a fuck what he is. Stay here." Tyson shut the door.

Caleb moved to the window and watched as Tyson stalked across the road. The big man met Jeff in front of the cabin. Tyson was so big, he couldn't even see Jeff standing on the other side of him.

Several moments later, Jeff turned and stormed back into their cabin, returning with Caleb's suitcase. He handed the piece of luggage to Tyson. The two men had a few more words, before Tyson turned and carried the suitcase back to his house.

Caleb opened the door when Tyson stepped onto the porch. Tyson came inside and set Caleb's bag on the floor.

"If there's anything else you need from over there, just tell me, and I'll get it in the morning."

Caleb was numb. It felt like his entire life had changed in the space of ten minutes, but he knew in his heart the separation had been coming for a long time. He couldn't even say he was sorry about it. Months earlier he'd begun to mourn the loss of what he'd hoped would be a lifetime commitment.

Jeff's abusive outbursts had been hard enough to deal with, but with the almost certain knowledge his lover had cheated was too much, even for Caleb.

"You okay?" Tyson asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I should go back to Connecticut."

Tyson walked over to the couch and sat down. "Let me talk to Ray and Deacon in the morning. I mean, I'm sure they'd give you a refund or let you make up the unused days later, but I'd hate to see you leave."

Caleb was surprised by that. "Why? I've been nothing but trouble since I got here."

Tyson shook his head. "Jeff's trouble, not you. Do the two of you live together?"

Caleb nodded. "We've been together eight years."

"Was he always like this?"

"Like what?"

Tyson scratched at his goatee. "Abusive."

Caleb opened his mouth to protest the statement, but snapped it shut. He knew he couldn't deny the truth. "No. He wasn't always this way. Jeff's an assistant district attorney. His last case really got to him."

"And he took it out on you?"

He refused to make excuses for Jeff's behavior any longer. "Yeah. I guess so."

"Is there someone back home who can get your stuff for you?"

Caleb collapsed onto the couch beside Tyson. There was a time when he'd had a lot of friends, people he'd met in art school. Once he'd moved in with Jeff, his partner had slowly begun a process of driving Caleb's friends away, and he'd stupidly sat back and let it happen.

"No, not really." He sat on the edge of the cushion and cradled his face in his hands. "I don't have anywhere to go."

Tyson reached out and squeezed Caleb's shoulder. "Get some sleep. Things will be clearer in the morning."

"I don't know why you're being so nice to me, but thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll grab you the pillow and blanket you used earlier."

After saying goodnight to Tyson, Caleb curled under the blanket and buried his face in the pillow that smelled so much like the man who normally slept on it. The tears began to flow before he could stop them, soaking the white pillow case.

He doubted he'd do much sleeping. There were too many things he needed to think through before being confronted with the sight of Jeff the following day. Maybe he'd move out of Connecticut. There was nothing holding him there except bitter memories of things that could have been.

### *Chapter Three*

In the predawn hours, Caleb discovered Tyson's back porch. He carried his pillow and blanket out and settled onto the comfortable swing that hung from the rafters.

Although he was beyond tired, his mind had worked through a tentative plan for the future. The first thing he needed to do was sell some of the paintings he'd created for profit. They were much different than the ones he'd done for himself. Jeff had laughed at him when he'd talked about trying to sell his landscapes.

He knew his paintings weren't for everyone, but they filled his soul. Surely someone would feel the beauty as he had when he'd painted them.

"Caleb!"

Caleb froze as Jeff called his name from a distance. The voice of his ex-lover was filled with pain. Caleb cringed, remembering the many nights his partner had held him, crying, begging for forgiveness.

"Evidently he's sobered up enough to notice you're really gone," a gentle voice said from behind him. Tyson sat on the floor next to Caleb.

As Jeff's cries continued, Caleb reached down and put his hand on Tyson's shoulder. "I should be used to this by now, but every time it tears me apart."

Tyson covered Caleb's hand. "No one should have to get used to that. I know it won't be easy to break away, but I'm here if you want my help."

"I just don't know if I'm strong enough. I'm twenty-seven-years-old, and I have absolutely nothing to show for my life besides a fucking savings account."

"Caleb! I'm so sorry, baby. Please forgive me!" Jeff continued to wail.

Caleb pulled his hand back and covered his ears. "I can't listen to it anymore. So many times I forgave him."

Tyson moved to kneel in front of Caleb. He reached out and brought Caleb's hands away from his head. "Let's go inside."

Caleb shook his head. "It won't matter. He won't stop begging until I forgive him."

"I'll keep him away from you."

Caleb couldn't help but smile at the kind man. The light broke over the horizon, signaling a new day. He stared into Tyson's eyes. "Would you do me a favor and bring me my sketch pad? It's on the coffee table along with my pencils."

"You're an artist?"



"That's what the degree says. I don't really think you could call what I sell art though. Its abstract shit that people think will be worth money some day. My real art, sits in my studio gathering dust."

Tyson stood and looked down at Caleb. "I'll be right back."

Caleb stared out into the misty morning. He wasn't even aware of Tyson stepping back out onto the porch until his sketch pad and pencils were handed to him.

"Would you like me to stay?"

Caleb shook his head. "Would you mind if I had some time alone?"

Tyson brushed his hand over Caleb's arm. "Whatever you need."

Caleb was faintly conscious of the door to the house closing as the morning grew lighter. He flipped his pad open to a new page and set it on his lap.

In his mind, he began to catalog all the times he'd been hurt, the hateful words spoken in stress, alcohol and anger. When had he let go of himself? When had he become someone he hated?

He was staring off into space when movement in the grass in front of him caught his attention. A deer stood fifteen yards in front of him, barely visible through the morning mist.

Caleb held his breath as tears filled his eyes. He'd seen plenty of deer in his life, but nothing he'd ever witnessed was as beautiful as that moment in time. The innocence of the animal looking straight at him with big brown eyes shook Caleb to his foundation.

How was it possible to see himself in a deer? But there in front of him, was...him, looking through the mist, trying to find his way in an unclear world.

Caleb wasn't fully aware he was drawing. His eyes flicked from the paper in his lap to the deer standing sentinel.

"Do you see me?" he whispered to the deer.

Jeff's cries came again and the deer gave Caleb one last slow blink before running off into the trees.

For several minutes Caleb sat frozen. He blinked several times before glancing down at the pad in his hands. Although rough, the eyes of the deer stared back at him from the page. Caleb clutched the sketch to his chest. Right or wrong, he was sure of what he needed to do.



Tyson dried off before running the towel over the mirror. He opened the old-fashioned medicine cabinet and took down his shaving cream and razor. The thought of Caleb sitting outside by himself killed Tyson.

As he lathered his cheeks and neck, he began to run through his options. He could always offer to go back to Connecticut with Caleb and help him move out of Jeff's house, but to where?

Caleb had admitted he didn't have close friends or a place to go. So where did that leave them? He wondered if he could convince Caleb to move to Montana. The idea was ludicrous, yet it filled Tyson with hope for some reason.

Maybe it was because he knew what it was like not to feel comfortable in your surroundings. Before he'd come up from Kansas City with his father, Tyson seemed to simply exist. He loved his family more than anything and even had a couple of really good friends, but there was something about the city that made him feel like he was different from everyone else.

He'd even argued with his dad about making the trip to Justice River to install new windows in every cabin and house. The drive up had been miserable. He hadn't realized until he sat for hours beside his father, how little the two of them had to talk about.

By his second week on the ranch, Tyson knew he never wanted to leave. It was more than being with like-minded men, it was the sense of freedom the open spaces allowed. Maybe Caleb needed some of that freedom in order to settle into his own skin once again?

After shaving, he used his electric grooming tool to trim his moustache and goatee. The facial hair was a new addition since he'd moved to Montana, and Tyson loved it more each day. He truly was a different person here. It was fitting that his face should reflect that.

By the time he pulled on clean underwear and jeans, Tyson had bolstered his resolve to make sure Caleb stayed in his life. He couldn't explain why it felt so important to him, but it did. Tyson wanted nothing more than to wrap the man in his arms and heal the wounds he knew went far below the surface.

He found Caleb going through his suitcase.

"The bathroom's free if you want to shower."

Caleb looked up from his position on the floor. "Thanks."

Tyson nodded and walked toward the kitchen. "Coffee?"

Clothes in hand, Caleb stood and advanced toward Tyson "I'd love a cup after I finish in the bathroom."

Caleb stopped just in front of Tyson and looked up at him. "I wanted to thank you again for doing this. Most of my old friends wouldn't go this far to help me, and I've only just met you."

In a surprising move, Caleb reached up and wrapped his hand around the back of Tyson's neck, pulling his head down. He placed a soft kiss on Tyson's cheek before quickly retreating to the bathroom.

Tyson stood rooted to the spot for several moments after the door shut. *Wow*. If a kiss on the cheek could make his cock hard, what would a full on dance of the tongues do to him?



Fresh from the shower, Caleb found Tyson at the small kitchen table. "Much better."

Tyson indicated the steaming cup of coffee. "I put two sugars in. That's right isn't it?"

Caleb took a seat, stunned. "You know how I take my coffee?"

Tyson shrugged. "I've seen you make it in the cookhouse before."

In all the years he was with Jeff, Caleb couldn't remember the man ever making him a cup of coffee, especially not with two sugars. Although small, the gesture meant the world to Caleb. "Thank you."

Tyson chuckled. "You don't have to keep saying that."

"Keep on doing nice things, and I won't be able to help myself."

Tyson pushed Caleb's sketch pad toward him. "I hope you don't mind, but I took a peek at your drawings."

"And?"

Tyson shook his head. "I don't know how you do it. I saw the beauty in this place almost immediately, but looking through those, I felt like I was seeing it for the first time all over again."

Caleb couldn't keep the smile from his face. "They're just sketches. Next I'll redo them in charcoal and then some of them will be put to canvas."

"Is this the kind of stuff you usually do?"

"Well, like I said before, I make my money on modern crap that any sixth grader could do. But for me? Yeah, landscapes, buildings, usually whatever I happen to see that moves me in some way."

"I'd like to see some of your other stuff."

"You would?" Caleb was surprised to say the least. "Jeff agreed with my professors at art school. They always thought I could do so much more than sofa paintings, as they called them. It was because of their pressure that I started the other stuff."

Tyson shook his head. "I've never gone in for all that modern stuff. Give me a window to the outside, and I'm happy."

Caleb smiled. "Yeah. That's the way I feel about it. There are so many things around us that we don't take the time to really see until it's frozen in time on canvas."

The conversation brought up Caleb's thoughts from earlier. "I feel inspired by the scenery around here, and I was wondering..." *God, Caleb, just spit it out.* "Do you know of any reasonably priced retail spaces in Red Lodge?"

Tyson's dark eyebrows shot up. "I don't know. I guess it would be an easy enough thing to check. I mean, Red Lodge is kind of expensive to live in, but there might be something that would appeal to you. Are you really thinking of opening something?"

Caleb knew it was probably a silly dream, but... "Yeah. I've always wanted to have my own little gallery and studio. I've managed to put away some money over the years. I live with Jeff, but the house is his. Believe me, he's reminded me weekly of that fact."

Caleb shrugged. "Anyway, I think I should have enough to put a down payment on something and have enough left over for about six months. Hopefully that'll give me time to build up a clientele. I thought with all the vacation homes and stuff around here, there might be a market for the kind of work I do." Caleb bit his lip. "What do you think?"

Tyson smiled and reached over to take Caleb's hand. "I think it sounds perfect."

Caleb looked down at the large hand covering his. He'd never thought of himself as a small man. In his world, five-ten wasn't big, but it sure wasn't small. Tyson's size would be intimidating to him if he'd met him in any other situation. But, since meeting the man, Tyson had been nothing but kind.

"I need your help with something else. You can say no and there'll be no hard..."

"Yes," Tyson answered, cutting Caleb off.

"I need to find a way to sneak away without Jeff knowing. If he finds out, he'll just come after me, and I need to get my things out of the house before that happens."

"Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Find someone to take me to the airport. If Jeff notices we're both missing, he'll become suspicious. If I can get a big enough head start on him, I should be able to get my stuff out of the house and put into storage. Later, once I know where I'm going, I can have everything shipped."

"Why don't you just have it shipped here anyway?"

"What if I can't find a place here?"

"You will, and it'll save you a step."

Caleb couldn't believe it was happening so fast. He'd be taking a huge gamble with his meager savings. "Maybe I'm getting ahead of myself?"

Tyson glanced at the clock mounted on the kitchen wall. "I think it'd help if we talked to Deacon and Ray. They'll not only have a better idea about what's available in town, but it can't hurt having more allies."

Shame threatened to overwhelm Caleb. He stood and walked over to look out the kitchen window. "People won't understand how I let Jeff treat me like he has. Hell, I don't understand. He didn't turn into a monster overnight. We had a lot of good years together before all this started. At first I told myself he was frustrated with his job. Then I decided it was me he was becoming more and more frustrated with."

Caleb heard a chair scrape against the floor and suddenly Tyson was beside him, a comforting hand on his back.

"But you know it really has nothing to do with you, right?"

Caleb looked up at Tyson. "I try to tell myself that, but I can't blame anyone but me for staying as long as I did."

As they talked, Tyson continued to rub comforting circles against his back. Although his body was aware of the gesture, it wasn't until Tyson came into contact with one of his most recent bite marks that Caleb flinched and turned away.

Tyson started to lift the back of Caleb's shirt, but Caleb grabbed the hem and held it down. He knew what Tyson would find. The same thing the doctor at the clinic had seen. It had taken a great deal of talking for Caleb to convince the health professional that the bruises and bite marks were sexual in nature and not abuse. "Don't."

Tyson dropped his hands immediately and turned Caleb to face him. "I won't do anything you don't want me to, but I'd really like to know what I'm dealing with."

Caleb couldn't even look at Tyson. He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the bigger man's chest. "It's not that Jeff used to beat me or anything. I don't want you to think that."

Damn. This was probably one of the most humiliating things he had ever confessed. "Our sex life has never really been great. But as the years went by, Jeff found it increasingly more difficult to reach climax. With the trial and the stress, it's gotten a lot worse. I think he was becoming desperate." Caleb shrugged. "Then he discovered his kink for doling out pain."

Caleb glanced up, meeting Tyson's gaze. "Evidently it's just me he finds lacking because I think he was with Mitch yesterday."

Tyson shook his head and kissed Caleb's forehead. The soft scrape of Tyson's whiskers against his skin made him feel even worse. How could he want to be held and loved by this man after what he'd just escaped?

"There's absolutely nothing about you that I don't find sexy as hell. Jeff's problems are his own."

*Sexy? Me?* Caleb wrapped his arms around Tyson's waist and hugged him.

Tyson started to hug him back but stopped. "I don't know where to touch you. Hurting you isn't an option for me."

As Caleb rested his head against Tyson's chest, he prayed for guidance. He knew if Tyson looked at his back, it could ruin everything. On the other hand, he desperately wanted to be held. "You have to promise me you won't go after him. If you do, he'll run. And if he does, there'll be no hope of me getting my paintings out of the house."

Tyson brushed his lips across the top of Caleb's head for several moments. "Can I go after him after you get your stuff?"

Caleb couldn't help but smile, but he still wasn't ready to fully expose his shame to Tyson. "When can we talk to Ray and Deacon?"

"Now if you want."

"You think they're up?" It was only five-thirty.

"Yeah, I can guarantee they're awake, but let me give them a call to make sure they're out of bed." Tyson chuckled. "They're still newlyweds."

Caleb released his hold and stepped back. It was a strange feeling to miss someone's warmth to the extent he was feeling it. He chewed at his fingernail as Tyson reached for the phone.



He wondered if he was broadcasting his want when Tyson held out his hand. Caleb immediately took it, stepping closer to the bigger man's side.

"Did I wake you?"

As Tyson continued his conversation with whoever had answered the phone, Caleb continued to maneuver closer and closer to the man's body until he was once again plastered to his side. The spicy musk of Tyson's aftershave was like an aphrodisiac. It made Caleb think of things he hadn't thought of in longer than he cared to admit. Sex with Jeff... *No. I will not go down that road.*

Tyson hung up the phone. "Ray said to give them about ten minutes."

Caleb nodded. He wanted to kiss Tyson, but didn't want to come off like a slut. After all, he wasn't even moved out of his last partner's house. He decided to settle on kissing Tyson's neck. Caleb lifted his face and pressed his lips to the sun-bronzed skin.

*Oh fuck.* Tyson smelled so good, and his skin felt so right under Caleb's lips, he couldn't resist and pulled Tyson's head down. "Kiss me."

The flare of Tyson's nostrils indicated the man's want as he sealed his lips over Caleb's. Despite the obvious passion between them, Tyson kept the kiss gentle. The sweep of Tyson's tongue as it gained entrance caused them both to moan.

Caleb wanted more. The realization of what he was doing made him break the kiss. What kind of slut goes directly from one man's bed to another's? He knew he wasn't a slut, so why did being in Tyson's arms feel so good? Was he confusing the need to feel safe with sex?

He stepped back and ran a hand over his face. "Maybe we should go?"

Tyson tilted his chin up. "There's nothing wrong with what we just did, but I won't push."

Caleb wanted to believe that, but how could he?

## Chapter Four

After making sure Jeff was nowhere to be seen, Tyson led Caleb out the back door to the deer path that wound through the trees. "I think we should all go to breakfast together."

"In the cookhouse?"

"I doubt that Jeff will feel up to breakfast, but it's important the others see you. I think the trick will be for Jeff to think you're around, just keeping out of sight. That way, when you fly home, he won't notice as quickly."

Caleb stopped walking and turned around to face Tyson. "Do you think what I'm doing is deceitful? Maybe I owe it to him to just tell him I'm moving out?"

Tyson ran his hand from Caleb's shoulder down his arm to hold his hand. He knew he needed to ask a question he wasn't prepared to hear the answer to. "Do you still love him?"

Caleb seemed to think about it for several moments. "I'm not in love with him, but yeah, there's part of me that still loves him. For eight years he's been my entire life. I don't think that's something you can just turn off."

Caleb stepped into Tyson's arms. "But I know I don't want to be with him. I know I can't keep trying to convince myself things will get better. I'm tired of giving everything only to get nothing but pain in return."

Tyson almost moaned as Caleb once again began kissing his neck.

"I know that I want you, and I'm afraid of what that says about me," Caleb whispered.

God, Tyson wanted that. "I think what you want is the safety you feel with me."

"Do you?"

Tyson nodded. "I'm not condemning you. I completely understand your need for it, and for now, I'm okay with it."

Caleb stepped back, and despite the chilly morning air, pulled his T-shirt off over his head. The first thing Tyson noticed was the large, hand-shaped bruise in the center of Caleb's chest.

He reached out to brush the bruise with his fingertips. "He pushed you into that window."

Caleb bit his lip and nodded. "He was jealous of you."

Tyson swallowed that nugget of information like a cactus. Although not ripped, Caleb's body was nicely toned with a smattering of light brown hair on his chest. Although the light in the trees was dim, he could see several other healing bruises along Caleb's sides. He knew from before that the fading bruises weren't the worst of them.

"Turn around."

Caleb held up his hands. "The doctor's already checked them. He gave me an antibiotic shot, but he said none of them looked infected."

The more Caleb tried to explain, the angrier Tyson became. He reached out and spun Caleb around. The breath froze in his chest when he was confronted with just how vicious Jeff had been. Caleb's back looked like a wild animal had attacked it.

He dropped to his knees at the sight of the bites, scratches and bruises covering Caleb's flesh. "Oh my God."

Caleb's head tilted forward until his chin rested on his chest. The stance was one of shame and defeat. Two things Tyson couldn't stand seeing in the man. He stood and walked around to face Caleb. "I'll never let him touch you again."



After breakfast in the cookhouse surrounded by the employees of the ranch, Ray took Caleb into town. On the way, Caleb watched the scenery out his window. "Is it always so green?"

Ray chuckled. "No. It gets dry and brown in the heat of July and August unless we get a lot of rain. Of course in the winter, which can start as early as the first week of October, we can get several feet of snow in one dump."

Caleb wasn't a stranger to snow. Connecticut got its share of the white stuff, but he'd heard bits and pieces about the brutal Montana winters. "Does everything shut down?"

Ray laughed. "No. We hunker down at the ranch, but there are still animals to tend to and work to be done. If you're lucky enough to have someone special the time spent indoors is a lot more fun."

An image of the winter spent with Tyson came to mind. He still couldn't figure out why Tyson would want to get mixed up in Caleb's chaotic life, but he wouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth.

At breakfast, Tyson's strength made him feel safe. Even when Jeff came into the cookhouse with a slow-moving Mitch, Caleb didn't flinch. On one hand, he knew Jeff couldn't get to him, and on the other, Mitch's slow gate told him what Jeff didn't need to. Jeff's sexual problems had nothing to do with Caleb. It wasn't because Jeff didn't find him attractive anymore. Whatever Jeff was going through, Caleb had merely been an enabler.

"So what exactly are you looking for in Red Lodge?"

Caleb shrugged. "Something with a big open space. It doesn't necessarily have to be a retail building, but big enough for me to work and set up a display for customers."

"Well, Deacon's friend, Max, said he has a couple things in mind that you might be interested in."

"Do you think I'm wrong in doing this?" Caleb finally asked.

"That depends on your motivations. I can't fault anyone for seeing this place and wanting to live here. It's the way I felt when I first laid eyes on it."

Caleb could tell there was something else Ray wanted to say. "Go on."

"I don't think you can run away from your problems."

"You mean I should confront Jeff?"

Ray shook his head. "I think you should figure out why you stayed as long as you did." He slowed the truck and glanced at Caleb. "Until you figure that out, you're no good for Tyson. He likes you. But he deserves a happy, healthy lover."

Caleb couldn't help feeling he'd just been scolded. "I'm not trying to..."

Ray held up his hand, cutting Caleb off. "It doesn't matter what you are or aren't trying to do. I saw Tyson's growing feelings in the way he looked at you. He's on the verge of really falling. He can kid himself all he wants into thinking he's simply trying to help and protect you, but I see the truth."

Caleb turned his attention to the passenger window as the pickup entered the town of Red Lodge. He wanted to argue with Ray, but what would be the point? He knew Ray was right. The protectiveness Tyson showed was something Caleb didn't know he'd craved until he'd experienced it for the first time. He was beginning to develop his own feelings for Tyson, but was it something he should explore further?



Tyson's gaze was glued to the cookhouse door when Caleb and Ray walked in. It took everything he had to stay seated when what he really wanted was to wrap his arms around Caleb now that he was once again near.

He tried to be patient as Caleb filled a plate and came to sit next to him. The smile on Caleb's face told Tyson what he needed to know. "You found a place."

Caleb shrugged. "Maybe. I put an offer in at least. I won't know until tomorrow if the seller will accept it or not. I told him I wanted to lease for six months with an option to buy."

Tyson nodded to Ray as he sat across from him, flanked on the other side by Deacon. "Is it downtown?"

Caleb shook his head. "It's on Thirteenth just off Broadway. It's perfect. It has a space I could use as a gallery on the bottom floor and a big open loft upstairs. I could work there and carve out a small corner for me to live."

The pure joy in Caleb's voice lifted Tyson's spirits. To have the man as close as Red Lodge felt like a dream come true. "I'm happy for you."

"Thanks." Caleb dug into his food, completely oblivious to Jeff's narrow-eyed stare.

Tyson wasn't and stared right back at Caleb's ex-lover. Eventually Jeff looked away, and Tyson returned his attention to Caleb. "So now what?"

"There's a morning long ride tomorrow. I thought it would be the perfect time to get Caleb on a plane," Ray said.

Even though Tyson knew Caleb planned to return, the thought of him trying to get everything packed and shipped by himself, bothered him. "Are you sure you don't want me to go?"

Caleb put his hand on Tyson's thigh. "I need to do this, and I need you to keep an eye on Jeff."

"Okay. If you change your mind, all you have to do is call."

Caleb gave Tyson's thigh a light squeeze. "I will."



The bedroom door opened and Caleb closed his eyes, pretending to sleep. Despite the circumstances, Tyson's continued vigilance made him feel good. Each time the man came out to check on him, he stayed a little longer.

"Are you awake?" Tyson whispered.

Caleb grinned and opened his eyes. "Yeah."

Tyson sat in the chair beside the couch. "Can't sleep."

"Because of me?"

Tyson hesitated before answering. "Yes, but probably not for the reason you think."

Caleb sat up and wrapped the blanket around his partially nude body. He already knew what Tyson was feeling. It was the same thing he was struggling with. Somewhere along the line, their relationship had begun to change. He still loved the protective instincts Tyson showed, but Caleb had caught Tyson staring at him a time or two with lust in his eyes.

"I'm pretty screwed up," Caleb admitted. "I had a long talk with Ray, and I think I'm going to need some time to figure out why I let someone do those things to me."

Tyson nodded, but Caleb could see the hurt expression on the man's face. He decided to change the subject. "Ray told me you and your dad came up here to install new windows in all the ranch buildings. Why didn't I know that?"

Tyson started to answer, but Caleb stopped him.

"Wait. I know why." He leaned forward. "Because we spend all our time talking about me."

"You're more interesting. I'm boring."

Caleb chuckled. "I doubt that."

"No, it's true. I opted to work with my dad instead of going off to college like most people I went to school with. I was even offered a football scholarship, but by then I was having a real problem keeping my eyes off my teammates. I decided it would be better for



everyone if I hung up my helmet. It wasn't like I was good enough to go pro or anything. My only real talent was my size."

"What about your family? Brothers? Sisters?"

"Keith is twenty-six, he's a systems analyst in Kansas City. I also have a sister, Meg, who's going to be thirty in a couple of months."

"Are you an uncle?"

Tyson shook his head. "Not yet, but Keith just got married about a year ago. Mom and Dad are pressing for grandkids, but Keith and Andrea seem to be on their own schedule."

"And Meg?"

"She's married. Her and her husband are teachers. They both agree they don't have the patience to be surrounded by kids all day and then go home to their own." Tyson chuckled. "I don't blame them."

"You don't like kids?" For some reason that surprised Caleb.

"I've never really been around them enough to know. Most kids are afraid of me. I know it's my size and not me, but it still bothers me, so I don't put myself in that position. The ranch has a big Gay Family week planned for July. I'll probably try to make myself scarce."

There was something so lonely in the way Tyson said it, Caleb's heart melted. With his blanket still wrapped around him, toga-style, Caleb crawled off the couch to kneel between Tyson's legs. "I won't lie and say your size didn't intimidate me at first, but as soon as you opened your mouth, I could tell how nice you were."

Caleb held Tyson's hands in his. "To be honest, I think your kindness intimidated me more than anything else."

"Why?"

Caleb shrugged. "You seemed to see too much. I was afraid you'd find out my secret."

"And I did."

"Yes, you did."

"What about your family?" Tyson asked. "I've never heard you say anything about them."

Caleb leaned forward and laid his head on Tyson's chest. Like every time before, the contact helped soothe him. "I was raised in foster care."

"I'm sorry."

Caleb didn't want to talk about his childhood. "Once I leave in the morning I won't be back for a while. I have to drive my car back anyway, so I've decided to see a little of the country at the same time. There are a lot of feelings I need to sort through."

"What about the gallery?"

"It'll take time for the paperwork to go through, and Ray said I could ship my stuff here."

Tyson ran his palm over Caleb's cheek. "It worries me to think of you out on the road by yourself."

Caleb's eyes drifted shut at the loving touch. "I know it'll worry you, which is one of the reasons I have to do it."

Tyson's hand stilled. "You're trying to punish me?"

"No!" Caleb looked up into Tyson's big brown eyes. "You make me feel safe for the first time in a long time. I need to know if my attraction to you is based on that or if there's more."

Caleb kissed Tyson's chest. "And I think you need to do the same thing."

Tyson shook his head. "Don't they go hand in hand? I think it's natural to wanna protect the person you care about."

Caleb didn't know the answer to Tyson's question. "I guess I just need to know that your attraction to me isn't based on your need to protect."

Tyson grinned. "I can settle that right now. The first time I saw you, you were struggling with an oversized suitcase. I thought you were the sexiest thing I'd seen in years. Jeff was nowhere in sight. Hell, I didn't even know he existed until I walked into your cabin."

Although Tyson's explanation made him feel good, it only solved one of his many issues. He knew there wasn't much else he could say, so he wrapped his arms around Tyson's waist and hugged him.

Whether or not things worked out with Tyson, Caleb would be forever grateful to his fierce, sexy protector.



"Where's Caleb?"

Tyson set the fuel filter on the bumper of the ranch truck and turned to face Jeff. "He's in town with Ray. His stitches looked like they were getting infected."

"That's the second time this week he's gone off with Ray."

Tyson grabbed the rag out of his back pocket and wiped his hands. "Ray's trying to salvage as much of Caleb's vacation as possible. It's not like Caleb feels like riding horses, especially not after the number you did on him the other day."

Jeff stiffened. "He told you?"

Tyson grinned. "Better. He showed me." Tyson crossed his arms, making sure to put the full extent of his strength on display. "If you ever lay another hand on him I'll take the pictures I took to the New Haven newspaper. How long do you think you'll last in the DA's office once those hit the paper?"

"Try it and I'll sue you for defamation."

Tyson laughed and spread his arms. "You can try, but I don't have much for you to take. It'll cost you your job. It'll cost me my pickup at most."

Red-faced, Jeff stormed out of the equipment shed.

Tyson took a deep breath. Hopefully Jeff bought the excuse. He glanced at the clock on the shed wall. Caleb should be in the air by now. With any luck, things would go off without a hitch, and Caleb would be able to get in and out before Jeff even realized he'd left the ranch.

Tyson sat on an overturned five gallon bucket. He lost track of how many times during the night he'd gone into the living room to check on Caleb. Each time he looked down at the sleeping man, he'd longed to carry him back to his bed.

The talk they'd had early that morning had given him hope that eventually Caleb would see him as a man and not just a safety net.

With Caleb on his way to New Haven, Tyson knew he only had one job left and that was to make sure Jeff didn't find out he was gone.

## *Chapter Five*

Tyson was settling down to watch the news when the phone rang. With a groan, he got up and went to the kitchen. "Hello?"

"Tyson?"

"Caleb? Where're you at?" It had been almost five weeks since Caleb left. Other than a brief phone call asking if his crates had arrived, Tyson hadn't heard from him.

"I'm in town. Got here about an hour ago. I went by the realtor's office to get the keys to the building but they were closed. I was hoping maybe you had room on your couch for me."

Tyson almost lied and invited Caleb over, but he knew it wouldn't be the right thing to do. "I have a key. I got it so I could put your stuff in the building."

"I'd offer to buy you dinner, but I suppose you've already eaten."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't mind a piece of pie." Tyson knew he'd drive to Red Lodge simply for the chance to see Caleb, but he didn't want to scare the guy.

"Deal. I'm in a bar right now. I can hang out here and wait for you, or meet you at a restaurant."

"Which bar?"

"The Whiskey Barrel."

"Sit tight. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Tyson?"

"Yeah?"

"I've missed you."

Tyson closed his eyes as his heart skipped a beat. "I've missed you, too."

After hanging up, Tyson made a quick call to Ray and Deacon before jumping into his pickup. As he drove toward Red Lodge, he glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. He knew he probably should have taken the time to shave, but at least he'd already had his shower.

Since Caleb had been gone, Ray was the one who kept Tyson updated on his whereabouts. The knowledge that Caleb was phoning Ray instead of him, hurt at first, but then Ray had sat him down and explained Caleb's reasoning.

Knowing that Caleb was still trying to work through his break-up with Jeff and his confusion over his growing feelings for Tyson helped. Tyson had tried to prepare himself

for the let down he knew was sure to come. Caleb was safely away from his old life, how long would it take for him to realize he didn't need Tyson's protection?

As he entered town, he began to wonder. When Caleb said he had missed Tyson, was it a friendly kind of miss or something more?

He managed to find a parking spot in front of the candy store and walked as fast as his long legs would carry him to the bar. He was a bit surprised at how busy the place was until he realized it was a Friday night. How long had it been since he'd been out on a Friday night? Hell, any night for that matter.

Tyson spotted Caleb immediately. The first thing he noticed was how long the man's hair was getting. The second thing was how damn good Caleb looked. He had a nice tan, indicating he'd spent quite a bit of time in the sun over the last five weeks.

"Hey," he called as he neared Caleb.

Caleb jumped off the bar stool and wrapped his arms around Tyson in greeting. "That was fast."

Tyson shrugged. "I was anxious to see you." He held Caleb at arm's length. "You look good. I like the hair."

Caleb ran a hand through his blond locks. "I like it. I feel more like my old self."

Caleb's statement told Tyson more than he was saying. Evidently, the shorter style had been Jeff's influence.

Tyson sat on the stool next to Caleb. He couldn't take his eyes off the man. How many nights had he laid awake wondering where in the country Caleb was laying his head?

"I hope you don't mind, but I went ahead and ordered a steak."

"Don't mind at all." He flagged down the bartender and ordered a beer before returning his attention to Caleb. "So tell me how you've been?"

Caleb took a sip of his beer. "I've had my ups and downs, but I'm glad I did it. I was able to spend a lot of time sketching. I spent several days at Hell's Half Acre."

"Huh?"

"It's in Wyoming?"

Tyson shook his head. "I'm from Kansas."

Caleb smiled. "We'll have to go down there sometime. It's about half-way between Billings and Denver. I've never seen anything like it. It's in the middle of nowhere behind a closed restaurant." Caleb shook his head. "I don't even know how to describe it except it looks like something that should be on another planet. There are these deep ravines and weird-looking spires. It's so cool. I'll show you my drawings."

Tyson didn't think he'd ever seen this side of Caleb. The man practically vibrated with enthusiasm. "We'll definitely have to go down."

The waitress set Caleb's dinner in front of him and he dug in with gusto. "I need to get a cell phone," Caleb said around a bite of food.

"There's a place down the block, but I'm sure they're closed."

Caleb swallowed and took a drink of his beer. "I don't need it tonight. You're already here."

Tyson blinked. Was Caleb saying what he thought he was saying? "You plan to call me?"

Caleb nodded. "If I'm going to try and woo you, I'll need a way to get a hold of you."

Relief flooded him. "You won't have to try very hard."

"I know I haven't been fair to you, and I'm sorry."

"Why would you say that? You told me before you left you were questioning your feelings."

"I was. It wasn't until I was away from New Haven that I could let my fears go enough to really think."

"And?"

"And, I still don't understand why I stayed with Jeff as long as I did. I'm afraid it has something to do with not having a family. Maybe I'm too needy when it comes to love."

Caleb set his fork down and turned on his stool to face Tyson. "I need to go slow. I think it's important I learn the difference between true love and falling in love for love's sake."

"I can go slow," Tyson tried to assure him.

"Yeah?" Caleb grinned. "Can you paint?"

"Like you?" Tyson laughed. "Not hardly."

Caleb leaned forward and bumped Tyson with his shoulder. "I meant walls. I'm going to need some help getting the gallery ready."

"Oh! Yep, that kind of painting I can do."



Caleb was hanging one of his Hell's Half Acre landscapes when Tyson walked into the gallery.

"It's looking good," Tyson remarked. "The sign out front is perfect."

Caleb climbed down from the ladder and put his hands on his hips, eyes roaming the room. "I hope so. I spent a chunk of money on it. Advertising alone is going to kill me. The Carbon County newspaper's running a couple of ads for me and the Red Lodge Local Rag has a story coming out next week about the gallery."

Tyson walked over and wrapped his arms around Caleb. "You'll do fine."

He leaned down and kissed the shorter man. Caleb opened immediately and Tyson thrust his tongue inside, as Caleb stepped even closer. The previous weeks of working together to ready the gallery and Caleb's living space had drawn them closer than ever before.



Tyson had no doubt he'd fallen in love, but he continually had to remind himself not to push Caleb for more. Although they'd spent the night together, they'd yet to engage in anything beyond heavy petting and blow jobs.

By the way Caleb began grinding against Tyson's leg, Tyson knew he wasn't the only one ready to take their relationship to the next level.

Tyson broke the kiss. "Are you done for the day?"

"Yes," Caleb sighed, running his hand over the front of Tyson's jeans. "Take me upstairs."

Tyson felt it was only fair to warn Caleb of his intentions. "If I go up..."

"Yes." Caleb gave Tyson's erection a squeeze.

"Do you have stuff?"

Caleb nodded. "I bought some a couple of weeks ago."

"You've been ready that long?"

"Yeah, but I wanted it to happen at its own pace."

Tyson glanced over his shoulder. If it weren't for the large picture windows, he knew he'd strip Caleb naked where he stood. He walked over and locked the front door. "Last one up's a rotten egg."

With a squeal, Caleb ran toward the staircase in the back of the store. Tyson caught up on the fourth step and picked Caleb up. He settled the gorgeous man over his shoulder and continued up the steps, past the work area to the large bed in the corner of the room. He tossed Caleb onto the mattress and grinned.

"Who won?" Caleb asked as he began taking his clothes off.

"I think we both did." Tyson unzipped his jeans and pushed them down as far as they would go. He sat on the edge of the bed and began unlacing his work boots. He tossed the first one to the side and started on the second.

Caleb started pulling Tyson's T-shirt off from behind. After lifting his arms, Tyson reached back and came into contact with a deliciously naked Caleb. Despite a few raised scars from the savage bite marks he'd received from Jeff, Caleb's back and ass had completely healed.

Tyson pulled Caleb around and into his lap. "You feel good."

Caleb's fingers began plucking at Tyson's nipples. "So do you."

Tyson ran his hands down Caleb's back to his ass. He'd played with Caleb's ass while sucking on his cock, but never with the intent to fuck him. Now that the final barrier between them seemed to be falling away, Tyson couldn't resist fingering the puckered hole with purpose.

Staring into Caleb's eyes, he lifted his hand to his mouth and wet three fingers. Caleb groaned as he readjusted himself to straddle Tyson's lap.

"I have lube and condoms in the drawer." Caleb swiveled his hips as Tyson pressed a middle finger against his hole.

"Can you get to them without moving off my lap?"

When Caleb reached for the supplies, Tyson sank his finger as deep as it would go. Caleb moaned as he pulled the drawer open. "Hang on."

Tyson waited while Caleb eased himself back into a sitting position. Caleb held up the lube.

"Put some of this on before you try another."

Tyson's chest squeezed. "Did I hurt you?"

Caleb shook his head. "Not really, but one of your fingers is like two of mine. I just think it'll go easier with the slick stuff."

Tyson applied a large amount of lube to his fingers before working the first one back in. He took his time stretching Caleb's muscles before introducing the second. He knew two would be enough to sufficiently ready Caleb for his cock, so he set up a slow rhythm in and out of his lover's body.

He moaned as Caleb reached between them and began stroking Tyson's cock. Those slender, artistic fingers knew exactly how much pressure Tyson loved. "Get me ready."

Caleb reached to the mattress and came back with the foil package. He used his teeth to rip it open. He held it up and smiled. "Ribbed, for my pleasure."

"I have a pretty good idea that it'll be for my pleasure, too." Tyson gritted his teeth as Caleb took his time rolling the rubber down his length.

Once he was finished, Caleb held up the lube bottle once more.

"Are you kidding? There's already enough lube back there to service an entire football team."

Caleb chuckled. "Better to be safe than sorry."

Tyson shook his head and removed his fingers as Caleb applied the lube.

"Scoot back a little on the bed," Caleb instructed.

Tyson did as told, moving back until Caleb could set his knees firmly on the mattress. He knew, without being told, that Caleb needed to be in charge of their first coupling. Tyson held his cock by the base and gazed into Caleb's eyes. "Anytime you're ready."

Caleb's expression softened as he rose up enough to position the head of Tyson's cock to his stretched opening. At one point, Tyson noticed they were both holding their breath while Caleb slowly worked his way down Tyson's length.

He smiled. "Breathe."

Caleb grinned back. "You're a little bigger than I'd anticipated."

Tyson wondered, "Is that a good thing?"

Caleb nodded his head as he finally took Tyson's entire shaft into his body. "It's a very good thing. At least it will be in about two minutes."

*Two minutes?* Tyson didn't know if he'd last that long. The urge to move threatened to overwhelm his good sense. He tried to concentrate on Caleb's mouth and fucked his lover with his tongue the way he wanted to with his cock.

The longer they kissed, the more Caleb began to squirm. Finally, Caleb rose up on his knees and back down, impaling himself in one smooth move.

"Oh, fuck!" Tyson grunted. He held onto Caleb's hips as his lover began to ride him. The squeeze of Caleb's body around his shaft as it plunged up and down was like nothing else in the world.

Caleb used Tyson's shoulders to help raise and lower him as he began to pick up speed. "Need more."

"What do you need, sweetheart?" Tyson asked.

"Fuck me," Caleb whispered against Tyson's mouth.

On the next downward plunge, Tyson held Caleb in place and rolled to reverse their positions. With Caleb's back in the center of the bed, Tyson knelt between his lover's spread thighs. Spread out like he was, Caleb was breathtaking. His newly suntanned body glistened with sweat, something he wasn't used to seeing on Caleb.

Tyson drew his forefinger down the center of Caleb's chest to circle his cock.

"Tell me if it's too much." He hooked his arms under Caleb's knees and spread him even further. Tyson wasted no time giving Caleb what he'd asked for. His rhythm was fast and deep, but in no way brutal.

The combination seemed to work well for Caleb who began thrashing his head back and forth on the mattress. "Yes! Fuck me."

The sound of skin slapping skin was almost deafening as Tyson continued to piston his hips at lightning speed, giving Caleb everything he had.

Caleb's hands reached out and roamed along Tyson's chest. They worked their way down, one to his cock and the other to the spot where his body joined with Tyson's.

Tyson almost swallowed his tongue when Caleb slipped his finger inside himself on Tyson's next inward thrust. He'd never seen anyone do that before. "Damn that's sexy."

"I'm coming!" Caleb shouted as ropes of white seed splashed onto his chest.

With Caleb's finger still inside himself, Tyson buried his cock to the hilt and filled the condom. "Caleb!"

Tyson rested his forehead on Caleb's shoulder as he started to come down from the high of his climax. He felt his lover's hand wrap around the base of the condom and Tyson pulled out. Rolling to his side, he collapsed on the bed as Caleb took care of the soiled condom.

Tyson felt the bed move and opened his eyes. "Don't leave me."

Caleb smiled and tossed the rubber into the trash. He grabbed a dishcloth from the small kitchen counter and raced back to bed. "Just trying to take care of my man."

"That sounds nice, but you know it's a two-way street, right?"

Caleb tossed the towel to the floor and curled his body against Tyson's. "I know, that's why I enjoy doing it so much."

Tyson was busy wondering if the time was right to tell Caleb how he felt when someone started pounding on the downstairs door.

"Who could that be?" Caleb sat up.

Tyson groaned. "Cody, I bet ya. He said he was bringing guests into town this evening to shop."

"But we're not open." Caleb jumped out of bed and scrambled for his jeans.

Resigned to getting dressed, Tyson crawled out of bed. "Just let them look around. If you sell something, great. If not, no big deal."

"I don't even have the cash register up and running."

Tyson smiled at his nervous lover. "We'll figure it out."

Caleb ran downstairs in his bare feet with Tyson close behind. They opened the door and welcomed Cody and about fifteen men into the shop.

"Sorry to stop in unannounced, but Craig and Jesse fell in love with the postcard prints you made for the Justice River. I told them about *Red Lodge Landscapes* and here we are."

Tyson stepped back and watched as Caleb came alive. His lover showed the men around the gallery, describing in detail the different paintings, charcoals, and drawings he had for sale.

It seemed the gallery was open for business a week early.

## Chapter Six

With his arms full of groceries, Caleb let himself into the gallery. He stepped over the mail the carrier had shoved through the slot in the door. He glanced down before closing the door and came face to face with a crisp white envelope with the impeccable penmanship he knew all too well.

The bags of food dropped to the floor. *How did he find me?*

Without a second thought, Caleb went back outside and locked up before running to his car. As he raced out of town, he rolled down his window hoping the fresh air would keep him from being sick.

It was one day before his big opening. Why now? He'd been gone for two months.

He was so out of it, Caleb didn't remember the drive to the Justice River or the trip down the rutted ranch road. The first thing he was aware of was Deacon knocking on his window.

Caleb looked up into the friendly face. He fisted his hand several times to keep it from shaking as he opened the car door. "I need Tyson."

Deacon grabbed Caleb by the shoulders and tilted his chin up as he seemed to study him. "What's wrong with you?"

"I need Tyson," he repeated.

"Ray!" Deacon yelled toward the cookhouse.

Ray strolled out with a cup of coffee in one hand and a stack of cookies in the other. "Hey," Ray greeted as he came down the steps.

"Stay with Caleb while I ride out to get Tyson."

"Why? What's going on?"

"I need Tyson," Caleb repeated once again.

The two men exchanged looks. Ray started leading Caleb across the grass. "I'll take him to Tyson's house."



Tyson was helping Neil fix one of the old windmills on the ranch when the sight of Deacon riding Black Jack at full speed caught his attention. "What the hell?"

It was rare that any of the cowboys rode their horses at a full run on the ranch. The chances of coming upon gopher holes were too great to risk it.

Neil shoved the wrench he was working with into his tool belt. "I don't know, but it must be important."

Tyson started to climb down the windmill when Deacon pulled Black Jack to a stop. "Caleb's here. I think there's something wrong."

Tyson's chest tightened. "Why? What did he say?"

Deacon shook his head. "That's just it. He won't say anything except that he needs you. He doesn't look like he's all there."

"Shit." Tyson jumped on the four wheeler. "Can you get Neil back?"

"Go on. I'll take care of it."

The small ATV kicked up a spray of dirt as it shot toward the ranch. Tyson knew it had something to do with the blood test Caleb was supposed to be getting results back on. What if Jeff had given him something or maybe it was worse? Could they tell if a person had cancer from a blood test?

A hundred different scenarios raced through Tyson's mind on his way back to the ranch. He spotted Caleb's car in front of the cookhouse with no one in it. Taking a chance, he rode the four-wheeler across the grass to stop at his front porch.

Tyson jumped off and ran up the steps into his house. Caleb launched himself into Tyson's arms as soon as he was through the door.

"He found me."

It took a moment for Tyson to figure out what Caleb was trying to tell him. "Jeff? How do you know?"

"He sent me a letter."

Tyson wrapped his arms around the man he loved. "What did it say?"

Caleb shook his head. "I don't know. I remember seeing it on the floor when I came through the door with groceries. I-I don't remember what happened after that."

Tyson kissed Caleb's forehead. He was as unnerved by the information as Caleb was, but he knew they had to keep their wits about them. "Okay. You need to calm down. We don't even know what the letter said."

Caleb continued to shake his head. "I don't care what it said. He knows where I live. I can't go back there."

Tyson walked Caleb over to the couch. "Sit."

Caleb looked surprised by Tyson's tone but he did as he was told.

Tyson turned to Ray. "Thanks for sitting with him, but I've got it."

Ray's gaze moved to Caleb before nodding. "Let me know if you need anything."

"Thanks," Caleb said.

As soon as the door closed, Tyson moved to sit beside Caleb. "You've worked too damn hard to let a letter ruin your opening."

He reached out and took Caleb's hand. "I'll be there tomorrow. I won't let him hurt you."



Caleb pulled his hand away from Tyson and covered his face. "You don't understand what it's like. I think I'm over it, and then I see someone who looks like him, or I'm walking down the street and I hear someone yell Jeff. It doesn't matter where I am, or what I'm doing. It's like, BAM, out of the blue I'm thrown right back into it."

"It's called post traumatic stress disorder."

"No. That's for soldiers and stuff."

Tyson shook his head. "You've lived through traumatic events." Tyson pulled Caleb into his arms. "You might want to talk to someone who can help you learn how to deal with it."

Caleb rested his cheek against Tyson's chest and hung on. "I'm so sorry. I know you don't deserve to deal with this shit."

Even in the midst of a meltdown, Caleb was apologizing. Tyson wished he could take away Caleb's past, but he knew it wasn't possible. The only thing he could do was help his lover deal with a future of sudden flashbacks to his days of being abused.

"I love you, Caleb. No matter what, I need you to remember that."

Caleb's head shot off Tyson's chest. His eyes were huge as he stared at Tyson. "You love me?"

"I do. The big question you need to ask yourself is do you think you're worth it?"

Caleb reared back like he'd been slapped. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

*Damn.* Tyson searched for the appropriate words to help Caleb understand. "You said something to me a few weeks ago. You said you were afraid that you needed love. Well, I agree, I think you do need it and that's what's bothering me. You are so fucking incredibly fantastic and you don't even see it. The reason you need someone to love you is because you don't love yourself."

Caleb stood and headed toward the back porch. "Give me a minute," he said when Tyson started to follow.

Tyson stopped in the kitchen. He opened the fridge and took out a bottle of beer. He knew he'd laid a lot of psycho mumbo jumbo in Caleb's lap, but he had some experience in post traumatic stress disorder.

His sister Meg had been raped while in college. Eight years later, the smell of alcohol on a man's breath still sent her back to the night it happened. She'd had years of therapy, but the best the psychologist could do was help her deal with the episodes when they occurred. Even a trained professional couldn't wipe the memories from a victim's mind.

Tyson knew he needed to see the letter Jeff had sent. If it was in any way threatening, he would push for Caleb to go to the police. Maybe Tyson hadn't done Caleb any favors by suggesting he not confront Jeff earlier? Perhaps that was exactly what his lover needed to do.

The door opened and Caleb stepped inside. "You're right. I don't think I've ever loved myself. I don't know how. Jeff was the first person to really love me at all. I mean, my mom obviously didn't or else she wouldn't have given me over to the state."

It was the first time Tyson had heard Caleb speak of his mother. "Maybe she wasn't in a position to care for you."

"In a position?" Caleb snorted. "Guess you could say that. She loved the pipe more than me."

"Drugs can make people do stupid things."

"Yeah, well they're still a choice. And my mom chose them."

Tyson knew it wasn't that simple. Most likely Caleb's mom thought she could have both until the addiction took over and she fell under its control. It would be another area a psychologist could help Caleb understand, but there was time to discuss that option once he got Caleb through the current situation.

Tyson set his beer on the counter and opened his arms. "Well I choose you."

"But for how long?" Despite the question, Caleb moved into Tyson's embrace.

It was the first time Tyson had witnessed distrust in the younger man's eyes. Although it hurt, Tyson knew he couldn't blame him. "I can't promise we'll have an easy road in front of us, but I can promise to love you as long as you'll let me."

"I think I'll let you for a long time." Caleb gazed up at Tyson. "I love you, too."

Tyson leaned down for a kiss, putting all the love he felt into every swipe of his tongue. He hoped in time he could help Caleb learn to truly love himself.

He walked Caleb backward and pressed his lover against the wall, taking the kiss deeper. Tyson lifted Caleb and set him down to straddle Tyson's thigh, opening his lover's pants in the process. One of Tyson's favorite things about making out with Caleb was how horny the man became.

Tyson could feel Caleb's erection rub against his leg as the kiss became a sloppy mess of teeth and tongues. He reached down and scooted Caleb closer until the hard ridge of Tyson's erection could grind against Caleb's abdomen.

*Oh fuck.* The pressure felt so damn good it made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

Caleb reached between them and skillfully unzipped Tyson's jeans, separating the denim to fish Tyson's cock out. The steady squeeze of Caleb's hand as he began jacking Tyson off was nirvana.

Tyson broke the kiss and threw his head back as Caleb's thumb pressed against the sensitive area directly under the crown. "Oh. Yes!"

Tyson's cum covered Caleb's hands as his body quaked with the intensity of his release. He felt Caleb's body hump against his thigh until his lover's jerking movements signaled the man's climax.

Feeling completely boneless, Tyson lowered them both to the floor. The cool wood felt wonderful against his heated skin. "Wow. Where did that come from?"

Caleb nuzzled against Tyson's chest. "Don't know, don't care, but I'll be ready to do it again in about an hour."

Tyson chuckled. Since making love the two of them couldn't seem to get enough of

each other. It was all good as far as Tyson was concerned. Caleb was an absolute dream lover in or out of bed.

"Tyson?"

"Yeah?" He placed a kiss on the top of Caleb's shaggy blond hair.

"What do you think Jeff wants?"

Tyson tensed. He had a very good idea of what Caleb's long-time partner wanted. "I think he wants you back."

Caleb shook his head. "I won't go back. Ever."

"I hope not, but unfortunately, you're the only one who can make that decision."

Caleb sat back and stared up at Tyson. "I won't go back. I love you."

Tyson nodded. "Maybe Jeff needs to know that. As much as I hate the asshole, it might help him move on. The quicker he does that, the easier it'll be on you."

Caleb resumed his earlier position against Tyson's chest. "I can't believe a stupid envelope could make me freak out like that. It's so embarrassing. I can't imagine what Ray and Deacon must think of me."

"Don't worry about what anyone thinks. The important thing is we got through it this time, and we'll get through it the next time."

"I still don't feel like going back to the gallery tonight," Caleb admitted.

"Okay. You know you're welcome here every night if that's what you want. I've already taken tomorrow off for your big opening. We'll get up, eat a big breakfast and head to town."

Tyson heard Caleb's stomach growl at the mention of food. The clock on the wall said it was only four, two hours before supper would be served. "Feel like going next door with me and raiding the cookie jar?"

Caleb nodded. "I was wondering about that. Should I pay Ray something for feeding me while I'm here?"

"You can offer, but I know he'll tell you no. We're a family here. We take care of each other." Tyson lifted Caleb's chin. "You're part of that family."

Moisture filled Caleb's eyes. "I like that."

"It's the Montana way."

Caleb shook his head. "No. It's the cowboy way."



Neil headed straight for Tyson and Caleb after going through the food line. Tyson could see the questions in his friend's eyes.

"Everything okay?" Neil asked.

Caleb nodded. "Yeah. Sorry to alarm everyone."

Tyson glanced at Neil, broadcasting silently that he'd speak with him about it later. Neil gave a slight nod and dug into his dinner.

"Oh, I need you to help me with a special project when you get a chance."

Tyson set his glass of tea down. "Sure. What kind of special project?"

"Well, as you know, we've got the group of Dads and their kids coming in July. Ray told me several of the children have special needs. I thought I'd play around with a couple of the old saddles and see if I can figure out how to rig up a harness of sorts."

Tyson smiled. Although a loner by nature, Neil's heart was big. A person simply had to see the way the man treated his dog Georgia to see the love and compassion inside of him. "I'll definitely help with that."

"Thanks. I may not be able to make enough for everyone to ride at the same time, but I figure if I can get Griggs to help, too, we can take out smaller groups during the day so everyone gets a chance at feeling the freedom riding a horse allows."

"I'd love to help, but unfortunately my riding experience consists of about an hour on the back of a horse." Caleb chuckled. "Maybe I can do something else though."

Ray and Deacon sat down with their plates.

"How many families do we have signed up for the July week?" Tyson asked.

Ray seemed to think about it for several moments. "Seven, I believe. Why?"

Tyson put his hand on Caleb's thigh. "How long does it take to do one of your pencil sketches?"

"Depends on what it is, but if you're talking about portraits, usually a couple of hours. An hour of them sitting for me and another hour of detail work."

"Maybe you could offer the families a cut-rate price for a drawing?" Tyson knew he'd love to have a sketch done of him and Caleb for his wall, surely other people would want one.

"I can do better than that. If you'll give me a break on the price, we'll include the drawing in with the vacation package," Ray informed Caleb.

Caleb looked down at his plate. "You continue to feed me when I'm here and I'll do that group for nothing."

Ray nodded. "You've got yourself a deal. You can eat here as often as you like."

Tyson wasn't sure who was getting the better bargain. Caleb's skills didn't come cheap, but then again, he planned to have Caleb at the ranch as often as possible.



Caleb was too keyed up for his opening. He lay next to a sleeping Tyson for about twenty minutes before he finally allowed himself to explore the perfectly sculpted body beside him.

He carefully peeled back the sheet covering Tyson's chest and drew a circle around

one of the dark brown nipples with his tongue. He felt the small nub harden and took the tender bit of flesh between his teeth which awarded him a low moan from Tyson.

Caleb released the nipple and looked up to make sure Tyson was still asleep. Satisfied, he returned his attention to the sun-bronzed skin on display. He knew if he pushed the sheet off the rest of Tyson's body, his lover would wake and he was enjoying the secret playtime.

He ducked under the sheet and made his way to the happy trail that led to Tyson's cock. Hair was a tricky thing when it came to running your tongue through it. Caleb was grateful for his lover's considerate nature had him trimming his pubic hair to a short, clean length.

The first thing Caleb did was lean down to inhale the musk of Tyson's groin. The faint odor of soap and their earlier session of love making could be detected within the dense patch of short curls.

While he was busy sniffing his lover's groin, Tyson's cock began to grow. Being a man, Caleb knew an erection wouldn't necessarily wake Tyson. He grinned. However, a good tongue bath probably would.

It took him about two seconds to decide having Tyson's length in his mouth was more important than his secret playtime. Although definitely hardening, Tyson's cock still rested on his thigh. Caleb made room for his body between Tyson's legs as he ran the tip of his tongue up the length.

The spongy head was his favorite part to tease, so he began to alternately suck and lick the large helmet.

"Mmm," Tyson moaned.

Caleb grinned when Tyson's legs spread further apart. He wasn't sure that Tyson was fully awake yet, but at least the man knew something good was about to happen.

When Caleb engulfed as much of Tyson's length as he could down his throat, a large hand twined itself in his hair.

"Feels good, sweetheart."

Now that Tyson was awake, Caleb tore the sheet off without losing his hold on the man's cock. It amazed him what a difference removing the thin covering made in his ability to breathe. As he pumped his mouth up and down on the cock, he held his hand up to Tyson's mouth.

Caleb groaned as he felt Tyson taking his fingers one by one into his mouth. Apparently Tyson knew exactly what was coming and wasn't going to protest. *Excellent.*

With one hand wrapped around Tyson's balls, he used the other to circle the tight pucker of his man's ass. He'd yet to fuck Tyson and wasn't really sure how his lover felt about it. Jeff hated... Caleb stopped that line of thought almost as soon as it started.

He pushed his finger deep into Tyson's body and began stretching the tight hole. As he slowly inserted another, he brushed across the smooth walnut-sized gland.

Tyson's hips thrust upward, nearly choking Caleb with his cock. "Sorry."

Caleb eased his way off Tyson's length and gazed up at him. "Come in my mouth."

Without waiting for an answer, Caleb once again devoured Tyson's erection, adding a third finger into the man's passageway.

"Coming!" Tyson shouted as the first splash of cum hit the back of Caleb's throat.

He pulled off enough to taste his lover's essence, groaning at the thick feel of the seed coating his tongue and throat.

As he busied himself cleaning Tyson's cock of any remaining cum, a condom and bottle of lube were thrust in front of his face.

Caleb looked at Tyson. "Really?"

Tyson answered by rolling to his stomach, nearly tearing Caleb's fingers off in the process. Caleb quickly removed his hand and watched as Tyson tucked his knees under him.

"Damn." Caleb didn't know what to say at the incredibly tempting ass on full display. "It's been a while since I've done this."

"Don't think, just do."

To Caleb, it felt like it took twice as long as usual to sheathe himself. He took the lube and applied some to Tyson's hole before positioning himself on his knees. He really wanted to apologize for his lack of experience, but he also knew Tyson wouldn't care if Caleb was an expert fucker or not.

He lined up and rocked his hips back and forth until he finally pushed inside Tyson's heat. Tyson began squeezing Caleb's cock with his interior muscles and Caleb almost lost it. Although he'd been on the giving end of just such a massage, he'd never had it done to him.

"Shit that feels good."

He gripped Tyson's hips and withdrew his length until just the tip remained inside. He surged forward once again, burying himself to the hilt. "Oh, yeah, this is what I needed."

Caleb knew half of what he said didn't make sense, but he couldn't keep quiet as he continued to fuck Tyson. It had been too long and he knew he was too turned on to last long.

After another series of rapid-fire thrusts, Caleb ground his groin against Tyson's ass and came, filling the condom with more cum than he thought possible. Every time he'd start to pull out, Tyson's body would once again squeeze around his dick, eliciting another short burst of seed.

By the time his balls were completely empty, Caleb was near exhaustion. He wrapped his hand around the base of the rubber and pulled out. After a quick knot in the condom, he tossed it into the trashcan and collapsed. "I'm never moving again."

Tyson chuckled as he reached over the side of the bed for the towel they'd used earlier. He gave them both a quick clean-up before pulling Caleb into his arms.

"We need to be up in about two hours, so you'd better get some sleep."



*Carol Lynne*

"Tell me it's going to be a great day," Caleb mumbled around a yawn.

"The best. It's your day to shine, sweetheart, and I'll be there to hold the spotlight on you."

"Love you."

"Love you."

## *Chapter Seven*

Tyson chuckled as a nervous Caleb continued to fuss with his white linen jacket. With a sigh, Caleb pushed the sleeves up his forearms.

"Are you sure this doesn't look to...faggy?"

Tyson walked over and straightened the collar of the powder blue button down shirt under the jacket. "You look great. I'm glad you went with a dress casual look instead of a suit."

"Nah, that wouldn't be me."

"Exactly." Tyson tugged on the bottom of the blazer. "This is you. Let people embrace who you are, not what they want you to be."

Caleb rolled his eyes. "How come when I fell in love with you, I didn't know about this philosophical side?"

Tyson chuckled and leaned down for a quick kiss. "I keep it hidden. I only share it with very special people."

"Oh, shit. I forgot to open the red wine."

Tyson released his hold on Caleb and watched as his lover scurried off on yet another project. All day Caleb had flitted from one thing to another. Tyson wasn't sure if it was the man's nerves over the opening or the letter they'd yet to read.

As soon as they'd arrived at the gallery earlier in the day, Caleb had scooped the mail off the floor and stuffed it into a box upstairs. Tyson had promised his lover he wouldn't push him to read it.

The abandoned groceries hadn't fared as well. Although the non-perishables had survived, all the refrigerated items had been a total loss.

With everything ready, Tyson once again wandered over to his favorite painting, *Through the Montana Mist*. It was of the deer Caleb had seen from Tyson's back porch. He'd been more than a little upset to find it had already been sold to one of the ranch guests who'd been in earlier in the week.

Tyson wondered if the man would consider selling it to him. There was just something about the deer's eyes peering through the mist that drew him in. He stepped even closer to the painting and realized what that something was. If you concentrated on the eyes, Caleb's image was barely visible in the black pupils. *Wow*. By the time the night was over, he'd find out who'd bought it and get it back.

The front door opened pulling Tyson's attention away from the painting. "Hey," he greeted a group of his friends.

Neil and Jimmy stood with their mouths hanging open at the incredible display of art. "Am I still in Red Lodge?" Neil asked.

Caleb appeared carrying a tray of wine glasses. He set the glasses on a satin draped table and joined the men. "Thanks so much for coming."

Neil smiled at Caleb. "I'm incredibly impressed."

Tyson noticed the red tint to Caleb's cheeks. "Look around, you'll be even more impressed."

The door opened again and one by one, people began to trickle into the gallery. Some of them Tyson knew, some he didn't, but Caleb was gracious to every guest, showing them the first few paintings before letting them explore on their own.

Tyson tried to keep himself busy by making sure the refreshment table was stocked with drinks and the fancy little finger foods Caleb had ordered.

"I sold another one," Caleb whispered in Tyson's ear.

Tyson took the opportunity to lean down and kiss his lover. "And you'll sell many more."

Caleb smiled. "I just can't believe it."

"Well believe it, because if I'm not mistaken you're about to sell yet another one." He pointed to a mesmerized Ray standing in front of a painting of the barn at Justice River."

"I should probably just give it to him."

"Bullshit. You should sell it to him. You've already been more than generous with your talents. You're a business owner now."

Caleb's eyes lit up. "That's right. I'm officially a grown-up."

Tyson reached down and brushed his hand across Caleb's ass. "News flash. You've been a grown-up for quite some time, you're just finally realizing it."

Ray called for Caleb.

"See, told you."

With apparent joy in his step, Caleb went back to work.

Tyson was busy in the back unboxing another case of wine when Deacon tapped him on the shoulder.

"Jeff's out front."

Tyson's heart skipped a beat as he spun around to face his boss. He knew exactly what Jeff's presence would do to Caleb. The thought of his lover freaking out in the middle of the best night of his life made Tyson want to kill Jeff with his bare hands.

He pushed by Deacon and headed out to the gallery with murder on his mind. Before he could reach the ass, he saw Caleb stumble. As Neil and Griggs helped Caleb to his feet, Tyson continued to stalk toward Jeff.

"What do you want?"

"I-I came to see Caleb."

Tyson stepped closer to Caleb's ex and bumped him with his chest. "I suggest you get the hell out of here and never contact him again."

"I told him I was coming. I figured if he didn't want me here he would've called."

Tyson noticed a different quality in Jeff's voice. Gone was the pompous ass he'd met on the ranch. The man in front of him seemed almost...normal.

Tyson felt a hand on his back as a body pressed to his side. "Go upstairs, sweetheart, I'll take care of it."

"No," Caleb replied. "I'll take care of it."

Tyson glanced down at Caleb. "What?"

Caleb took Tyson's hand. "Jeff, can I talk to you outside?"

"You can't go out there with him," Tyson tried to argue.

"I know. Which is why you're coming with me, I don't want to do this here."

Tyson was filled with mixed emotions. On one hand the thought of Caleb being anywhere near Jeff pissed him off, but on the other hand, he knew it was what all three of them needed.

Jeff nodded his head and started toward the door. Caleb surprised Tyson by stopping to whisper in Griggs' ear. Griggs chuckled and nodded.

"What'd you say to him?" Tyson asked as they neared the front door.

"I told him if he saw you go after Jeff, to jump in and help."

"Help who?"

Caleb spun and wrapped his arms around Tyson. "Help you to stay out of jail of course."

As they joined Jeff on the side of the building, Caleb squeezed Tyson's hand. "You can't be here," Caleb said to Jeff.

"I wanted to see the gallery. It's all in the letter."

"I didn't read your letter," Caleb admitted.

Jeff nodded and glanced down the alley. "I quit my job."

"That's good. I don't think it was good for you."

Jeff looked at Tyson before returning his attention to Caleb. "Can I talk to you alone?"

"No, but I can try and convince Tyson to give us a few moments of privacy." Caleb turned and hugged Tyson. "Will you stand over by the corner of the building?"

"I don't like it." Tyson cupped Caleb's cheek. He didn't like the idea for several reasons, not all of them had to do with Caleb's safety.

"I'll be okay. If Jeff says or does anything to make me uncomfortable, I'll call for you."

Tyson was proud of the way Caleb was trying to take control of the situation. Tyson stared at Jeff. "Watch yourself."

After Tyson walked away, Caleb turned back to Jeff. "What?"

"I miss you. I know I was an ass, but I'm better now. I've been seeing a psychiatrist."

"That's good, Jeff, but I'm not sure what that has to do with me."

Jeff looked at him like he was crazy. "I want you back. I'm doing all this so you'll see how serious I am."

Caleb crossed his arms. "I can't go back. I don't want to go back. If you made these changes for me, you've done them for the wrong reason."

Jeff started to reach for him. Caleb stepped back and gestured for Tyson to hold his position. He smiled to himself. He hadn't even needed to look around to know Tyson had his back.

Jeff stopped and held out his hands. "I love you."

"I'm sorry, Jeff, but I'm not in love with you anymore. I love Tyson."

"You fell in love with someone else so soon?"

Caleb knew he needed to come clean with his ex-partner. "I didn't fall out of love with you the day I left. It started long before that, when you changed from the struggling law student to the high-pressured power lawyer you became."

Jeff snorted. "You could've fooled me."

"Yeah, I didn't just fool you, I fooled myself into thinking what we had was what we'd always had. But it wasn't. It wasn't until I could step back from the situation that I realized that. Now it's time for you to do the same."

"You bastard," Jeff spat.

"Go home. Figure yourself out so you can get on with your life." Caleb turned and started toward the man he loved.

He heard footsteps behind him and before he knew what was happening, Tyson rushed by him. He heard the unmistakable sound of skin hitting skin before he got turned back around.

Jeff was sitting on the ground rubbing his jaw as Tyson towered over him, his hands still fisted. Caleb reached out and tugged Tyson's arm. "Come on. Let's go back inside."

Before leaving, Caleb bent down to whisper in Jeff's ear. "Don't doubt that Tyson could've and will do much worse if you ever contact me again."

Caleb stood and wrapped his arm around Tyson. "Let's go sell some paintings."



Tyson wiped the sweat from his forehead. The muddy mess left on his bandana was proof of the horrible day he'd had. Martha clanged the dinner bell outside the cookhouse and Tyson groaned. No way did he want to eat covered in dirt and cow shit.

He rounded the corner of the barn and noticed Caleb's car parked in front of his house. Tyson couldn't help but smile. Even on the worst of days, a visit from the man he loved made all the scrapes and sweat fade to the background.

Happy to be home, he opened the door to the smell of...spaghetti? "Caleb?"

"In here," Caleb called from the kitchen.

Tyson stepped into the kitchen and laughed. Wearing only an apron, Caleb stood at the stove, stirring a pot of sauce. The pale skin of Caleb's ass teased him as his gaze zeroed in on the apron ties that hung down the crack of Caleb's butt.

Caleb banged the wooden spoon on the side of the pan and turned. He pointed to the big red letters on the front of the apron that read KISS THE COOK, only Caleb had made a few alterations with electrical tape and a permanent marker.

Tyson started laughing. "FUCK THE COOK?"

Caleb looked down. "I don't see a question mark, do you?"

Tyson held up his hands when Caleb started to come closer. "Let me hop in the shower before you touch me."

The closer Caleb got, the more his nose wrinkled. "Yeah, you sorta smell like a barnyard."

"Yeah, well that's what happens when you have to clear debris out of one of the drainage pipes in the pasture."

"Ooh fun. And all I did was sell three paintings and a charcoal."

"Seriously?"

Caleb nodded.

Tyson was incredibly impressed with his lover. Red Lodge Landscapes had not only been embraced by the town but the many tourists as well. "Congratulations, sweetheart."

"Thank you. Now go shower so you can do as the apron says." Caleb turned back to the stove and shook his ass.

Still chuckling, Tyson walked into the living room on his way to the bathroom. He stopped in his tracks and stared at the painting above the fireplace. "Caleb!"

His lover came into the room all smiles. "I didn't want to give it to you until I was ready to say yes."

Confused, Tyson's eyebrows drew together. "But I thought you'd sold it?"

Caleb shook his head. "I just didn't want anyone else to buy it. I wanted to give it to you as a housewarming present."

"But I've lived here for almost a year."

"Yeah, but I haven't." Caleb released the ties of his apron. "Until now."

Tyson didn't know where to look first. As gorgeous as the man's body was, Tyson was still lost in his lover's eyes. He'd asked Caleb weeks ago to move in, but the man insisted on staying in his loft until his business was off the ground.

He stalked toward Caleb and wrapped him in his arms.

"Ooh," Caleb complained.



"Get over it. You're living with a man who works on a ranch." Tyson sealed his lips over Caleb's, thrusting his tongue inside the sweet recesses of his lover's mouth. He reached down and began to fondle Caleb's cock with his dirty hands.

"Ouch," Caleb squealed. "Those are rough."

With a roll of his eyes, Tyson led Caleb toward the bathroom. "Guess you'll have to come in to make sure I get all soft again."

Caleb ran his hand over the front of Tyson's dirty jeans. "Not too soft."

"No, sweetheart, it'll always be just right for you."

## *About the Author*

I've been a reading fanatic for years and finally at the age of 40 decided to try my hand at writing. I've always loved romance novels that are just a little bit naughty so naturally my books tend to go just a little further. It's my fantasy world after all.

When I'm not being a mother to a five-year-old and a six-year-old, you can usually find me in my deep leather chair with either a book in my hand or my laptop.

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