



Cattle Valley Mistletoe

CAROL LYNNE

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#### Warning:

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

#### Cattle Valley

#### CATTLE VALLEY MISTLETOE

Carol Lynne

#### Dedication

To J.P. Bowie, I'm so glad I've gotten the chance to read your work.

May your future be as wonderful as your books.

#### Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Coke: The Coca-Cola Company, Inc. Dr. Pepper: Dr. Pepper Company

Honda: Honda Motors Company, Limited Corporation

Hot Tamales: Just Born, Incorporated

Sheetrock: United States Gypsum Company Mr. Clean: The Proctor and Gamble Company

Walking Tall: Hyde Park Films (US)

#### Chapter One

"Kuckleman Construction," a deep gravely voice answered.

"Um, yes, hi, I'd like to speak with Halden Kuckleman."

"You got him. How can I help you?"

"Hi, Mr. Kuckleman, this is Reverend Casey Sharp from the Cattle Valley Community Church. I was wondering if you would be willing to come out and give me a bid on completing the church expansion." Casey adjusted his reading glasses, a nervous habit of his from grade school. He was starting to worry he'd never find anyone to finish the reception hall and at this late date, he was desperate enough to call on Halden Kuckleman.

"Sorry, I don't do churches," Halden said.

"Yes, well, I heard that, but I'm kinda desperate. The contractor we hired to do the work, quit in the middle of the project, and we've promised to have the building ready for the annual Christmas Eve party. I know you're not a religious man, Mr. Kuckleman, and if you'd be willing to come take a look at the building, I promise not to try and save you." Casey bit his lip. Shoot, maybe he shouldn't have said that. Even though it was common knowledge around town that Halden was a tried and true atheist, maybe Casey should have just kept his mouth shut. He was the new guy in town, and making enemies wasn't his idea of fitting in.

There was a loud sigh on the other end of the phone. "How much still needs doing?"

"Well, the basic shell is there, but nothing has been done on the inside. I'm sorry to say, there isn't any heat yet, but at least you'll be out of the snow and wind." Casey looked out his office window at the snow on the ground. It was only mid-November and already, the city had been blanketed with almost two feet of snow. He sure as heck wouldn't want to work in an unheated building, but then, if a person was used to working outside in weather like this...

"The heating issue won't bother me, just the location." Casey didn't say a word. Halden seemed to be considering it, and at least he hadn't hung up on him.

After a few seconds, Halden continued. "Will you be around this afternoon?"

Casey pumped his arm in the air in triumph. "Yes, I'll be here all day."

"I could probably swing by after lunch and take a look, no promises, though."

"Yes, of course. My house is next door, which is probably where I'll be. If you could just honk when you pull into the parking lot, I'll be right out." Casey closed the phonebook, and put it back on the shelf.

"See ya then," Halden said and hung up.

Casey put the phone back into its cradle and looked around his office. He still had boxes to sort through, and a sermon to practice for Sunday. Scratching his head, he got up and wandered into the kitchen. Maybe a cup of strong coffee would get him going.

The house still didn't quite feel like home, but what did he expect? He'd only been in Cattle Valley for two weeks, two

very lonely weeks. Despite his chosen vocation, Casey was a man who enjoyed sex, lots of sex. It was the only reason he'd chosen to go to college to get his Master's degree in religious studies instead of entering a seminary.

Now with his dream job finally in place, his social life seemed to be paying the price. It wasn't that folks in town weren't friendly. They just tended to keep Casey at arms length. He knew it was further fall-out from his predecessor, Reverend Brian Doles, but Casey needed them to understand he wasn't like that man. He'd never even considered beating up lover. Maybe the town just needed a chance to heal.

Pouring a cup of java, Casey idly walked through the living room to his bedroom. Although the front room and kitchen had been unpacked, most of his personal belongings still lined the walls in boxes. Casey just didn't have the heart to dig through memories yet. Leaving his family and moving to Wyoming had been a big step for him. His mom still didn't understand why he'd needed to go.

Maybe he'd get back to Kansas City after Easter for a short visit. He already missed his nieces and nephews and he'd just gotten here. Pictures of his close-knit family should have comforted him, but Casey knew they'd only make him more homesick.

Bypassing the boxes, Casey headed for the small bathroom off the living room. If he was going to meet Halden Kuckleman it was best he didn't smell like his own cum. Casey and his hand had become best friends since moving to town. Even though he relieved himself several times a day, it never seemed to scratch that itch he just couldn't reach.

Setting his cup on the sink, Casey undressed and looked at himself in the mirror. He knew he was a good-looking man. The line of men vying for his attention back home testified to that, but how did the people of Cattle Valley see him? Yeah, he wore small wire-framed glasses most of the time, but he didn't think they made him look dorky. Maybe the haircut his mother had insisted on was too short. Casey ran his hand over his blond head. He guessed it wasn't too short, just right actually, given his new vocation. There had to be something about him that didn't attract men in this town.

The ringing phone brought his gaze away from the mirror. Looking down, he debated whether or not to answer it. He was as naked as the day he was born, and the house tended to be a bit drafty. Suddenly worrying it might be Halden calling to cancel, Casey sprinted toward the phone, bare cock swinging.

"Hello," he panted.

"Uh, hi, Casey?"

"Hi, Nate," Casey smiled. Nate Gils and his partners were his only real friends so far.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" Nate asked.

"No, I was just getting ready to hop into the shower. I managed to convince Halden Kuckleman to take a look at the building." Casey sat on the couch, aware passing motorists might be able to see in the window. He knew it wouldn't look good if they spotted their new reverend walking around in the nude.

"Well, congratulations," Nate chuckled. "On getting Hal over, not being naked. I'm sure you've been doing that for awhile."

"Yeah, I'm a pro at getting naked, though not recently," Casey laughed. The nicest thing about Nate was he didn't have to put on airs about who he really was.

"You'll be snapped up before you know it. Listen, I was wondering if you'd like to grab some lunch later."

Casey brushed his hand over his exposed cock, poor neglected thing. "It would have to be an early lunch. I'm not sure what time Halden is coming other than he said sometime after lunch."

"Eleven at Deb's?" Nate asked.

"Sounds good. I'll meet you there." Casey hung up and walked back to the bathroom. Just then he had a date with hot water, and his hand.

\* \* \* \*

Spotting Nate, Casey wove his way through the crowded diner. "Hey," he said, sliding into the booth across from his friend.

"So," Casey began, taking off his coat, "how's the gym coming?"

Nate shrugged and set down his menu, "Fine, slow. We finally got the lease signed. Rio's in Houston talking to some guy he knows about buying some equipment."

"Oh, so that's why you asked me to lunch," Casey teased.

"I hate it. Every second he's gone is torture for me." Nate ran his hands through his hair and looked out the window.

"I've been here supervising the remodelling and he's traipsing all over Texas with some friend of his."

"How long's he been gone?"

"Since yesterday morning."

Casey laughed and shook his head. "From listening to you talk, I would've guessed he'd been gone a week."

"Well it feels like a week," Nate pouted.

Stella came over to take their order before they could continue. "I'll take the chilli and a cinnamon roll." Casey put his menu back in the little stand and waited for Nate to order.

"Why do you always get that weird combination?" Nate asked.

"What, chilli and cinnamon roll? It's what I grew up on."
Casey shrugged. "It was always my favourite lunch at school.
I guess I never really thought about it being strange."

"You Kansans are a little freaky with your food. Like you ordering a Coke when what you really mean is a Dr. Pepper, that's weird, man."

Casey scratched his jaw. "That's what most people say back home instead of pop or soda. Someone asks if you want a Coke and you say yeah, bring me a Dr. Pepper." Casey thought about it and shook his head. "You're right. We are a bunch of freaks."

They talked about the gym until their food came and they dug in. After a while Casey couldn't stomach anymore and pushed his plate away. "I swear this is the last time I'm going anywhere in public with you," Casey said, looking at Nate.

Nate picked up his napkin and started wiping his mouth. "Why, have I got food all over my face?"

"No, it's because darn near every eligible man that's come in here has tried to make eye contact with you, and they're completely ignoring me." Casey took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. He was just so frustrated.

"Hey, don't sell yourself short, you're a terrific looking man," Nate said as he checked out the diner.

"Okay, if I'm so terrific looking how come they're all staring at you?"

Nate shrugged and held up his hands. "I said you were terrific looking, but this," Nate gestured to himself, "is the total package and then some. Besides, it helps when they know I'm not available. Kinda like forbidden fruit." Nate couldn't hold his serious expression any longer and burst out laughing. "I'm just kidding. Give people time, they'll come around."

"I hope so, because celibacy is not my thing." Casey pulled out his wallet and put money on the table for his share of lunch. "I gotta get going. As hard as it was to talk Halden into showing up, it wouldn't do for me to be late."

"There's someone you should get to know. That man's built fine. When the rumours started up about us opening a gym, Hal was the first to call. After taking one look at him, I told him he'd do better as an instructor than a member. He turned me down though. Said he wasn't much of a people person. Far as I've heard, he only has one real friend in town and that's Gill. Funny thing is, as quiet as Gill is, I didn't know he had any friends in town. Don't ask me what the two of them do when they get together, because I'm sure it's not shootin' the shit."

"You mean you think they're seeing each other?" Casey asked, putting on his coat.

Nate shook his head. "Naw, from what I understand, they're just friends."

Casey nodded and shook Nate's hand before leaving.
Climbing into his little Honda, he headed home. By the time he arrived back at his house, he felt worn out. He hated driving in the snow. People around here thought it was nothing. Maybe he needed a four-wheel drive.

As he was getting out of the car, a huge four-door pickup pulled into the parking lot. From the sign on the side of the black truck, Casey determined it was Halden. With a quick look at his reflection in the window, Casey walked across the yard to the parking lot.

Casey's feet faltered when Halden exited his truck. *Oh, unfair. This was like waving a steak under a starving man's nose.* Halden had the body-type of every man he'd ever been attracted to. Tall, with wide shoulders, Halden walked toward him. He couldn't make out Halden's facial features because of the black cowboy hat riding low on his forehead, but by the way he moved, Casey guessed he was going to be just as yummy close up.

A few feet from the man, Casey held out his hand. "Mr. Kuckleman?"

Casey's hand was taken in a firm grip, almost too firm. "Call me Hal."

Trying to return the handshake almost killed Casey. He was definitely not Hal's equal in regards to strength. Upon closer examination, Hal's face was indeed yummy. Not

typically handsome features, but when you put them all together, the effect was nice.

"Okay, Hal, I'm Casey." He released Hal's hand and gestured to the back of the church. "As you can see, the shell is up, but that's basically it."

As they walked toward the expansion, Hal rubbed the back of his neck. "You mind me asking why the original contractor didn't finish?"

Casey opened the side door and led Hal into the big open space. "Nothing exciting. Jeff Hutton started the job but asked out of his contract due to some personal problems."

Hal nodded his head and continued to walk around the space. "So, what are we talking here? Is it going to be one big room or divided up?"

Motioning for Hal to follow him, Casey walked toward the make-shift work bench set along one wall. He unrolled the blueprints for Hal's inspection. "As you can see, it's basically the one big room, with the exception of bathrooms over here and a functional kitchen. We'll have our own church functions here as well as renting it out to other groups or individuals."

Hal rolled up the blueprints. "Do you mind if I take these with me? I need to study them before I can tell you how much and if it can be done in time for Christmas Eve. I'll be honest, the time-frame is going to be the biggest issue. Would you be opposed to having the party if everything's not completed?"

With those light blue eyes staring at him, Casey found it hard to even think. "Uh, well, I guess it would depend on just how far from being done it is."

"Cosmetics mostly, it'll take some time to get the wiring done and plumbing finished before we can even start on the insulation and sheetrock." Hal narrowed his eyes a bit and leaned forward. "I won't put speed over quality, so if you just want it done and don't care how, I'm not your man."

Oh yes you are, Casey thought. "I owe it to the parishioners to see the job is done right, so you won't get any arguments from me."

"Fair enough." Hal started to walk toward the door, but stopped and turned around. "I need to be upfront with you. It looks to be a bad winter for someone in my line of work. I reckon I'll take on this project, but you need to know it'll be for the money and to give me something to do over the winter. I've no desire to be led into the Promised Land by you or anyone else."

"I told you before, I'm looking for a contractor, not another parishioner." Casey felt a little irritated that Hal thought he'd try to convert him.

Holding up the blueprints, Hal nodded. "I'll take a look and get them back to you as soon as possible."

"I'd appreciate it," Casey said, following Hal's firm ass out the door and into the parking lot.

Getting in his truck, Hal called out, "By the way, do you already have the materials ordered, or am I going to need to do that?"

Scratching his head, Casey stepped closer to Hal's pickup. "We've already got most of it stored in my garage. The sheetrock hasn't been ordered though, or anything as far as paint, trim, stuff like that."

"Okay, good to know. I'll call ya later. It was nice to meet you, Casey."

"Same here." Casey managed a smile. As he stepped back and watched Hal drive off, he wondered if Hal was aloof with everyone or just men of the church.

#### Chapter Two

Stretched out on the sofa, Casey munched on a bowl full of popcorn and Hot Tamales, while watching *Walking Tall*. He didn't know whether he was paying more attention to the movie or The Rock's body, but both seemed to be extremely satisfying.

He'd just started a slow rhythm stroking his cock, when there was a knock on the door. Looking down at the cock in his hand, he sighed, "Later." Setting the popcorn bowl on the coffee table, Casey tried to adjust the half-hard bulge in his sweats, before just giving up and walking toward the door.

Looking through the peep-hole, his cock hardened further. With a smile, he unlocked and opened the door. "Hi, I wasn't expecting you." Casey shook his head, flustered. "What I meant was, I thought you'd call." He stepped back and let Hal into the living room.

"I'm sorry," Hal said, looking around. "I was in town anyway and thought I'd drop by to give you my bid." He handed a piece of paper to Casey.

"I have to find my glasses. Would you like to have a seat?" Casey gestured to the sofa.

Glancing down, Hal shook his head. "I'm okay here. I wouldn't want to track on the carpet."

"Oh," Casey studied the large tan boots. "Well, if you'll wait here, I think my glasses are in the study." Casey turned and went to his office. Flipping on the light, he caught his reflection in the window above his desk. With his hair

mussed, and his dick hard, he looked like a wanton fool. Quickly smoothing down the wayward locks, he looked down at his cock once more. *Please, not now.* 

Finding his glasses, he put them on, and studied the bid. He was a little shocked at the price. The bid was higher than he'd expected, but Casey knew he didn't have much choice. Hal was the only contractor left in the area, and apparently he knew he had Casey over a barrel. The image did little to quell his lust.

Walking back into the living room, Casey studied the bid some more. When he glanced up, he caught Hal looking him up and down with apparent appreciation. Casey mentally gave himself a little pat on the back, *yep*, *I've still got it*. Now the question was how to share it?

He stopped in front of Hal and pointed toward the bid. "I'll be honest. It's a little higher than I thought it'd be."

With a slight shake to his head, Hal pointed at the paper.

"A lot of the labour charge is because of the timeframe. If you want most of the building completed by Christmas Eve, I'm going to be putting in a lot of overtime."

Casey scratched his head. "If I agree to help out as much as I can during the day, can you knock some of this off? I mean, I know nothing about plumbing or wiring, but I can fetch and carry. Surely, with some grunt labour it should speed things up a bit?"

"I usually work alone," Hal said, voice getting a little gruff.

Taking off his glasses in frustration, Casey rubbed his eyes. "So are you telling me no, that the bid stands as is?"

Hal said nothing for a long moment. "I guess we can try it, but I can't make promises that it'll work out. I'll keep track of the hours I spend on site and adjust the bill accordingly at the end of the project. That's the best I can do, take it or leave it."

Casey stuck out his hand, and waited for Hal. "Deal," he said after Hal shook on it. Casey noticed Hal's grip wasn't as firm this time. Did that mean he thought Casey too weak to handle a real handshake? Well, he'd show him. Casey would be the best darn grunt man in the business. "When can you start?"

Hal released Casey's hand. "Six a.m."
Six a.m.? Wow, okay he could do this. "I'll be ready."

\* \* \* \*

The morning after their first workday, Casey poured coffee into a thermos. Every muscle in his body hurt, and his hands were trashed. How did people do this kind of work everyday? At least he'd been smart enough to put on three layers of clothing. Working in his coat was cumbersome. He'd noticed Hal wore a ski vest, maybe he should invest in one?

A glance at the clock showed it was time to head to the church. Casey put on his coat, and tucked the thermos under his arm before opening the door. It was still dark outside. What reasonable human voluntarily went to work at six a.m.?

Spotting Hal's truck next to the addition, Casey knew exactly what kind of man. He'd had to remind Hal three times the previous day that he should break for lunch. Hal was like some kind of robot. He very rarely talked, and when he did,

he just seemed to bark out orders. Casey had to remind himself several times he was working for the good of the church.

Opening the side door, Casey took off his coat and set the thermos on their worktable. "Morning," he called to Hal across the room.

Hal grunted a reply Casey took to mean good morning. "I brought some hot coffee if you'd care for a cup."

Slipping his tape measure into one of the pouches in his tool-belt, Hal turned. Without acknowledging Casey had spoken, Hal put the pencil behind his ear and walked toward him.

After digging for a few seconds in his toolbox, Hal came out with a pair of leather gloves. "I saw your hands yesterday and figured you could use these." He handed the gloves to Casey.

"Thanks. Would you like a cup of coffee?" Casey asked, holding up the thermos.

"Sure," Hal said.

Casey poured the aromatic brew into the thermos lid and handed it to Hal. "It's strong, hope you like it that way."

"It'll do," Hal said, sipping at his drink. He turned and went back to work. Casey looked down at the thermos and realised he hadn't brought another cup. Darn it, he'd have to go back over to the house. "I forgot something, but I'll just be a minute," he yelled, putting his coat back on.

Trudging back across the cold parking lot, Casey wondered if he'd ever break through Hal's surly demeanour. For that matter, why did he even care? Yeah, the man was hot, but

did he even have it in him to treat a boyfriend with respect? Wow, wait a minute. Who said anything about making Hal his boyfriend?

After grabbing another cup out of the cabinet, Casey once again made the trek back. Stepping inside, his gaze immediately landed on Hal. He was bent over the worktable jotting notes on the blueprints. He'd shed his vest and rolled up his sleeves. Nice arms. Casey watched as the tendons moved with each stroke of his pencil. He felt his cock begin to harden.

Averting his eyes, Casey took off his coat. When he finally got his first sip of coffee, he moaned. Hal's head popped up. "You say something?"

"No, sorry." Casey held up his cup. "It's just my first coffee of the morning ... makes me moan."

Hal glanced down, and Casey knew he was checking him out. Shoot, had he not been completely frozen, Casey would have gone over the edge from a look like that.

"So what would you like me to do for you?" Casey asked, quickly finishing his coffee.

"I'm gonna start on the wiring. You think you can start bringing in the spools from your garage?" Hal stuck his pencil between his teeth and waited.

"Sure, coming up," Casey said, sighing on the inside. Why he'd even bothered to take off his coat was anyone's guess. "Do you want all the electrical stuff?" Casey knew there was a lot more to wiring up electricity besides the actual spools of wire.

"Yep," Hal said around his pencil. He went back to looking at the blueprints, dismissing Casey it seemed.

This was going to be a long day, Casey thought as he grabbed his coat.

\* \* \* \*

By lunchtime, Casey had brought over, not only the electrical, but the plumbing supplies as well. Knowing the weather wasn't going to get any better, he decided to just torture himself once that week.

Laying the last of the PVC pipe down, Casey turned to Hal. "I have a meeting in an hour with the church board, so I'm gonna take off and grab a quick shower."

Without turning around, or speaking, Hal waved his goodbye. Casey shook his head and rolled his eyes. Stopping to retrieve the empty thermos, he headed out the door. The entire walk home Casey discussed his attraction to Hal with his libido.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Casey walked out the door, Hal sighed. "This is going to kill me," he said to the wall. He'd done his best to keep Casey out of his line of vision for the previous two days, but just knowing he was in the room was giving his willpower a workout. He'd felt bad for making him carry everything in from the garage, but Hal was at the end of his rope.

He remembered the first day he'd seen Casey Sharp. He'd been at Gill's garage when the man had pulled up to the selfserve gas pumps out front. Hal had immediately asked Gill

who the new guy was getting gas. He was definitely interested until Gill informed him Casey was the town's new reverend.

Little did he know, he'd be working for Casey barely a week later. It was hard enough to turn from the window the first time at Gill's, but now it was impossible. His ringing cell phone pulled him out of his misery. Unclipping it from his waist, Hal saw it was Gill.

"Hey," he answered.

"Hey, you want to come over to watch the game later?" Gill's deep voice asked.

"Sure, better than sitting home feeling sorry for myself." "The kid again?" Gill chuckled.

"He's not a kid. I imagine he's in his thirties. Casey just looks young." Hal glanced out the window toward Casey's house.

"Must be all that clean living he does," Gill teased.

"Don't remind me. I'll see ya after work. You feeding me, too?"

"Sure, I'll scrounge something up."

"Okay, let me off the phone so I can get this job done and get out of here." Hal started to hang up as he heard Gill laughing, damn him. Pushing the end button, Hal clipped the phone back onto his waistband and got to work. If visions of Casey next door in the shower happened to creep into his mind while he worked, well, who could blame him?

Putting the twelve-pack he'd brought in the fridge, Hal opened the box and took out a beer. "You want one?" he asked Gill.

"Are they cold?"

"They've been in my truck since lunch. What do you think?" Hal said, getting Gill a can.

"Damn, someone's grouchy this evening." Gill stirred what appeared to be a big pot of chilli.

"It's Casey. He's driving me nuts." Hal took his beer over and sat on one of the stools at the kitchen island. Taking a big gulp, he shook his head.

"Just because you have some hang-up about dating a religious man, don't take it out on me." Gill opened his beer and leaned his forearms on the island. "I know you've got something against religion, but what does going out and getting lucky have to do with it?"

"He's a reverend. You think he's gonna settle for a quick fuck a time or two? He's the kind of guy who's going to expect fidelity and happily-ever-afters." Hal ran his fingers through his short brown hair. "I don't do those things."

"You've cheated on someone before?" Gill asked, sounding shocked.

"Well no, but that doesn't mean I won't want to in the future. Besides, what would we talk about? How do you keep the subject of faith out of a conversation with a damned reverend?"

"You, my friend, are a puzzle," Gill chuckled. He tore a paper towel off the roll and wiped his shiny bald head.

Hal looked at his friend, trying to figure out why there was no apparent attraction between the two of them. Gill was a damn fine looking man. It wasn't everyday Hal found someone taller than he was, but Gill had him beat by a good four inches.

"What?" Gill asked.

"Why haven't we ever hooked up?"

"Uh, because we're friends and we both already have our eyes on someone else. Besides, I think you like being the top and no way in hell is anyone ever gonna top me." Gill gave Hal a wink and went to stir his chilli again.

Hal smiled at the thought of anyone attempting to top the black version of Mr. Clean. Just the thought of fucking Casey had Hal's cock hard in no time. "Thanks," he said to Gill's back. "I thought for sure I'd be able to get through an evening without a perpetual hard-on."

Gill turned around and held his hands up. "Don't look at me, man. Matter of fact, stop it. Go in the bathroom and take care of it or something. I'll be damned if I want to watch the game with you and your woody."

"I don't think that will be necessary. I'll try to control myself around that big gorgeous body of yours," Hal teased.

"Oh, now you're just asking for a smack-down. Get your ass up and set the table. It would be nice if you invited me over to that house you're so proud of once in awhile. But no, you always have to come here and eat up all my grub."

Laughing, Hal got out the big bowls and silverware. "Tell me again why we're friends?"

"Cuz no one else will put up with your cracker ass." Gill took the dishtowel off his shoulder and popped Hal in the butt.

"For you're information, I do invite you over, but you always whine that it's too far to drive. Besides, I can't cook nearly as well as you do." Hal got out the cheese, hot sauce and vinegar and put them on the table. "Crackers?"

"Yeah, don't you know what a cracker is?" Gill asked like he was crazy.

Rolling his eyes, Hal gave Gill his bowl to fill. "Crackers, saltines, ya know those little square things with salt you put in chilli."

"Oh, in the pantry, bottom shelf."

"You know, someday someone's going to hear you calling me that and come to the conclusion you don't like me much." Hal took his bowl before handing Gill another one.

Gill surprised him by leaning in and kissing Hal's forehead. "They'd be wrong. Now, let's eat."

#### Chapter Three

"Ow!"

"You okay?" Casey asked, walking over to Hal.

"Yeah, I wasn't paying attention and got a splinter. I'll live." Hal sucked at the skin between his thumb and forefinger.

"Let me see." Casey stepped up, and held out his hand.

Hal shook his head. "It's nothing. I'll dig it out with my pocket knife at lunch."

Casey rolled his eyes. Alphas could be such pains. "I'm not letting you *dig* anything out with a knife. Let me see it, and I'll run over and get my tweezers if I need to."

Hal grinned. Casey was a bit surprised the man even knew how. "Not gonna *let* me, huh?" Hal teased.

Sighing, Casey emphasised his outstretched hand. "Just let me see it."

Grudgingly, Hal put his hand in Casey's. Finding the small sliver of wood wasn't hard, but it appeared to be fairly deep. Pulling Hal by the hand, Casey stood directly under a light. "I'm going to run home and get some stuff." He willed his hand to release Hal's, but his body had other ideas.

Looking up into Hal's light blue eyes, Casey stopped breathing. Even standing as tall as he could, Casey only came to Hal's shoulder. His lips felt like they were on fire with the need to kiss the bigger man.

Hal started to lean down, lips parted when his cell phone rang. Hal blinked and straightened, unclipping his phone in one fluid motion. "Hal."

Casey swallowed his regret and walked to retrieve his coat. He didn't know how to feel. On one hand, Hal looked like he'd really wanted to kiss him, but on the other, he let a simple phone call interrupt without a second thought.

By the time he got back, Hal was off the phone. Setting the first-aid kit on the work table, Casey waited. Hal walked over. "That was the heating guy. He'll be here tomorrow to install the ductwork. We'll have heat in here before you know it. Of course it won't be economical to turn on until we get the insulation installed."

Looking up, Casey noticed the way Hal's breath was visible in the freezing room. "How long before that's done?"

Hal scratched his chin and looked around. "With the two of us? I'd say we should be able to do it in two days. So by Thursday, we should have it ready for heat."

"Um, do you plan on working on Thanksgiving?" Casey knew the man was a robot, but come on. What's Thanksgiving without eating yourself sick and spending the day on the couch snoozing.

"Thanksgiving? I hadn't even realised. I take it you'll be going home for the holiday."

"No, but I don't want to work either, and neither should you. Don't you have some family or friends you want to spend the day with?" Casey started sterilizing the needle and tweezers with alcohol.

"I don't have much family, but I've got friends," Hal said gruffly. He just seemed to pull away and shut down, like the almost-kiss never happened.

"Cool, then we'll start again first thing Friday. As it gets closer to Christmas, I'll have less and less time to help. There's a lot of preparing for the party and services, as well as the kids nativity..." Casey stopped talking when he noticed the red flush creep up Hal's cheeks. "Sorry," he said and went back to working on the splinter.

After a few more pricks with the needle, he could see the end. Picking up the tweezers he pulled the sliver out, and held it up. "Wow, that's a doozy."

"Thanks," Hal said and tried to pull his hand away.

"Wait. Let me pour some peroxide on it first." Casey picked up the brown bottle, and dribbled some over the wound. It bubbled for a few seconds and then quit. "Okay, you're good to go," Casey said, releasing Hal's hand.

Hal walked away, and went back to finishing the partition between the restrooms. Casey thought of Thanksgiving, and closed his eyes. Maybe he should have gone home? He knew he'd be welcomed at Nate's, but it was the threesome's first Thanksgiving together, and Casey didn't want to interrupt that.

Picking up the broom, he started sweeping sawdust into piles. Oh well, he'd still get a turkey and do the day up right, even if it wouldn't quite be the same.

\* \* \* \*

Thanksgiving sucked. Well at least as far as Casey was concerned. He'd made a big dinner, set the table and ended up in front of the television, eating on the coffee table.

After doing the dishes, he looked around his small house for something to do. He'd never been much of a football fan, and he'd seen all the movies that were on. He'd called his mom's earlier, and that had made him feel worse.

Walking from room to room, he decided to give in and call Nate. Picking up the cordless he dialled Nate's number as he continued to roam. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's Casey. I thought I'd just call to tell you all Happy Thanksgiving." Casey could hear Rio and Ryan in the background yelling at the football game. Yep, that's exactly what his parents' house had sounded like, well except Nate didn't have screaming kids running through the room.

"Hey, man. How has your day been?" Nate asked.

"Okay, fixed a big meal, have tons of leftovers." Casey plopped down on the sofa.

"I figured a big man like Hal would really be able to put it away."

"Oh, no, it's just me. I think Hal was having dinner with a friend." Casey picked at the frayed patch on the knee of his jeans.

"Really? As far as I know, Hal's only friend besides you is Gill, and I know for a fact he's in Tennessee."

Casey felt his stomach do a little flip. Was it possible Hal was just as lonely as he was? Nate made a sound that sounded a lot like a muffled moan. Casey could only guess,

but he assumed it must be commercial break. "Well, I'll let you go. I'll call next week, and we can have lunch."

"Sounds good. Take care, Casey."

Nate hung up before Casey could say anything else. Setting the phone on the table, he rubbed his eyes. Should he take Hal some desert, or was he just using that as an excuse to see him?

Deciding it didn't matter, Casey rose and went to the kitchen. Looking at the mountain of food, Casey decided to take Hal some leftovers. He wished he knew if Hal had cooked for himself. He knew his nurturing instinct was kicking in but instead focused on getting large enough portions packed away for a man of Hal's size.

Forty minutes later, Casey looked at the piece of paper in his hand then back to the mailbox. "Wow, Mr. Kuckleman, who knew you lived in a chalet?" Driving on bad roads with his little Honda was one thing, but the older car definitely wasn't up to Hal's driveway. No wonder the man drove a big four-wheel drive.

Casey cringed as the snow repeatedly scraped the undercarriage. With one quick, stupid move, Casey was stuck. After trying several times to get out, he shook his head. "Great. What a perfect ending to my day."

The house wasn't that far, maybe a hundred and fifty yards or so. He could walk it no problem. Turning on the little overhead light, he reached into his pocket for his gloves and came up empty. Trying once more as if they'd magically appear, Casey still came up with nothing. He thought back to the last time he'd taken them off and could clearly see them

sitting on the furnace vent to dry. Casey sighed and gathered his scarf and the big box of food. As soon as Casey opened the door the wind and blowing snow seemed to suck the breath right out of him. Adjusting the scarf to cover his face, Casey gripped the box and set out for the house.

By the time he reached the front door, he was numb. Saying a brief apology, he kicked the door with the toe of his boot instead of knocking. He was sure his fingers would break off if he tried. A few seconds later, he hit the door again just to make sure Hal heard him. Finally, he saw the big man get up off the couch and walk to the door with a questioning look. It was easy for Casey to see Hal through the glass and wood door, but with no lights on, he was sure to surprise the heck out of Hal.

Walking up to the door, Hal reached over and flipped the switch. The porch flooded with light, and Casey winced. The door opened immediately, and Hal stood before him, shirtless. Oh, God, please help me control myself.

"Casey? What're you doing here?" Hal ran a hand through his brown hair.

Teeth chattering, Casey looked down at the box. "M-Mind if I c-come in?"

"Oh, shit, sorry." Hal stepped back and Casey stepped inside. The house was as warm as a mother's womb, and Casey suddenly felt like crying. Seeing Hal like this, all relaxed and warm, did a number on his heart. He held the box of food out, and Hal took it and looked inside. "What's this?"

Casey tried to speak, but his teeth were chattering so bad he couldn't get anything out. Hal quickly picked up on his predicament. "What happened? Did your heater stop working in your car?"

Shaking his head, he took off his scarf. "S-Stuck d-down the d-drive."

Hal looked out the door. "Way down there?"

At Casey's nod, Hal put the box on the floor and helped Casey get out of his coat. "Where are your gloves?" he asked, looking at Casey's frozen hands. The look on Hal's face melted his heart even more. There was genuine concern there. Maybe he wasn't the only one feeling the connection?

"At h-home on the heater, drying."

Hal pointed to a small bench beside the door. "Sit and let me get these boots off."

Following Hal's command, Casey sat and held his foot out. On his knees in front of him, Hal pulled the snow boots off. "Come on in and set yourself beside the fire," Hal pulled Casey up and helped him into the living room with a strong arm around his torso. Casey knew immediately that he'd been right. Friends don't hold each other this tight against them, even if they are half-frozen.

"Wow, great room," Casey mumbled as he sat on the stone hearth. The heat on his back felt wonderful, thawing him even more. "I'm sorry about this. I just thought I'd bring you some leftovers. Even though I was alone, I thought I'd go ahead and make a full dinner. Somehow I didn't quite realise how much food I'd end up with."

Retrieving a blanket from the back of the couch, Hal knelt beside Casey and wrapped it around his shoulders. The action put them into close proximity, and Casey's chest tightened.

Hal looked into Casey's eyes, not backing away. "You brought me Thanksgiving dinner?"

"And dessert. I didn't know whether you preferred pumpkin, or pecan, so I brought half of each," he said, staring into Hal's eyes. This close, Casey could smell the musky scent of Hal's skin. He knew it was a blend of cologne and wood smoke, but it seemed pure Hal. Casey leaned forward and tilted his head upward, lips whispering across the stubble of Hal's chin.

When Hal still didn't pull away, Casey continued with light kisses and licks to the bigger man's neck and jaw. Hal tilted his head back to give Casey better access and a faint moan erupted. Casey wasn't sure if it was him or Hal, but it didn't seem to matter.

The skin under his tongue tasted salty as Casey travelled up Hal's jaw and across to his lips. With his mouth poised, Casey whispered, "Breathe." He saw the spark of lust in Hal's eyes just before their lips came together. Casey licked across the seam, and Hal groaned. Moving himself between Casey's thighs, Hal opened, and Casey thrust his tongue inside the hot depths of Hal's mouth. Oh God, this felt right. He'd never be able to explain it, but Casey knew at that moment, he'd fallen for the surly contractor.

They seemed to devour each other. Casey scooted to get closer, as Hal's hands landed on his butt. Never breaking their kiss, Hal picked up Casey and carried him to the couch.

As soon as Hal stretched out over him, Casey began to move, feeling the hardness underneath Hal's sweats, the bigger man grinding against him. Oh, oh wow, Hal felt good.

Casey's hands found their way under the elastic waist and onto Hal's firm butt. Breaking the kiss, he grabbed onto the cheeks and thrust up with all his might. "Gonna cum," he moaned.

Hal rose up enough to fumble with Casey's zipper, and then ahh, his cock was taken in that firm grip. Scooting to the side enough to stroke Casey's cock, also left Hal's erection within reach. Moving his hand from Hal's ass to his thick cock had them both moaning.

Pressing his thumb against the wide slit of Hal's crown was enough to set the big man off. Casey milked Hal's cock, as he tumbled over the edge into bliss. And, "My God," what bliss. Casey hadn't realised he'd said those words out loud until Hal shook his head and quickly pulled away.

"I'm sorry," Hal panted. "I can't do this, not with you."

"Uh ... I think you just did," Casey said. He couldn't figure out what had gone wrong. "Did I do something?" No, no, this couldn't be happening. It was right, it felt so right, dammit.

Hal rose off the couch and walked toward the fireplace, pulling his sweats up as he went. "I like you, Casey, a lot, but I can't get involved with you. We're too different. Our beliefs would get in the way, and one of us would wind up hurt."

Without bothering to put his spent cock back into his jeans, Casey sat up. He didn't know if he was pissed or hurt, but his stomach started to cramp, the words of rejection going bone deep. "So what am I supposed to do now?" He

wondered if it would help for him to beg. Something told him he'd happily do it if it meant being close to Hal again.

Hal turned back toward him, and Casey saw the momentary flash of heat as Hal noticed Casey's uncovered cock. "I'll get dressed and get your car pulled out. I'll understand if you want to find a new contractor."

"No, there isn't anyone besides you. I don't know how I'll do it, but I'll manage. I'm stronger than I look." Casey wasn't sure if he was trying to convince Hal or himself.

Thirty minutes later, Hal's truck had successfully pulled Casey's Honda out of the drift. Before Casey could turn around and drive off, Hal walked toward him. Shoot, please not now. Just let me slink home with my tail between my legs. Casey rolled down the window and looked up. "Yes?"

"I'll wait for you to get turned around and back to the road, just in case." Casey gave a short nod and started to roll his window up. Hal put a hand to the top of the window, getting his attention. "I'm sorry. I wish it didn't have to be this way."

Suddenly all the confusion and pain slipped out. "Tell me," Casey inquired. "Do you hate God or just those who pray to him?" He saw the red flush creep up Hal's cheeks, and he knew he'd hit the nail on the head. Hal was angry at God.

Letting go of his window, Hal said nothing, but he stepped back. Casey finished rolling up the window and put the car into gear. He wasn't sure what had gone on between God and Hal, but he hoped there was room enough for forgiveness, because he knew he didn't want to live without either of them.

\* \* \* \*

Hal watched Casey's taillights disappear around the curve in the road. He turned and got back into his truck. Sitting in the heated cab, he felt tears trickle down his cheeks. "He brought me Thanksgiving," Hal whispered.

Pulling into his garage, he didn't bother wiping his eyes as he made his way inside. Hal stood in front of the fire and looked around. He could still picture Casey stretched out under him, wrapped in his arms. Hal hugged himself, as he sat on the hearth.

For weeks he hadn't been able to think of anything but Casey. He'd tried his best to keep Casey at arm's length, knowing they could never be together. Even coming off as an asshole was better than leading Casey on. It wasn't that Hal didn't want a relationship with him, because he wanted it more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life, but his beliefs wouldn't change and neither would Casey's.

Hal looked up at the vaulted ceiling. "Once again you're taking away someone I love." As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Hal growled and shook his head. No way could he be in love this fast and especially not with a preacher. It was just the physical attraction he felt so strongly. He'd get over it, he had to, losing someone you love was too hard, and he'd be damned if he'd ever put himself in that position again.

### Chapter Four

It had been two weeks since Thanksgiving. Casey stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep. He'd prayed every chance he'd gotten, whether working or resting. He'd taken the Lord's name in vain Thanksgiving night and had yet to come to terms with his sin.

By the time he'd arrived home that fateful night, he was hurting, and angry. Instead of going into the house, he'd unlocked the church and gone inside. Kneeling before the alter, he'd asked God why. What had he done to make a fine man like Hal turn his back? The longer he searched for answers, the madder he'd become. "God dammit, why can't I have you both," he shouted at the tall bronze cross.

Casey's shame over what he'd done had followed him since. Just thinking about it now had his stomach cramping. It seemed to be doing that a lot lately. Looking at the clock, he saw it was almost time for the alarm to go off, another day of working alongside a ghost.

As the tears made tracks down the side of his face, Casey continued to question his vocation. He loved God, but he was beginning to wonder how much, because in the dark of night, he'd thought about giving it all up for Hal.

Casey sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. And every day the sun rose in the morning sky, he remembered why he'd chosen his life's work. Deciding to get an early start, Casey turned off the alarm and stood. Holding his abdomen, he walked through the drafty house to the shower. If he hurried,

he could get a good thirty minutes worth of prayer in before his workday began.

\* \* \* \*

"Hey there stranger," Nate said, closing the door.

Casey waited until Hal got a few nails into the wallboard before letting go and walking over to Nate. Casey stuck out his hand, but just like he always did, Nate ignored it, and pulled him into a hug.

"I've missed you," Nate said, clapping Casey on the back.
"Why haven't you been returning my calls?" Nate pulled back
and looked at him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I've just been busy getting the church ready for Christmas." Casey felt another bite of pain in his stomach at the lie. What was wrong with him? How could he have lost his way in one night?

"Liar," Nate said with a half-grin. "You've lost weight, you don't call, and from the bags under your eyes, I'd say you haven't slept." Nate suddenly looked over Casey's shoulder to Hal. "Did he do something to you?" Nate whispered.

Casey watched as Nate's jaw clenched. Unwilling to tell even a partial lie, Casey just shook his head. "It's nothing, really."

"Hal, I'm kidnapping your help for an hour or so, you'll have to suffer without him." Picking up Casey's coat, Nate helped him into it before steering him out the door. "I want you to see The Gym."

"It's done?" Casey asked, climbing into Nate's SUV.

"Not completely, but it's getting there." Nate pulled out of the parking lot and drove down Joshua Boulevard. "Feel like talking?"

Casey continued to look out the passenger window, giving Nate a slight shake of his head. They rode in silence for a few minutes before Nate pulled in front of The Gym. "Here we are," Nate said, getting out and walking toward the door.

Following Nate, Casey felt like he needed to throw up. As soon as they got inside, he excused himself and went immediately to the restroom. Barely making it to the toilet, Casey fell to his knees. He knew it was going to be a bad one, because he didn't have much to throw up. Sure enough, nothing but stomach acid and what looked like coffee grounds.

Casey was just wiping his mouth when Nate stepped into the room. "You okay?"

Flushing the toilet, Casey stood. "I think I might have a touch of the flu or something. I'll be okay in a couple minutes. Just let me get my face washed, and I'll be right out."

"Okay, man. Call out if you need anything." Nate left, and Casey scooped water into his hand to rinse his mouth. He didn't have time to get sick. There were still a million and one things to get done. Drying his face, he noticed how gaunt he looked and shook his head. "No wonder Hal doesn't want you." He straightened his clothes and attempted to put a smile on his face as he turned toward the door. Maybe if he acted like nothing was wrong, no one would guess his heart was broken.

"Sorry about that," Casey said, joining Nate and Rio. He looked around at the new equipment and freshly painted blue walls. "The place looks great. When do you open?"

"January second, but I don't want to talk about that. What's going on with you?" Nate asked, putting a hand to Casey's shoulder.

The simple friendly touch tipped Casey's already fragile emotional state over the edge. He felt tears well and shook his head. Nate pulled him into an embrace, and all Casey's fears came spilling out. "I'm in love with Hal, but he doesn't want me because of the church." Casey shook his head and gripped Nate's back, trying to hold on to reality.

"I thought about giving up the church for him." Casey leaned back and looked into Nate's eyes. "What kind of reverend does that make me, when I'm ready to toss away my faith for a man? I swore at God, in the sanctuary no less. I've been praying to be forgiven, but so far, nothing seems any clearer. I don't know what to do. I've tried getting over Hal, but it's not working. He works beside me, but I'm not sure he even sees me anymore. Why would I compromise my beliefs for someone like that?"

Nate ushered Casey over to a stool beside the new juice bar. He didn't say anything for a few minutes. Instead, Nate rocked Casey back and forth, letting him get it all out. Once the worst of the tears had subsided, Nate released his hold. "I wish I could tell you what to do. It's obvious the stress is making you sick, but unfortunately it sounds like the real problem is between you and God."

"Yeah," Casey sighed. "Hal's testing my relationship with my faith."

"Maybe or maybe you're using Hal as an excuse." Rio said, coming up to put a hand on Casey's shoulder. "What you need to do is figure out where you stood with God before Hal ever came into the picture."

Casey bristled. "I don't know what you're talking about. I'm the leader of a congregation. How could I do that if I questioned my beliefs?"

"Maybe it's not so much your faith you're questioning but your vocation. You told me yourself, the congregation, and the other folks in town seemed to keep you at arms length. I know this is the first church you've led, maybe you're disillusioned." Nate gave Casey a kiss on the forehead. "Maybe the problem is the town and not you at all?"

"What do you mean?" Casey wanted to believe there was another reason his own congregation seemed to wane a little more every Sunday.

Nate cleared his throat. "Maybe the town has become disillusioned. Brian Doles was very respected in Cattle Valley. People would have done anything for him, but he let them down. The person who in their minds was good and true turned out to be a monster."

"It's a lot to think about," Casey said, rubbing his sore eyes. "Would you mind taking me back to the church?"

"If you'll promise to eat some lunch? You need to take better care of yourself." Nate walked beside Casey toward the door.

"I need to fix the inside, before I can worry about the outside," Casey mumbled. He felt more lost than he had before, but Rio was right, this really had nothing to do with his love for Hal.

\* \* \* \*

After a couple of hours and no Casey, Hal started to worry. Casey knew they needed to get this sheetrock up, and it wasn't something Hal could do on his own. He looked out the window to see if his car was still in his drive. Yep, which meant he was either sulking at home or still with Nate. His jaw tightened at the thought of Casey with the good-looking and charming Nate. Hal knew Casey had been hurting lately. It was evident every time he caught Casey's gaze as they worked. He wished he could tell Casey he was hurting just as much, but it was better this way. A clean break would be easier on both of them.

Unclipping his phone, he called Casey at home. After four rings, the answering machine clicked on, and Hal hung up. Rubbing the phone against his temple, Hal tried to figure out if he should call The Gym. Would it seem intrusive?

He'd thought of nothing else besides Casey since Thanksgiving. Wishing he could get over his anger of thirty years but knowing it had become so much a part of him, he was lost to know how to let it go.

A quick shake to his head and Hal was calling information. After getting the number, he held his breath and called Nate.

"The Gym," a deep voice answered. It must be Rio, Hal thought.

"Hi, it's Hal. I was hoping to talk to Casey. We've got a lot of wallboard left to install, and I wondered when he'd be back?"

"Um, Nate dropped Casey off at the church over an hour ago."

"Oh, I haven't seen him," Hal said.

"I know he wasn't feeling well, maybe he's gone on to bed for the day."

"Yeah, maybe. Okay, well thanks." Hal hung up, and called Casey's phone again. When he still didn't get an answer, he started to really worry and decided to check out the church. As he walked toward the connecting door, Hal hoped he wouldn't burst into flames as soon as he entered the sanctuary.

Taking a deep breath, Hal walked into the church. "Casey?" Hal called in a respectful tone. He looked around the big open space, finding nothing. He turned, ready to make a hasty retreat, when he heard something coming from the front of the church. It had to be Casey, but he couldn't figure out what that sound was. As he stepped into the vestibule, he heard it again. Looking over, Hal determined it was coming from the men's restroom.

"Casey?" Hal called, opening the door. He spotted movement in one of the stalls. "You sick?" After another retch, his question was answered. Wetting a paper towel, Hal opened the stall door just as Casey stood and flushed the toilet.

"I'm okay," Casey turned, and Hal almost lost his lunch.

"The hell you are." Hal brought the wet towel to Casey's face and wiped away smeared blood. "We need to get you to the clinic," he said, showing Casey the towel.

"No," Casey said, shaking his head. "I just need to get to bed."

Hal felt his face pale. No he wouldn't go through this again. Without a word he reached out and picked up Casey. Cradling the smaller man in his arms, he walked toward the door.

When Casey saw them heading for Hal's truck he tried getting away. "Stop, just put me in bed, and I'll be fine."

"I know you're not as stupid as that. God won't heal this problem." As soon as he'd said it, Hal wished he could take it back.

"I don't like hospitals." Casey continued to squirm.

It took all Hal's strength to keep Casey off the ground. "It's a clinic. Indulge me."

Casey started coughing and Hal looked down. Casey's fist and the front of Hal's shirt were splattered with drops of blood. He just looked at Casey and unlocked the truck door. Getting him buckled in, Hal ran around and jumped in before Casey could escape.

Starting the truck, Hal looked over. Casey had his hand on the door handle getting ready to jump out. "No!" Hal screamed. "I won't lose someone else I love because they didn't get the help they need." He tried to reach across Casey to shut the door, just as the smaller man stuck his head out and threw up again. Jumping out, Hal ran around to give him some support.

Pulling his bandana out of his pocket, he tried to hold Casey up with one arm. Hal noticed a lot of stomach acid, but only a small amount of blood. Once Casey stopped, Hal laid him back in the seat. "Sit tight."

Jumping in, he spun out of the parking lot toward the clinic on Main Street. It wasn't until after they'd taken Casey back to the exam room that Hal had a chance to breathe and think. Shit, had he really told Casey he loved him? Maybe his little man was so out of it he wouldn't remember.

One thing he knew, he couldn't just sit there thinking. He picked up the phone and called his best friend.

"Gill's," the deep voice answered.

"You got time to baby-sit a friend?"

### Chapter Five

"Thanks, Nate," Hal said and disconnected the call, and walked back in to the waiting room.

"What'd he say?" Gill asked.

Hal took a deep breath and looked around the room. Cattle Valley Medical Clinic wasn't really set up as a hospital, but they had a small emergency department with a doctor on call. Dr. Isaac Singer was luckily the physician on call when he'd brought Casey in, and Isaac had come right over from his office next door.

While Hal had sat in the waiting room, Casey was in the procedure room having an endoscopy. Isaac had wanted to transfer Casey to a bigger hospital, but Casey had gotten upset, claiming he just wanted to go home.

After consulting with a physician in Sheridan, Isaac had agreed to do the procedure in the emergency department. If they could get the bleeding stopped, Casey could be released as early as the next day, or it could be up to three days. Hal couldn't imagine lying in an emergency room bed for up to three days. Casey would have been much more comfortable in a real hospital, but for some reason, he refused to go.

"Did you hear me?" Gill asked, bringing Hal out of his thoughts.

He turned toward his friend, and sighed. "Nate said he threw up earlier, when he was at The Gym." Hal ran his fingers through his hair. "It seems he's suffering because of me, the town, and his own conscience."

"I understand the you part, but what's this about the town?"

"It seems Cattle Valley hasn't been very receptive to their newest resident. A holdover from Brian Doles, I gather. Nate said Casey's been questioning his ability to lead the congregation." Hal didn't tell Gill that Casey was thinking about giving up the church. Hal still couldn't believe it. No one had ever loved him that much. Hell, he had a lot of thinking to do. But first, he needed to set Casey's congregation straight. No way would he let the people of this town paint Casey with the same brush used on Reverend Doles. Hal narrowed his eyes. "Do you know who's on the church board?"

"Some," Gill replied. "I know Mayor Madison, Shep Black, and Asa Montgomery are on it. I think maybe Pam Gleason, too."

"I'm going to step outside and start making phone calls. Come out and get me the second Isaac comes out." At Gill's nod, Hal walked out onto the sidewalk. Flipping open his phone he got to work.

\* \* \* \*

By the time he was let in to see Casey, it was going on eight o'clock. Hal stood at the end of the narrow bed and gazed at the sleeping man. Casey looked so fragile. Dr. Singer thought he'd closed the perforation to his duodenum, but they planned to keep a close eye on Casey for another forty-eight hours.

When he'd asked Isaac what had caused the bleeding in the first place, he was told gastric acid build-up, caused by stress and too many aspirins. Knowing he was one of the reasons for the stress made Hal feel like shit. The whole situation between the two of them was frustrating. Hal knew his feelings were more than any he'd had before. They certainly weren't the kind you had for a simple one-night fuck.

Pulling up a short stool, Hal sat next to the bed. He'd asked Quade Madison to set up an emergency meeting for nine o'clock. Hal just hoped Casey woke up by then. He'd like to look into those dark brown eyes just once before leaving for the night.

Hal had sent Gill on home after they'd talked to Isaac. Now it was just him. He knew he should call Casey's folks, but he knew nothing about them. He didn't even know for sure where they lived. Hopefully, Casey would wake up and tell him what to do. Hal wasn't good with sick people. After his mom had died, he'd run the other way as soon as someone mentioned not feeling well. He'd never thought he'd be sitting beside the bed of a sick man. Especially one he'd come to love. And there was no longer any doubt that he loved Casey. Watching him throw-up had almost brought him to his knees. All Hal could think about was Casey dying without knowing how he felt.

The thin legs under the blanket started to move restlessly, and Hal sat up, watching Casey's face. Before long, Casey's long eyelashes began to flutter. "Casey?" Hal whispered.

Casey's eyes started to open before shutting again. "Too bright," he rasped.

Hal jumped up and turned the overhead light off, leaving the light in the corner on. "How's that?" he asked, taking his seat again.

Casey tried again and managed to get his eyes open about half-way. "Better." He turned his head toward Hal. "Thirsty."

Reaching for the plastic cup on the table, Hal shrugged. "They won't let you drink anything until they're sure you won't throw it up, but they gave me this little sponge thing to wet your mouth down."

At Casey's nod, Hal dipped the sponge into the cup of water. "Open for me," Hal instructed.

Casey complied, and Hal ran the sponge around the inside of Casey's mouth. "Is that enough for now?"

Nodding, Casey's eyes drifted closed before opening again. "Tired."

"I imagine you are. Dr. Singer thinks he got the bleeding stopped, but they'll need to keep you here for another two days or so."

Casey shook his head. "I wanna go home."

"Sorry." Hal reached out and took Casey's hand. "I'll wait and let you talk to the doctor, but it sounds like they want someone to keep a pretty close eye on you for the next bit. I thought maybe you'd come to my house and take a little vacation from some of the stress you've been dealing with."

Casey looked at him for several moments. "Are you trying to get me away from the stress or the church?"

"The stress is killing you," Hal said.

Despite being tired, Casey started to get himself worked up. "There's a ton of work to be done on the building, and my Christmas sermon, and the pageant, and planning the party..."

"Enough." Hal stood and leaned over Casey. "None of those things are as important to me as you and your health." He closed the distance and placed a soft kiss on Casey's lips.

A look of surprise crossed Casey's face. "Why'd you do that?" he asked.

"Because I'm falling in love with you, and my beef is with God, not you." Hal brushed Casey's bottom lip with his thumb. "I'm not sure how it will work out, but I'd like to give it a try."

Tears pooled in Casey's eyes. As he tried to blink them away, a few escaped and ran down the side of his face. Capturing them with his lips, Hal tried to soothe the emotional man. "Is that a yes? Or is that a too-late-buddy?"

Casey nodded. "That's a yes, but I need you to do something for me."

"Anything," Hal said, giving Casey a grin.

"I'm gonna need you to kiss me again, and often." Casey smiled back.

"My pleasure," Hal said, seconds before he captured Casey's lips again. They started off slow, but soon Casey's tongue was tangling with his own. How had he lived without this? Holding Casey by the back of the neck, Hal took the kiss even deeper, bathing Casey's lips and mouth with his tongue.

A clearing throat broke them apart. Hal didn't release his hold on Casey but turned his head toward the doorway. Dr. Singer stood smiling at them, clipboard in hand.

"Might I have a word with my patient?"

Turning back to Casey, Hal placed one more kiss on his nose. "I'll be outside. I want to see you again before they run me out of here for the night." He stood, and squeezed Casey's small hand before walking into the hall. He didn't miss the wide smile Isaac gave him as he passed.

Well, folks would just have to get used to it. Standing in the waiting room, Hal had never felt happier. His primary goal now was to get Casey healthy and stress-free, and if that meant knocking a few heads together, he was up to the task.

Looking at his watch, he knew he only had about ten minutes before he'd have to leave for his meeting at the church. Pacing back and forth, Hal was just about to leave when Isaac finally came out of the little exam room they had Casey tucked in. "He doing okay?" Hal asked.

"Seems to be. Of course he's all goofy-eyed now with love, so it's a little harder to assess him." Isaac grinned. "I never in a million years would've imagined you two together."

"Yeah, well I think neither did we, which is part of the reason he's in that bed right now. I'm fixing to take care of the other part."

"Mind if I ask?" Isaac inquired.

Hal shook his head. "This town and Casey's congregation need an attitude adjustment."

Isaac seemed to know just what Hal was talking about. "You have to give people a break. The whole Reverend Doles thing was a shock to them."

"Don't care. That man in there has done nothing but good for them, and yet they refuse to see it. Well, if I have to hold their heads to make them look closer, they'll see it."

Isaac chuckled. "Something gives me the feeling if anyone can do it, you can. Good luck to you." Isaac shook Hal's hand. "The emergency room nurse will be on duty overnight. She'll call if I'm needed."

"Can I leave her my number, too?"

"Sure," Isaac said, walking off.

Pushing open the door, Hal knew he had less than a minute before he had to speed across town. "Hey," he said, going to Casey's side.

"Hey, yourself," Casey grinned.

"They're kicking me out, but I'll be back in the morning around nine to check on you." He bent down and gave Casey a kiss, sweeping his tongue into the warm depths for just a second. Hal drew back and looked into Casey's eyes. "I love you," he whispered.

"And I love you," Casey answered.

\* \* \* \*

After Hal left, Casey couldn't stop smiling. He knew he should be worried about the church and what would happen if he didn't get out in time for Sunday services, but right then, he didn't care. All that mattered was this feeling of utter peace within his heart. Hal hadn't asked him to give up his

faith. Instead, he'd said they'd work it out. Casey didn't really know what that meant either, but for this feeling, he was willing to take the risk.

He thought about calling his parents but decided against it. They tended to hover anyway, and if they found out he had a peptic ulcer, they'd be on the first plane out of Kansas City. They hadn't always been that way, but since he'd gotten pneumococcal meningitis his first year of college, they tended to worry. Now though, Casey smiled, he had other things to think about besides his folks.

As much as he'd like to take Hal up on his offer of recuperating at his house, Casey knew it would be easier for both of them, if they were next door to the church. What if it made Hal feel weird to make love to him that close to a church? He started to worry on it until he felt a slight discomfort in his stomach. Okay, enough thinking. He'd let Hal make the decision. Wow, how easy it was to trust Hal shocked him.

The nurse came in a few minutes later with a sedative.

"Dr. Singer wants you to get plenty of rest while you're here."

"Yes, ma'am." Casey swallowed the pill and handed her the empty paper cup. Before long his eyes were drooping. Hopefully his sleep would be peaceful. Dropping off, Casey still had a smile on his face.

### Chapter Six

At six the next morning, Hal was busy at work with help from Gill. "I really appreciate this, buddy." Hal hammered another nail into the sheetrock. Even though Gill was a hell of a lot stronger than Casey, Hal missed his regular helper.

"No problem," Gill answered, his voice deep and sleepy. "I don't open the garage for another hour."

"Hopefully I'll get another volunteer by the time you have to go." Hal thought about his meeting the previous night. He still wasn't sure what kind of impression he'd made, but he knew he'd gotten their attention. A few tried to make excuses, but Hal would listen to none of it. The bottom line was if they wanted their church to succeed, they'd need to come to terms with their feelings regarding Brian Doles.

Nate stood right beside him even though he wasn't on the board. Hal had felt relieved he wasn't the only one there to attest to Casey's character.

"Hey, you with me?" Gill asked.

Hal shook his head and hammered in the next nail. "Sorry. I was thinking about my meeting."

"They'll come around. I don't know Casey much, but anyone who has you defending them so vehemently has to be a good egg."

"Thanks. Gill? I think, no, I know, I'm in love. For the first time in my life I'm in love and I'm uneasy about it. What if our lives are just too different to make it work?"

After the last nail was in, Gill pulled Hal off the chair and gave him a hug. "I'm glad you finally found someone, but I don't know how to reassure you. I don't know what happened to make you turn away from God, but I think you'll need to decide which means more, the past or the future. Maybe being with Casey will help you heal."

"Maybe," Hal agreed.

"At the very least, I think you owe it to Casey to let him know what he's up against." Gill walked over to get the next sheet of wallboard.

Hal wondered if he could tell Casey about his past? He honestly didn't know. He'd tried over the years to forget that time in his life, only clinging to the hatred he'd felt as a way of remembering.

Gill hoisted the sheet into place and Hal resumed his place on the chair. He had another couple of hours before he could see Casey, so he might as well use the time wisely. Thinking of Casey had his cock perking up. Hal tried to suppress his thoughts, knowing Gill was at crotch level and wouldn't appreciate it.

Forty minutes later, Hal's cell phone rang. He put the hammer in his tool belt and answered. "Hello."

"Hi, it's Kyle Brynn. Uh, from Brynn's Bakery. I wanted to call and express my sympathies for Reverend Sharp's condition. Even though I can't really help with the construction, I felt I needed to do something. I've made up some donuts and hoped you could spare someone to pick them up."

Hal knew Kyle was in a wheelchair and didn't drive much. He had a handicapped equipped delivery van, but he rarely left his building. "That's very thoughtful of you. It's just me and Gill right now, and he's getting ready to go open the station, but I'll figure something out."

"Okay, well, they'll be waiting. Um, I'm sorry if I gave Reverend Sharp the impression I didn't like him. I've been down lately, and unfortunately it seems others have suffered for my mood."

Hal thought if anyone had a reason to be down it was Kyle. The fact the man was trying to make amends touched Hal. "Think nothing of it. I appreciate the sentiment though."

After saying goodbye, Hal hung up. "That was Kyle. He's got some donuts for someone to pick up and bring over."

"I'll do it," Gill volunteered.

Hal looked at his watch. "By the time you get there and back, you'll be late opening the station."

"So, I don't think the boss'll dock my pay." Gill winked, shrugging into his coat.

"Thanks."

A few minutes after Gill left, Shepard Black strolled through the door followed by two men Hal had seen in town but didn't know. "Morning," Shep said. "I brought a few of my ranch hands with me to help for a bit." He gestured to the two men, "This is Rance, and this young guy is my newest hand, Jeremy."

"Any help is appreciated," Hal said, shaking the new worker's hands. "I know you have your own ranch to tend to.

I'd like to get you all started and then slip away for a few minutes to check on Casey."

Shep nodded, and the four of them got to work. Almost thirty minutes later, Gill finally walked in with two big boxes of donuts. After thanking Gill and waving him out the door, the men took a short break. Hal started a fresh pot in the coffeemaker Casey had thoughtfully brought over the previous week.

As they ate a couple of donuts and sipped the hot beverage, Shep turned toward him. "How far are you expecting to get before Christmas Eve?"

"Huh?" Hal wondered what exactly the man was talking about.

"On the room," Shep chuckled.

"Oh, well, Casey and I had hoped to have at least the sheetrock up and the kitchen cabinets in, but I'd like to get it totally finished. Now that it seems I have more help I don't think it's an unreachable goal." Actually, he thought it was quite possible they could have the entire room complete. Hal smiled, thinking about the surprise Casey would be in for. "Casey will be in the clinic for at least another day, but I'm going to try and keep him away from the church. I've already talked to Quade about having one of the other members of the church fill in for him for the next couple of weeks. He needs some stress-free living for a while longer to get his ulcers fully healed."

Shep grinned. "So in other words, you want to surprise him with a finished building?"

Hal grinned back. "Yep. That is, if I can keep him away. For some reason, I think he's under the impression if he does a good job on the addition, his congregation will come to accept him. He's been killing himself, literally, trying to work on this with me during the day, while attending to his other duties in the early morning and evenings."

Shep seemed to sober. "This is a small town, Hal. It takes folks a good while to accept newcomers, Reverend Sharp more than most. It wasn't anything personal, but none of us wanted to be fooled again. I don't know about the others, but I decided to sit back and watch a while before making a determination. I'll admit, it was selfish as hell, but I don't put my trust into many, and I didn't want to be taken for a fool again."

"Thanks for being honest, but I can tell you, there's no finer man than Casey." Shep smiled and nodded. Hal felt relieved. He'd change the attitudes of the town, one conversation at a time if he had to Casey would never again feel people didn't like him.

\* \* \* \*

Casey opened his eyes when a calloused hand touched his face. He grinned, "Hey."

"Hey, yourself," Hal said, leaning over to give him a brief kiss.

"Mmm," Casey moaned. "That's nice." He reached out and grabbed the front of Hal's coat, pulling him back down for another. Casey's tongue stroked against Hal's as the kiss went deeper. Casey felt the tenting of the sheet at his groin

and grinned. He broke the kiss and looked down. "Someone else seems happy to see you."

Hal groaned and ran his hand over Casey's erection. "You're killing me."

Casey laughed and lifted the side of the sheet for Hal's wandering hand. Hal chuckled and shook his finger. "Now you're trying to get me kicked out of here."

"Well honestly, that wasn't my first thought." Casey let the blanket fall. "Have you been working?"

Pulling up the little stool, Hal sat down and leaned on the bed. "I have. If I make you a promise the room will be done enough for your party will you promise to not stress over it? I've already asked Nate to come and decorate and get all the donations you'll need."

Casey felt his face pinch. Was Hal saying he wasn't needed at all? "Seems like you've taken care of everything but replacing me on Sundays."

Hal looked guilty. "Well, I actually asked the board if they could find one of the congregation to lead the services for the next two weeks."

"You what?" Casey couldn't believe what he was hearing. He sat up and tried to swing his legs over the side of the bed. If he was going to have an argument, he needed his pants. He looked around the room. "Where are my clothes?"

Hal put his hands on Casey's shoulders. "Just relax. I know what you're thinking and you couldn't be further from the truth."

Casey narrowed his eyes, "Oh yeah, what am I thinking?"

"That we don't need you," Hal stated. He moved one hand off Casey's shoulder to cup his cheek. "It's because we need you that we're doing this. You could die from this, Case. Don't you understand that?"

"I'm not gonna die. It was just a little blood," Casey pouted. What if they liked the person who filled in more than him? Would he be well rested and out of a job? "What am I supposed to do with myself?"

Hal leaned in and kissed him. "Let me get to know you, let me take care of you." Casey received another kiss, this one longer, deeper. "It will be nice for the congregation to step into your shoes for a change to see just how hard you work every day."

Casey took a deep breath. Dr. Singer had told him flat out that he needed to find a way to deal with his stress. Maybe taking a little break wasn't a bad idea. After all, it wasn't like anyone was really going to miss him. He looked into those sky blue eyes in front of him. Spending time with Hal would certainly be a good thing. He pictured the two of them snuggled in front of Hal's big fireplace.

"Will you be sure and tell whoever plans to fill in, to come and see me? I already have the next couple of sermons planned, and I'd like to help them."

"Sure."

"Will you do one more thing for me?" Casey pleaded with Hal.

At Hal's nod he continued. "Please see if you can get me out of here today? I'm feeling fine and I just want to be in a real bed with a thick mattress." Casey gave Hal a look that

said he didn't plan on being alone. It had been too darn long since he'd slept in another man's arms, and he'd never been in love so this would be even better.

Grinning, Hal sighed. "I'll ask if I can pick you up at the end of the day and take you home with me. Is there anything you'd like me to get from your house?"

Casey rubbed his razor stubble. "My shaving kit, a couple pairs of sweats and some T-shirts, socks. I think that should do me for a couple of days."

Hal seemed to be making a mental note. "Underwear?"

Smiling, Casey shook his head. "Don't plan on needing them. How warm's your house anyway? I might just run around nude all day. I'm a little paranoid in town, but no chance of anyone seeing me at your place. Well, except you."

"You're going to make it hard for me to leave you every day to get the building done, aren't you?"

"If I'm doing my job right I am." Casey pulled Hal down for another kiss. He knew it was all new and that's why he couldn't get enough, but every time he touched the bigger man, he melted.

Groaning, Hal broke the kiss. "Let me round up Isaac before I leave. I'll finish as early as I can and hopefully be back to get you."

"Thanks," Casey said as Hal gave him one last peck before walking out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Breaking for the day, Hal headed over to pack a bag for Casey. He dug the set of keys out of his pocket and opened

the door. Hal wanted to get this over with as soon as possible and get to the clinic, so he wasted no time finding a bag and shoving clothes inside. Despite what Casey had asked for, Hal put in a pair of jeans, long-underwear and wool socks. If he was lucky maybe Hal could get Casey out of the house to help him hunt down a Christmas tree.

Opening the bottom drawer of Casey's dresser, his eyes bugged. With a grin he put a few more things into Casey's bag. After finding a pair of snow boots in the closet and locking the house, Hal was on his way to get his man.

He chuckled to himself. His man. He'd never had anyone he'd considered in that particular term. What was it about Casey that was so different from every other man he'd slept with? Hell, he hadn't even fucked Casey yet. The image of the two of them had Hal's cock pushing hard against his zipper. He could well imagine Casey's sweet little body under him, or above him, riding up and down on Hal's cock.

Pulling up in front of the clinic, Hal shook his head. Plenty of time for that later. Casey needed a few days before he'd be up to the gymnastics Hal had in mind.

#### Chapter Seven

"Watch the sidewalk here. It can get pretty slippery," Hal said, as he wrapped an arm around Casey.

Casey was steady on his feet, but he liked the feel of Hal's warmth so he didn't discourage it. Once they were inside, Hal started flipping on lights. He sat Casey down on the bench just inside the door and knelt in front of him.

"Let's get these off," Hal said, pulling off Casey's boots.

Looking at the top of Hal's head, Casey smiled. Hal was treating him like he was really something special. An overwhelming wave of lust ran through Casey, and he tilted Hal's head up, devouring his mouth in a kiss.

Moaning into the kiss, Hal moved between Casey's legs. Slipping his hands under Casey's ass, Hal squeezed. "Yes," Casey whispered, wrapping his legs around Hal's torso. "Want you."

Hal groaned before shaking his head. "You need to rest," he said, kissing Casey's neck.

"I need to come," Casey corrected. "It'll alleviate the stress on my balls," he added with a grin.

After looking into his eyes for a few seconds, Hal stood, picking Casey up into his arms. "I don't have any stuff in here," Hal said in explanation as he carried Casey toward what he assumed was the bedroom. He'd never had anyone carry him before, but he had to admit, it made him feel cherished.

Licking the soft skin at the base of Hal's neck, Casey latched on and sucked. When Hal didn't protest, Casey sucked harder, sure he was bringing up a bruise. Unless Hal planned to wear a turtleneck the rest of the week, everyone he came into contact with would see Casey's mark. He liked that, he admitted to himself. The thought of staking his claim in such a visual fashion hardened his cock even more.

Without releasing him, Hal tumbled them both onto the big bed. Within seconds, they'd pulled each other's shirts off, trying to get at skin. Hal pushed his hands under the elastic of Casey's sweats. "Need to feel you," he panted, wrapping his fingers around Casey's cock.

Thrusting into the touch, Casey tried to work Hal's jeans off, but the belt was impeding his progress. Frustrated, Casey unbuttoned the jeans before sliding the zipper down, leaving the belt in place. He palmed the bulge hidden behind Hal's briefs. "Need," Casey begged.

Hal managed to get his belt undone one handed, still stroking Casey with the other. As soon as the belt was free of the buckle, Casey used his hands and legs to slide the denim down. The first press of Hal's naked shaft against his own, tipped Casey over the edge. Embarrassment overtook him as warmth shot between them. "Sorry," he apologised. He hadn't come that fast since he was fourteen.

Hal kissed him and reached over to the side table. Coming back with a bottle of lube and a new box of condoms, he sat back on his heels. "Don't be sorry. It makes me feel good to know you want me that much."

Casey took the lube out of Hal's hand. "Let me get myself ready."

Shaking his head, Hal took the bottle back. "No, I want to taste you first." After sheathing himself, Hal once again insinuated himself between Casey's spread thighs.

With his eyes closed, Casey enjoyed every kiss, lick and suck Hal blessed him with, as he worked his way down Casey's body. "Nice," Casey moaned, as Hal licked the sensitive skin behind his balls.

When the warm velvet of Hal's tongue brushed across his puckered hole, Casey's hips automatically thrust into the air. Over and over, Hal licked and kissed, slowly loosening Casey's muscles.

Positioning his arms under his knees, Casey brought his legs against his chest, giving Hal free reign. A grunt from the big man had Casey smiling. Oh yeah, he could definitely get used to Hal's talented tongue. Casey cried out as Hal introduced a lubed finger into his neglected passage.

"So hot," Hal murmured easing his finger in and out.

"Want you," Casey moaned. He'd had quite a few lovers in the past, but Casey had never felt this humbled by their touch.

"Need to stretch you more. I don't want to hurt you," Hal panted. It was obvious to Casey that Hal wanted him just as much.

Shaking his head, Casey groaned. "No, I want to feel every inch of you sliding inside me."

Hal looked up into Casey's eyes. Casey could see the fire burning in those light blue eyes he'd come to love. "I won't last long," Hal said, withdrawing his fingers.

"Neither will I, but we've got time." Casey spread his legs, welcoming Hal's much bigger body between them. As Hal positioned the head of his cock at Casey's hole, he closed his eyes. "Fill me."

The breach was slow, but Hal steadily pushed his way inside Casey's body, one glorious inch at a time. "So good," Casey whispered. Never had he been so filled, both in body and soul.

When Hal stopped, Casey realised he was fully impaled on Hal's cock. Casey shook his head, he felt like he was having an out-of-body experience. Opening his eyes, he stared up into Hal's. "You fit."

Hal grinned, sweat already beading on his forehead. "Was there ever a doubt?"

"No." Casey smiled back.

Hal pulled back, taking that precious cock with him. Casey's body did its best to suck the shaft back in, not wanting to be parted for a second. He was just about to cry out in frustration, when Hal thrust back into him. The immediate feeling of being full threatened to steal Casey's breath. "More," he panted.

Repositioning his legs, Hal took Casey's words to heart and began pistoning in and out of his sensitive hole. "Yes," Casey cried. He began to move in counterpoint to Hal, wanting, no begging, for everything he could get.

Reaching up, Casey skimmed his hands over Hal's well-developed chest muscles, stopping at his pebbled nipples. The need to taste was overwhelming, but the pounding rhythm didn't leave Casey in the position to reach them comfortably. He settled instead for squeezing and twisting the tawny coloured discs.

"Not gonna last," Hal moaned.

Casey took that as his cue and moved one hand from Hal's body. He wrapped his fingers around his cock and pumped himself to Hal's already established rhythm.

"So sexy," Hal said, eyes feasting on Casey's cock. "Come for me."

The soft words and intense gaze pushed Casey over the edge into bliss. He forgot to breathe as his body bowed and his cock erupted. "Never, never felt like this," Casey shouted as he painted his chest with cum.

He felt Hal thrust into him a few more times, before a roar echoed throughout the large bedroom. Collapsing on top of him, Hal's weight was very much welcomed. They didn't say anything while trying to come down from such heights.

When Hal's cock slipped free, he quickly removed the condom, tying it off. Hal threw the rubber into the trash beside the bed before settling beside Casey. Moving easily back into Hal's arms, Casey yawned.

"Tired, baby?" Hal questioned, running his hand up and down Casey's back.

"Content," Casey answered, kissing Hal's chest.

Hal didn't say anything for a few minutes. Just as Casey was about to drift off, Hal started to speak. "I haven't been with many men, but that felt different."

"Mmm hmm." Casey turned his head and licked at Hal's nipple. "For me, too."

Yawning again, Casey was pulled tighter to Hal's chest.

"Rest, we'll figure it out later," Hal said, his deep voice

vibrating against Casey's ear where it rested on Hal's chest.

Nodding his head, Casey drifted off.

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Standing at the stove, Hal felt eyes on him a second before arms wrapped around his waist.

"You shouldn't have let me sleep so long," Casey said, placing soft, open-mouthed kisses across Hal's naked back.

"You looked so comfortable I hated to leave you, but I thought you'd need to eat something." Hal gestured toward the skillet. "I hope you like scrambled eggs. Isaac said you're stomach needed to take it easy for a few more days."

"I'll gladly eat anything you put in front of me, I'm starving. Someone gave me a pretty thorough workout all night."

Hal turned off the burner and slid the eggs onto two plates. Popping a couple of pieces of bread into the toaster, he turned around and faced Casey. "We never did get a chance to talk." He closed the distance, taking Casey's mouth in a short but deep kiss.

"I know, and you have to leave to go to work," Casey said, nestling his head against Hal's chest.

Skimming his hands down Casey's lean back, Hal cupped his man's fine little ass. "Yeah, but I won't be late getting home. I'm making a trip into Sheridan to pick up the tile."

"I could go." Casey looked up at him.

"You're supposed to be resting. It's bad enough I kept you up all night." Hal didn't want to admit that he'd love Casey to ride beside him all day.

"It's sitting in a truck not exactly manual labour," Casey grinned. "Please let me come?"

Chuckling, it was plain they were both thinking of the previous night and Casey's loud pleading. "Let me go into town and do a few things, then I'll swing by and pick you up."

Casey looked at Hal for a few seconds. Hal knew Casey wanted a look at the reception hall, but he was keeping all of that a surprise. "Won't it be out of your way to come all the way back here?"

"Nope, I know a shortcut." He kissed Casey again. "Let's eat before our breakfast gets cold."

### Chapter Eight

Pulling into the building supply store, Hal looked over at Casey. "You coming in?"

"Sure." Casey smiled and hopped out of the truck. Grinning, Hal followed that cute little ass inside the store.

Deciding to have a little fun, Hal walked up to the nearest clerk. "Hi, we're here to pick up the boxes of black and red floor tiles I ordered for Cattle Valley Community Church."

Casey coughed and grabbed Hal's arm. With a straight face, Hal looked over. "You okay?"

Shaking his head, Casey narrowed his eyes. "Grey with little blue flecks. It's what I showed you from the catalogue."

"Oh, well I must've made a mistake. Would the black and red look so bad, though?"

"Yeah, I think so. I planned to paint the walls a pretty sky blue to match the floor, and..."

Hal decided to give Casey a break. "I was just kidding. Geez, loosen up." He grinned.

"Very funny. You nearly gave me a heart attack." Casey punched Hal in the arm. Even though he could barely feel it through his thick winter coat, Hal quickly grabbed his arm and howled in pain.

Evidently their playful activities weren't having the same effect on the clerk who rolled his eyes and walked off. "Well," Casey said. Straightening, he walked to the customer service counter and waited. When a young woman smiled at him, Casey smiled back. "We're here to pick up some floor tiles.

We asked one of your associates, but apparently he finds little humour in his job."

Hal had never seen this side of Casey. He stood back and watched as Casey handled the girl with ease. He was charming yet still business minded as he turned to Hal and asked for the order form. When the cashier tried to charge him more than the agreed upon price, Casey showed her the paper, making sure she saw that it was for a church. Hal had to chuckle when he told the woman she needed to watch who she tried to cheat because some took it a little more seriously than others. Of course Casey made a show of pointing toward the sky before putting his finger over his lips.

By the time they got into the truck, Hal was shaking his head. Not only had they come away with the tiles for the price agreed upon, but the manager had thrown in the tile adhesive as a donation to the church. "That was something," Hal said. "You should have gone into business. You're good with money."

Casey looked sideways at Hal. "Don't you think it takes business skills to run a church?"

Hal didn't know what to say. He hadn't meant to insult Casey, but he'd thought only of the spiritual side of Casey's vocation. "I'm sorry." He shook his head. "I guess I haven't given your job enough thought to make a statement like that."

Casey sighed, "We still have a lot to talk about."

Hal knew Casey was right, but they'd been having such a perfect day. He wasn't sure how Casey would take the news

of Hal's fall from grace. Reaching out, he pulled Casey next to him. "Later, okay? Can we just enjoy this for now?"

Casey nodded and moulded himself to Hal's side. "Buckle up," Hal reminded him. "I don't want to take any chances with you." He waited for Casey to comply before pulling out of the parking lot. "So," Hal began, "why don't you tell me about your family."

"My family? Well, they're pretty normal I'd say. Dad works for the city, Mom's a homemaker. I have an older brother and an older sister, both married with kids." Casey shrugged. "Normal."

"You're from Kansas City, right?" Hal got onto a straightaway and put his hand on Casey's thigh. He was tempted to do some exploring, but he wanted to learn more about Casey while he could.

Casey shook his head. "Just south, a town a little bigger than Cattle Valley. What about you?"

Hal felt tightness settle into his chest. He didn't like to think about where he was from, so he went with the story he told everyone. Was that wrong? He wanted to be honest with Casey and knew the time would come soon enough, but for now ... "I did most my growing up in Wyoming."

"Do your folks still live around here?" Casey asked, rubbing the soft skin between Hal's fingers.

It took Hal several seconds to answer. "No, I never knew my father, and my mother died when I was eight."

Casey interlocked his fingers with Hal's. "I'm sorry."

Hal squeezed Casey's hand letting him know it was okay. "It was a long time ago. I was raised by my mother's cousin, Ada and her husband, Dave."

"Do you still see them?"

"Occasionally, at funerals and stuff." Hal pointed toward the back of the truck. "I think I'll drop you off and run into town. I don't really need to get started today, but the adhesive should be kept warm."

Soft lips landed on his cheek. "Are you trying to change the subject?"

Hal sighed, "Yeah, for now. I just ... I'm not ready." He turned his head and gave Casey a quick kiss.

"Do you have time for a quickie before you head back to town?" Casey ran his free hand over Hal's fly.

Groaning, Hal spread his legs to give his growing cock more room. "Once I get inside with you, I won't want to leave again. I'd better take care of things before coming home."

"Ya know, if the roads weren't snow covered, I'd be sucking you off right now." Casey ran his tongue up Hal's jaw.

Hal moaned. "I'm tempted to pull the truck over and let you do just that." That reminded him of something. "Hey, Case, would you be interested in getting tested tomorrow? I mean, you can trust me if we do. I won't step out on you or anything." He looked over at Casey and felt stupid.

Giving Hal's cock another grope, Casey purred in his ear.
"I had Isaac run one right after you told me you were falling for me. I'm clean by the way. I was embarrassed to tell you I wanted us to be together exclusively."

"Why would you be embarrassed?"

"I don't know. I've never done exclusive, and I wasn't sure that's what you wanted. I've never had a relationship." Casey shook his head. "It just seemed kind of dreamy to me, like I was being silly to want you all to myself."

Hal pulled into his drive and put the truck into park. Turning to Casey, he lifted the smaller man and set him on his lap. "I don't share. I've never had what I consider a relationship before, but when I'm with someone I don't stray. This is my first time being in love, and I can guarantee you I won't think kindly to another man even looking your way." He narrowed his eyes. "If that's acceptable, I'll stop into the clinic before coming home tonight."

With rounded eyes, Casey nodded. "I don't think you have to worry about anyone in town giving me a second look. I seem to be almost invisible to them." Suddenly, a smile broke out on Casey's face. "You really think you're in love with me?"

"Well, like I said, I've never been in love, but yeah. If love means thinking about you all day and dreaming of you every night. Feeling like I've been kicked in the gut at the thought of something happening to you." Hal ran his tongue over Casey's lips. "Wanting nothing more than to wake up with you every morning."

Casey wiggled back and forth against Hal's growing erection. "What happens at night?" he asked with heat in his eyes.

"At night, we curl up naked in front of the fire. Talk about our day, before I carry you off to the bedroom to fuck your brains out." Hal grinned.

Casey started, "Well, aren't you a smooth talker." He thrust his tongue into Hal's mouth and moaned. "That sounds like the perfect way to spend every evening for the rest of my life."

Hal watched as Casey's bright eyes clouded. "Let's not dream anymore until we talk. We both know the things we need to work through aren't minor, and if I'm going to have my heart broken..." Casey didn't finish the sentence.

"Fuck it," Hal said putting the truck in gear. "I'll park the truck in the garage." He gave Casey another kiss before moving him back to the seat beside him. "The last thing I wanted was to get you upset again. I'm done working for the day. Right now and always, you're more important."

Hal hit the garage remote and pulled in. Lifting Casey out of the truck, he carried him into the kitchen. "Why don't you go put some sweats on while I make us some hot chocolate and build a fire? I won't leave the house until we get things settled between us."

Casey stood looking at him for several moments. "Are you mad at me?"

Hal realised his voice had gone brusque. He ran a hand over his face and shook his head. "No, baby, I'm mad at myself. Instead of just talking to you about my hang-ups, I've made you feel insecure. It's me who's insecure. I'm afraid once you know everything you'll change your mind about loving me."

Taking two steps Casey wrapped his arms around Hal.

"Whether or not we can work out our relationship has nothing to do with me loving you. I'll always love you, Halden."

Letting out a breath, Hal hugged Casey as tight as he dared. Smacking that cute ass, he kissed Casey's forehead. "Go get changed and I'll be there in a minute."

\* \* \* \*

Slipping on a pair of well-worn dark grey sweats, Casey sat on the bed. He knew he needed to prepare himself for this conversation, but he didn't know how to start. He'd felt the tension in Hal's body earlier when he'd asked about Hal's family. Something told Casey Hal's problem with God revolved around the death of his mother.

Deciding to go without a shirt, Casey pulled the blanket off the end of the bed and carried it to the living room. Two cups of instant cocoa sat on the coffee table as Hal worked to get a fire going.

Taking the time to appreciate the view of Hal's butt in a black pair of boxer-briefs, Casey smiled. "I like your comfy clothes more than mine," he said, coming further into the room.

Hal looked over his shoulder and grinned. "Feel free to take off whatever you want. No need to stand on ceremony on my account." Putting the fire-grate in place, Hal stood and turned toward him. "Grab those pillows off the couch and come over here."

Tossing the pillows onto the floor, Casey pushed his sweats down and off. Wearing nothing but a smile, Casey carried the blanket in front of him. "I thought we might get cold."

Hal's gaze was riveted to Casey's crotch. "I'm heating up just fine," Hal said, pushing his underwear down his thighs.

Casey was the first to stretch out on the rug. He held the blanket up. "Will you cover me up?"

Grinning, Hal squatted, straddling Casey's feet. "I'll cover you." He kissed his way up Casey's legs, stopping for a quick taste of Casey's awakening cock. By the time Hal reached his mouth, Casey was hard and wanting.

Wrapping his legs around Hal's torso, he pulled the bigger man down for a kiss. The warm depths of Hal's chocolate flavoured mouth had Casey panting in no time. "Love you," he whispered, breaking the kiss.

Casey threaded his fingers through Hal's hair, knowing it was time to get this over with. "Would you like me to start?"

Hal shook his head and moved to lie beside Casey. Resting his head on Hal's chest, Casey waited. After a few long moments, Hal began. "My mom got pregnant when she was nineteen. She'd left home with a guy—I assume he was my father—right after graduation. When she became pregnant, dear old dad took off. She turned to the church and they took her in, supported her. After I was born, they helped her find a little room in a boarding house. By this time, mom was totally immersed in the teachings of the church and the Reverend Marshall." Hal stopped talking, and Casey could tell he was sorting through a lifetime of buried pain.

"When I was eight, she got sick. To this day I don't know what from, but the Reverend Marshall told her to pray. Mom spent everyday in the church on her knees. When she got to the point that she was too sick, she sent me in her place, telling me if I prayed hard enough she'd live. I ... tried..."

Casey tightened his hold on Hal's torso. He knew Hal's mother had died, and now he knew how. "Shhh, that's enough for now." Casey wasn't sure what to say. How a boy could be placed in that position by people who were supposed to love and protect him, Casey didn't understand. A realisation struck him, and he looked up at Hal. "You're not an atheist are you?"

"Huh?" Hal asked, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"It's not that you don't believe in God, it's that you're angry with him." Casey quickly worked through the last few days. "When I was throwing up and refused to go to the doctor, were you mad at God or the fact that I was refusing medical help?"

Hal just looked at him, and Casey could see the wheels turning. "What are you trying to say, Case?"

Casey took a deep breath. He knew it wouldn't be easy for Hal to hear what he was about to say, it may even drive a wedge between them. "God didn't let you down when your mom was dying, she did. But a little eight-year-old boy can't hate his dead mother, so you turned that anger in another direction. You told me that you wouldn't let me die just because I was too stubborn to go to the clinic that day. I think over time you've realised that your mom should have gone to the hospital and not the church."

"God and the Reverend Marshall let her die then tried to blame me," Hal said, pulling away enough to get up and walk toward the fireplace.

Watching Hal put a few more logs on the fire, Casey blew out a breath. He didn't know who the hell this Reverend Marshall was, but Casey felt like finding him and kicking his butt. "You know now that your mother should've gotten medical treatment, don't you?"

Bracing his hands against the mantle, Hal looked down into the fire. "Yeah."

"Do you know that even though I'm also a reverend, I'm nothing like Marshall?"

"I know Casey the man, but I've never heard Reverend Sharp address a congregation of followers." Hal turned to look at Casey but didn't move from his spot.

Casey stood and walked toward Hal. Standing in front of him, he looked up. "You see, that's the difference. I don't have followers. I have fellow worshipers. Every man and woman in my church has their own mind. They don't blindly follow me and my teachings. We gather together on Sundays to praise and give thanks to the Lord, it's just easier when one man is sharing the teachings. It doesn't make me any better than they are."

Hal placed a kiss on Casey's lips. "If you don't mind, I'd like some time to myself. I think I'll go for a drive." Hal pulled away and started gathering his clothes.

"Would you rather I left? This is your home after all."

"No." Hal shook his head. He zipped his jeans and walked back over to Casey. "My feelings for you haven't changed. I just need to have this out with God in private. I'll be home later."

He didn't want Hal to leave, but he knew if he tried to stop him, it would prolong Hal's agony. Hal was right, he needed to get things straightened out, but Casey felt it had more to do with feelings toward his mother rather than God. That was for Hal to figure out though.

"I love you. Drive safe and come back to me."

"I'll always come back to you," Hal said. Casey watched him slip on his boots and coat before walking out to the garage. Hearing the big door open and then close, Casey walked to the window and watched Hal drive slowly away from the house. He just hoped the eight-year-old still trapped inside Hal could finally find peace.

#### Chapter Nine

As Hal drove through the countryside, he realised his tank was getting low. Deciding he could use some gas and hopefully a quick cheer-up from his best friend, he pulled into Gill's. Looking at the clock, he decided to gas up and see if Gill wanted to grab a bite to eat.

After parking the truck, he wandered inside. "Where you at old man?"

"Who you calling old?" Gill asked, sliding out from under Nate's Mercedes.

Hal was surprised to see Nate's car in the shop. "What's wrong with it?" Hal gestured toward the black convertible coupe.

Gill shook his head and wiped his hands on a rag he'd pulled from his back pocket. "Not a damn thing. This car's a masterpiece of machinery." Gill brushed the back of his hand across the passenger side door. "I asked Nate if I could borrow it to study for a week or two while things were slow."

Shocked, Hal shook his head. "And he said yes?"

Hal would have sworn he saw the big black man blush. "Well, he asked me for a favour, and I told him this was the payment." Gill shrugged.

"So what was the favour?" Hal asked sitting on a stool close to Gill.

"Kyle needed someone to fix the wheelchair lift on his van." Gill shrugged. "It was no big deal."

Hal studied his friend. He just wasn't acting like himself. He knew Gill was interested in someone in town, but Hal had never pried into whom. "You like him, don't you?"

"Nate? Yeah, he's a nice enough fella." Gill stood and walked toward the sink to wash up.

Hal grinned. "I was talking about Kyle Brynn."

Gill started scrubbing his hands with vigour. "What are you doing here anyway? I thought you had a building to finish and a man to take care of."

Even though he hadn't answered the question, Hal now knew the answer. Deciding to let it drop, Hal walked toward the sink. "I thought maybe you'd like to get something for supper."

Pulling some paper towels off the roll, Gill turned around. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" Hal scratched the side of his neck before shoving his hands in his coat pocket. "I just needed a break from my thoughts, no big deal."

"Deb's?" Gill threw the towel into the trash and started unzipping his coveralls.

Hal was always surprised by the shear muscle mass of Gill's body. You couldn't see it in his customary work gear, but despite having been out of professional football for eight years, Gill looked bigger and stronger than ever. He walked into the office and waited for Gill to lock up. "You wanna just follow me? I thought I'd stop by and do some work on the hall afterward."

"Meet ya there," Gill said walking toward his truck.

It was almost seven o'clock when Hal parked in front of the church. Hoping a couple of hours work on the addition would set his mind at ease, Hal got out and started unloading the tile and adhesive.

With the first load set on the floor, he made a pot of coffee. It should be ready by the time he had all the boxes unloaded, and he had a feeling it was going to be a long night. After readying the pot, he plugged it in and noticed a little spark. Hal studied the outlet for a few seconds. He'd have to bring in his voltage tester in the morning. Shaking his head, he walked back out to the truck.

Sipping his first cup of coffee, Hal thought about Casey. Gill had reminded him that the annual lighting ceremony in the park was at eight-thirty. He knew Casey had never witnessed Beauregard Park lit up in all its glory. Was what Hal was feeling worth having Casey miss it?

He pulled out his phone and called home.

"Kuckleman residence," the soft voice said.

"Hey," Hal said. "I thought maybe you'd like to come into town and go to the lighting ceremony."

Hal held his breath when Casey didn't immediately reply. "Well, I just got off the phone with Nate. I tried to call, but you had your phone turned off. I left you a message. They're going to pick me up. Would you like to meet us at the park?"

"Sorry, I went out to eat with Gill." Hal blew out a breath. He really didn't feel like competing with Nate tonight. It also annoyed him that Casey said Hal could *meet* them at the park. His temper surged. "Forget it. I'll work on the building.

See you later." Hal hung up without waiting for a reply. He was sure it was a childish thing to do, but he wasn't feeling grown-up just then.

Picking up the broom, he decided to sweep up. He had a pretty good sized crew of volunteers coming the next day to paint. After that, he could get started on the trim work and the floor.

The longer he worked, the more guilty he began to feel, or was it jealous? He wanted to share the lights with Casey. The thought of the smaller man wrapped in his arms drinking hot chocolate was too much to resist. He just hoped Deb's Diner was still open.

Shrugging into his coat, Hal ran out the door. If he was lucky he could get the cocoa and still make it to the park in time to find Casey.

\* \* \* \*

He didn't know why he'd even come. The lights were beautiful, but they didn't sparkle for him. Casey looked over at the threesome, happily cuddling up to each other as they laughed and joked. Rio, Ryan and Nate had tried hard to include him, but some things you couldn't share.

Casey thought about his earlier phone conversation with Hal. He'd been so upset and worried after Hal left the house. It took him by surprise when Hal had told him he'd eaten dinner with Gill. Knowing there wasn't anything between the two men didn't make the sting any lighter.

The fact was, Hal was in a good enough mood to go out to eat but not good enough to ask Casey. It was times like this,

Casey wished he was a cussing man. A few choice words directed at Hal would probably make him feel much better.

"You look like you're ready to go," Nate said walking over.

"Yeah." The last thing he wanted was to go back to Hal's house and wait for him. "Would you mind dropping me off at my place?"

Nate looked at Casey for a few seconds. "You sure?"

Casey nodded. "If Hal wanted to see me he'd be here instead of working on the addition." Casey shoved his hands in his coat pockets and walked toward the parking lot.

As they passed the church, Casey spotted Hal's truck around back. A sharp pain hit him in the stomach. He wasn't sure if it was the ulcer flaring up or seeing Hal's truck and knowing he couldn't go after him. Casey pressed his fist to his gut, hidden in the darkness of the backseat.

Nate stopped the SUV and turned to look at Casey. "You sure this is where you want to go?"

"Yeah. Hal has a few things he needs to work out. I'd just be in the way." He received a nod from Nate in reply. Opening his front door, he waved back before stepping inside.

As soon as he crossed the threshold, Casey tore off his coat and made his way to the bathroom. "Please don't let me throw up," he moaned as his stomach started to roll. He felt a little better after splashing his face with water, so he decided to take a shower and just go to bed.

\* \* \* \*

With two large cups of hot chocolate in hand, Hal made his way through the thinning crowd. When he didn't see who he was looking for, he asked Mayor Madison if he'd seen Casey.

"I saw them leave about an hour ago," Quade replied.

Stopping long enough to dump the full cups into the trash, Hal headed home. Even though he'd yet to make peace with his past, Hal knew Casey was definitely his future. The important thing now was to make sure Casey knew it.

When he arrived home, he was surprised to find the house dark. "Casey? Baby?" When no reply came, Hal quickly walked from room to room. Finding no sign of Casey he called Nate.

"Hello."

"Hey, it's Hal. I just got home and Casey isn't here, are you guys still out somewhere?"

There was a slight hesitation before Nate answered. "Casey wanted us to drop him off at his house. He said you had some things you needed to work out and he thought it best that he stay at his house until you do."

"Oh."

"Sorry, man."

Hal felt numb. "No problem, he's right. I need to get my head on straight and deal with some stuff. Thanks for taking him tonight."

"No problem."

"Bye." Hal hung up the phone. He admitted to himself that Casey's attitude hurt. Yeah he needed to do some more heavy thinking, but he thought Casey understood it no longer

had anything to do with their relationship. Evidently, Casey thought differently.

Grabbing a bottle of whiskey out of the cupboard, Hal poured himself a drink and walked toward the living room.

\* \* \* \*

Casey wasn't sure how long he'd slept before he woke, with a persistent pain in his stomach. Sitting up in bed, he rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock. It was only eleven so he hadn't been in bed long.

Deciding maybe some antacid pills would settle him down, he rose and walked toward the kitchen. Grabbing the bottle out of the cupboard, he went to the sink for a glass of water. Looking out the window, he saw the lights were still on in the addition seconds before he noticed the smoke. "God help me," he said reaching for the phone. After a quick call to the fire department, Casey was out the door racing toward Hal and the burning building in nothing but his underwear.

He was surprised to find the door locked. He banged several times, calling for Hal. When he got no answer, Casey tried looking in the window. The smoke was getting thicker by the second, and he could barely see a couple of feet. Afraid Hal had been overcome with smoke, he quickly searched around for something to break the window.

Coming back with a large rock, Casey broke the glass, yelling once again for Hal. With the mutton bars on the windows, he knew there'd be no way he could climb in.

Reaching his arm up as far as he could his fingertips brushed

the lock. Taking a calming breath, Casey tried again, feeling a brief sting as his fingers managed to flip the lock.

Hearing sirens in the distance, Casey pushed the window open and hoisted himself inside. "Hal!" Casey tried to cover his nose and mouth with his arm. He felt the sticky wetness of his own blood against his face and looked down. A large jagged cut on his upper arm made him a little woozy. He hated the sight of blood.

Shaking it off, he pulled his underwear off and held it against the wound as he continued to search the large room. Not finding Hal in the main room, he quickly ran toward the bathroom. He was glad the fire seemed more smoke related than anything else. Just as he was coming out of the women's restroom, the door to the outside was kicked in.

Casey looked up at the fireman, complete with oxygen mask. "I can't find Hal," he cried, seconds before passing out.

#### Chapter Ten

The ringing phone brought Hal slowly out of a deep sleep. He ran a hand over his face and realised he was still on the couch. His second thought was a phone call in the middle of the night was never a good thing.

Scrambling for the phone, Hal managed to reach it before it clicked over to the answering machine. "Hello?"

"Hal, its Ryan. I just got a call from dispatch. A fire was reported at the church."

"Fuck." Hal ran a hand over his bristled jaw. "The church though, right? Not Casey's house?"

"No, looks like the addition. Casey's the one who phoned it in. I'm headed there now."

"Right behind you," Hal said and hung up.

He quickly ran to the kitchen and slipped his boots and coat on before rushing out the door. As he drove down the drive, he tried calling Casey's house. He knew he wouldn't reach him, but he had to try.

The closer he got to the building, the more a sense of urgency overwhelmed him. Fire? How had the building ... "Oh fuck," Hal said. A sudden vision of the coffeepot came to mind and the small spark earlier. Had he inadvertently burned down Casey's church by leaving it on, or was the wiring the culprit? Neither option sat well, nor was he prepared for the sight before him. Not only was there a fire truck in front of the church but an ambulance as well.

Hal was out of the pickup and running toward the ambulance in a split second. *Please don't let it be Casey inside*, he thought as he wove through the milling crowd of onlookers. He reached the ambulance just as two paramedics were lifting a stretcher into the back. "Casey," he yelled, pushing past the fire fighters.

"Hal," he heard the muffled reply. Looking over the paramedic's shoulder he could see Casey, white as a sheet, with an oxygen mask over his face. He looked so small on the stretcher it almost dropped Hal to his knees. He started to climb in, but Zac, the new paramedic in town, stopped him.

"Sorry, Hal, but you'll have to follow us to the clinic."

Warring with himself between arguing with the paramedic, and letting them get to the clinic, Hal nodded. Looking at Casey, he held up his hand. "I'll be there before you are, baby."

Without giving a second look to the building behind him, Hal ran for his truck. He was waiting for the ambulance as it pulled up to the back emergency entrance to the clinic.

Hal stepped through the automatic doors and acknowledged Dr. Sam Browning. He didn't know Sam well but had met him on several occasions. He knew all three physicians in practice at the clinic were good, he just hoped Sam was the best.

As soon as Casey was wheeled into the brightly lit room, Hal saw Casey wince. Hal took his place at Casey's side. Reaching for his lover's hand, he noticed the blood soaked bandage for the first time. "What happened?" Hal asked Zac.

"He cut himself trying to unlock the window to get into the building," Zac said after filling Sam in on Casey's vital signs.

Sam looked at Hal. "I need to get him into the operating room and get the bleeding stopped. Wait out here and I'll let you know."

The gurney carrying Casey disappeared behind a swinging door, and Hal turned to Zac. "Is he gonna be okay?"

"Probably," Zac said, taking off his latex gloves and tossing them into the trash in the nurses' station. "He was inside searching for you when the fire truck arrived on scene."

"Looking for me?" Hal asked, running his fingers through his hair.

"Seems he saw the work lights on and thought you were still in there."

"He risked his life thinking I was in danger?" Hal asked, more to himself than Zac. He couldn't understand it. Hal cursed under his breath. It was totally his fault Casey was in that room. First whatever he'd done to catch the damn building on fire, and then being in such a hurry to find Casey at the park that he'd left the lights on.

Needing some air, Hal made his way toward the entrance only to be stopped when Ryan, Rio and Nate pushed through the double doors.

"How is he?" Ryan asked.

"I don't know. They brought him in and took him immediately to one of the exam rooms. His arm was bleeding pretty badly though." Hal scrubbed the heels of his hands over his eyes.

Ryan's hand landed on Hal's shoulder in sympathy. Nate didn't stop there but instead wrapped his arms around Hal's waist. "I'm so sorry."

Giving Hal's shoulder a slight squeeze, Ryan released him. "The actual damage to the addition was minimal. They won't know for sure until they have a few more hours to go over things, but it seems a power surge might've been the culprit. The coffeepot was left on."

"Shit," Hal said and closed his eyes. Could there possibly be a bigger arrow pointing toward whose fault all of this was?

Hal was distracted when Sam came into the waiting room. "How is he?"

"He'll be fine. Casey lost a good amount of blood, but his pressure's doing fine and we've got him all stitched up. I'd like to keep him overnight, but he's insisting he be allowed to go home." Sam chuckled and shook his head. Yeah, Hal could just imagine his little man standing up to the doctor.

"So I can take him home?" Hal asked, rubbing his hands on his jeans.

"Give him a few more minutes on oxygen. He inhaled a little smoke but nothing damaging. He'll need some clothes though."

"Huh?"

Sam blushed, "It seems he was only wearing his underwear when he entered the church. After seeing his arm, Casey did the smart thing and used what he had to hold against the wound."

Despite the fact Casey was safe, the idea of even a handful of people seeing his man naked didn't set well with Hal. "I'll

take him home in a hospital gown. Bill me for it if you need to."

\* \* \* \*

Hal left the hospital with a very drowsy Casey wrapped in a hospital gown and blanket. Through a little creative buckling, Hal managed to secure Casey so he could stretch out in the seat beside him.

With Casey's head on his lap, Hal pulled away from the clinic. "The church?" Casey asked, his voice still a little scratchy.

"I haven't seen it, but Ryan assured me the damage wasn't anything that couldn't be repaired." Hal threaded his fingers through Casey's hair. He was glad nothing more serious had happened. "I'm sorry, babe."

Casey turned his head and kissed Hal's hand. "I was so scared you were in that building. All I could think about was getting to you."

"When I realised I'd been a shit-head, I decided to surprise you at the park with hot chocolate. You were the only thing on my mind and like a complete ass I left the lights and the coffeepot on." Hal sighed. "I'll pay for the damage and do the repairs free." He wanted to ask Casey for his forgiveness, but Hal knew he didn't deserve it.

"Hey," Casey said, looking up at him. "When I saw the smoke? I didn't give two thoughts to that building. It was you I was worried about. Still am."

Hal tried to watch the road, but his eyes kept drifting down to Casey's face. "I love you."

"Good, because you're going to be seeing a lot of me for the next ten days."

"I hope for a little more than ten days, babe," Hal said with a grin.

"Oh, you're not getting rid of me. I meant I'll be working beside you during the day and sleeping beside you at night." Casey gave him a smug look, and Hal shook his head. Before he could protest, Casey continued. "It's more stress for me to sit at your house and worry about the building getting done in time. At least this way, I'll be doing something about it. I may not be the most experienced help you've ever worked with, but I'm the cutest."

"Ya think so?" Hal asked. He tried to keep a straight face but failed miserably. "Charlie Brooks is a damn fine looking man."

"Stop right there, Mr. Kuckleman, before you bite off more than you can chew." Casey pinched Hal's leg.

"Good thing I prefer blonds." Hal pulled into the garage and turned off the ignition. "What about your arm?"

Casey unbuckled his seat belt and sat up. Moving his arm up and down a few times, Casey nodded. "I figure if it feels good enough for me to be horny, it's good enough to work."

Hal looked at the gorgeous man next to him. After everything he'd done, Casey still wanted him. "Really, you're horny?"

"Always," Casey said. He leaned in and ran his tongue over Hal's lips. "My arm may be sore, but my ass is fine."

Hal's cock sprang to attention at the image. "Shit, let's get you inside. We only have a couple hours before we have to get to work, and I plan on fucking you several times."

\* \* \* \*

The feeling of being stretched and filled was pure bliss,
Casey thought as he lay under Hal. He could see Hal's
concentrated effort to go slow and Casey shook his head.
"Take me, I'm not hurting. But I might be sore in a few hours
when the pain pill wears off. Better take advantage of it while
we can."

Hal's brow rose as he slid out of Casey's body before slamming back in again. "Oh yeah, like that," Casey groaned, trying to lift his ass off the bed, his fatigue from earlier gone the minute they'd hit the sheets.

Casey closed his eyes briefly as Hal's thick cock brushed his prostate gland. Making himself open them, he stared into Hal's eyes. He could see the heat as well as the love in their blue depths. Casey felt like Hal was burrowing into his soul, trying to figure out the answers he so desperately needed.

Despite the punishing rhythm Hal had set, Casey managed to lift a hand to the bigger man's face. He cupped Hal's cheek before moving his hand to the back of Hal's neck. Pulling him down for a kiss, Casey worked his tongue against Hal's. He sent up a silent prayer to please help his lover heal.

Breaking the kiss, Casey closed his eyes and whispered, "I love you."

With a grunt, Hal's body began to tremble as he emptied his seed into the rubber. Casey wrapped his fingers around

his cock at the beautiful sight above him. The utter contentment on Hal's face helped push Casey over the edge, ropes of cum bursting from his cock, painting his stomach and chest. Before he could even come down for his climax, Hal was lapping at his stomach.

The image of Hal greedily licking him had Casey thanking modern medicine. Hal had been thrilled when Casey handed over his blood test results. Now if only they could get Hal's report back. Sam promised it would be ready the next day, and Casey's mouth watered at the thought of finally really tasting his lover.

"You're so hot," Hal moaned, licking his way around Casey's pebbled nipples.

With an unexpected yawn, Casey wiggled. "Sorry, I think the day is catching back up with me."

Hal scooted up to rest his head on the pillow beside Casey's. "Why don't you try to get a few hours sleep?"

"What about you?" Casey asked, snuggling against Hal.

"Not sure, I might get lucky and drift off, but I still have a lot rattling around in my head."

Kissing Hal's cheek, Casey sighed. He hated not being able to help Hal in his quest, but he'd already said everything he had a right to, now it was up to Hal. The best Casey could do was to be by his side in case he fell.

#### Chapter Eleven

With a large thermos of coffee tucked between his thighs, Casey rode beside Hal toward the church. He was a little apprehensive about what they'd find. Hal had indeed, finally fallen asleep sometime in the early hours of the morning and they'd both slept through the alarm.

Now it was going on eight in the morning and Hal was driving a little too fast on the winter roads. "Getting there five minutes sooner isn't going to help us much if we have a wreck on the way," Casey commented.

"Huh?" Hal asked.

Casey pointed toward the speedometer. "Oh," Hal said, easing his foot off the gas pedal. "Sorry, I was thinking about everything I'd need to do."

"I thought you hadn't seen the damage yet."

"I haven't, but I'm sure the sheetrock will need to be redone. I've already called an electrician this morning. I still don't know where I went wrong, but I'm man enough to know when an expert in the field is needed to figure out my screw up."

"Don't," Casey warned. He knew Hal felt guilty, but they were both alive and the addition was just a room. As he gazed out the window, Casey tried to mentally balance his personal cheque book. He knew Hal said he'd pay for the repairs, but if they were going to have a partnership, he wanted them to share in everything. Casey thought he had a pretty nice cushion, especially if he was going to be spending

a lot of time at Hal's. He could turn down his heater enough to keep the pipes from freezing yet save a fortune on heating costs.

As they neared the church, Casey reached out and put his hand on Hal's leg. He wasn't sure what he felt more nervous about, him seeing the damage or Hal. The sight of the church coming into view surprised the heck out of him. "What's going on?" He asked, turning to look up at Hal.

"I don't know," Hal replied, parking the truck.

Casey looked around in amazement. There had to be around ten trucks in the parking lot along with a couple of SUVs. He recognised Nate's right away as well as several of the other vehicles.

He got out of the truck and waited for Hal. Walking hand in hand they made their way to the entrance. The first thing he noticed was a new door and frame already in place. Flashes of Fire Chief Manning breaking down the door to get to him had Casey shaking his head. "When did they have time to do this?"

Hal shrugged. "I knew nothing about it." Pushing open the door they walked inside. The room was alive with workmen, each doing a different task.

"There you two are," Nate said, coming over to stand beside Casey. "How're you feeling?"

"Okay," Casey mumbled. He gave his head a quick shake before looking back at Nate. "What's going on?"

Nate rubbed his jaw and grinned as he looked around the room. "Well, Ryan, Rio and I got to talking after you all left the clinic and decided it was time the town stepped up a little

more. We put a few calls in and this is the result." Nate spread his arms out as Casey looked around.

He noticed that most, but not all the men working were members of his congregation. A slow smile spread across his face as the dimming spark once inside him began to brighten. Casey looked up at Hal. "This is what a congregation is all about, pulling together in times of need to accomplish an almost impossible goal." Casey felt fired up. Without thinking he clapped his hands together. The sting in his arm was a quick reminder that although the spirit was willing, the body was crap.

The look of concern on Hal's face as he reached for him soothed Casey's arm in no time. "I'm okay," Casey assured him.

Hal gave his temple a quick kiss. "Why don't you be our supervisor until you're well enough to use both hands?"

"A supervisor, cool," Casey grinned. He looked around the room again trying to figure out what had already been unfinished and what had been damaged. "Where are we at, Nate?"

"Well, we had to rip down most of the wallboard over on the east side. Collin's going over the electrics now to see if it was the coffeepot or the wiring." Nate winced and looked at Hal. "Sorry."

Hal waved his comment away. "I called Collin earlier to ask him to check it out."

"Well, so far I don't think he's found anything, so that's good." Nate pointed toward the pile of wet and broken sheetrock. "Ezra called one of his cowboys to bring in a cattle

trailer to clear away the mess. We're actually lucky you hadn't gotten the floor in yet. The guys had to replace a couple of wall studs that surrounded the electrical box, but other than that and the wallboard, it's mostly cosmetic. I think we should be done in plenty of time for Christmas Eve. Of course most these guys will have to go back to their regular jobs tomorrow, but they've promised me a few hours in the evenings."

It was then Casey realised it was Sunday. He looked at his watch. "Church is in an hour and a half. I know you probably already have someone set to fill in for me, but I'd like to say a prayer and a few words." Casey noticed the way Hal turned his head away to watch the men.

"I'm gonna get busy," Hal said, giving Casey's hand a squeeze before pulling away.

\* \* \* \*

After an hour spent taping and sanding seams, Hal noticed the men start to go into the restroom, one by one before disappearing through the door to the church. He looked over at Ezra James. "You going to church?"

Ezra shook his head. "Nah, I'll leave that for the others. I feel God as much in this part of the building as that. You?" Ezra asked with a grin.

Since Hal's feelings regarding religion were common knowledge around town, he also grinned and shook his head. "If I went to church it would only be to ogle the Reverend Sharp. No, I think I'm much safer where I am."

Ezra seemed to study Hal for a few seconds before going back to work. Hal ran his hand over a spot he'd just sanded, testing its smoothness. "You think we'll be able to get everything done in time?" Hal asked.

"Doesn't much matter, but yeah, I do."

"What do you mean it doesn't matter? Why are you here on a Sunday if it doesn't matter?" Hal set his sanding block down and wiped his hands on the rag tucked into the front of his jeans.

"Because this whole process isn't really about this room. We can have a Christmas Eve party in it whether it's finished or not. It's about healing a community, and the way I see it, you've already started us on the path of forgiveness."

Hal was shocked by the statement. "Me? I haven't done anything but try and burn the damn place down."

"You're wrong," Ezra's deep voice dropped even lower.

"Despite what is or isn't between you and God, you brought this church's congregation together to give us a wake-up call. I'll admit I don't know the Reverend as much as I should by this time, but you've made us all see we can't hold him or the church accountable for what someone else in power did. We were hurt by someone we trusted, and we tried to fob those feelings off on Reverend Sharp. With a few choice words, you snapped us out of that. Made me feel downright ashamed of myself." Ezra started sanding again. "That's what you did, and I thank ya."

Ezra didn't say anything more. As a matter of fact, Hal couldn't remember the huge man saying that many words combined in all the years he'd known him. When the hymns

started next door, Hal felt the words filter through his mind. Images of him and his mother standing side by side singing those same songs had tears pooling in Hal's eyes.

"Excuse me, Ezra, I'm gonna go to the hardware store and get the paint I ordered." Hal left without looking at Ezra or waiting for a reply. He just desperately needed to get away from those songs. As he closed himself into the cab of his truck, the songs still played in his head. He realised it was the memories causing him to run and not the actual songs.

Putting his head on the steering wheel, Hal let a few tears slide down his cheeks before quickly wiping them away. Ezra had been right. You can't blame others for someone else's mistakes. He knew that it had been wrong for the adults in his life to put that kind of pressure on an eight year-old. Hal knew until he worked out who was to blame for his mother's death he'd never have peace. Should his dying mother have known better or the Reverend Marshall? Shouldn't those who made him feel like he'd failed carry the guilt?

The longer Hal sat, the more confused he became. His mom was young. Could he have done a better job as a single parent at the age of nineteen? Yeah, maybe he could have. He'd at least have gone to the damn doctor if he knew he was sick. He sure as hell wouldn't have taken a chance like that knowing his kid would be all alone if something happened to him.

The pain in his chest felt so real, Hal grabbed himself. The first thought that popped through his mind was heart attack, and then it suddenly became clear to him. He was angry at

his mom for dying. She should have loved Hal enough to take better care of herself.

Starting his truck, it became clear to Hal what he needed. Knowing Casey would worry, he picked up his phone and called Gill.

"Hello?"

"Hey, I need you to do me a favour."

"Anything, I was just on my way over with some donuts from Kyle."

Hal grinned at the way Gill said Kyle's name, all sweet and dreamy. "I need to go see Ada, the woman who raised me. Tell Casey I'll be home as soon as I can and not to worry."

"Hell, man, I'm worried so you can bet Casey will be.

What's happened that you need to see this woman?"

"I need to find out what killed my mother."

\* \* \* \*

Hal knew he'd driven too fast when he arrived at Ada and Dave's house in less than two hours. As he sat in front of the small white clapboard house, he thought about his life after he'd come to live here. He'd been so sullen and withdrawn he really hadn't given Ada and Dave a chance to get close to him. He'd been consumed by anger and guilt. Looking back, he realised he probably should have been taken to get professional help, but Ada had been a housewife and Dave a mechanic. There would have been no money for such things.

Standing on the small front porch, Hal had to raise his hand several times before he gathered the courage to knock. Within seconds, the door swung open and a rounded woman

with grey hair stood in front of him. "Halden?" Ada asked, surprised to see him.

"Hi. Mind if I come in?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, yes, please come in." Ada stood back and Hal stepped in. The small house looked the same as it always had. He was thirty-eight and he was surprised to find that it was a comforting feeling. "The place looks great, Ada."

His surrogate mother looked around the small living room. "It looks the same."

"Yeah, it does," Hal said wistfully.

Ada blushed and gestured toward the kitchen. "Come on in and have a cup of coffee and tell me who I need to thank for this unexpected visit."

As Hal watched the older woman walk out of the room, he sighed. He really hadn't been very nice to them. They'd taken in a stranger thirty years ago and had tried their best to be parents to him. Too bad he'd been too damaged to see it then.

Sitting at the old scarred table, Hal studied Ada as she prepared a fresh pot of coffee. "I'm sorry," he said. He hadn't known he was going to say it out loud, but he felt better for it.

Ada turned and wiped her hands on a towel. She came over and sat across from him. "For what, dear?"

"Everything. The boy I was growing up, the man I've been up until now." Hal swallowed around the lump in his throat before continuing. "I met a man."

"Oh?" Ada asked. Hal knew Ada and Dave had always suspected he was gay, but they'd never had the type of relationship to discuss it. "Is that why you're here?"

"Yes and no. I'm trying to work through a few things from my past."

The coffeepot beeped and Ada rose to pour them two cups. Setting Hal's down in front of him, she took her seat. "Tell me first about your young man."

Hal took a deep breath. "He's funny, loyal to a fault, cute," Hal shrugged, "and he's the reverend at the Cattle Valley Community Church."

"Oh my," Ada said, touching her hand to her ample bosom. "Is he the reason you're trying to work through things?"

"Mostly. I love him, well, I love the man, but I'm struggling with his profession." Hal stopped and took a sip of his coffee. "Do you know what my mom died of?"

Ada looked shocked. "You mean you don't?"

Hal shook his head. "I was told by the Reverend Marshall and other members of the congregation that she died because I hadn't prayed hard enough."

Ada made a sound in her throat and covered her mouth.

"Oh my God," she finally said. "I had no idea. When Reverend Marshall called to ask us if we'd take you in, he simply said you were a sullen, unfriendly sort and that we'd have our hands full. Dave and I couldn't have children, so we thought God had brought you to us by way of Reverend Marshall. I had no idea a man of God could treat a child that way."

Feeling a tear escape down his cheek, Hal quickly wiped it away and cleared his throat. These people wanted him,

despite what Marshall had told them. He had spent ten years living under their roof and had never reciprocated their love. Looking into Ada's eyes now, Hal had no doubt despite the way he'd treated them, at least Ada had grown to love him. Suddenly it didn't matter anymore, none of it.

Casey had been right. It wasn't God he was angry with, but rather his mother and her people. "Just tell me one thing. Would my mother have lived had she gone to the doctor for treatment instead of using prayer to heal her?"

Ada sighed heavily and stared into the black brew. "Maybe for a while longer, but she would've passed regardless. She had acute myeloid leukaemia."

He didn't know whether that made him feel better or worse, but it told him that his ability to pray had nothing to do with it.

"Would you like to stay for supper?"

Hal looked at the clock above the stove. It was only one o'clock. He knew they ate supper at five on Sundays. "I can't today, but I'd like to bring Casey over to meet you sometime within the next couple of weeks. Uh, if you think it would be okay with Dave?"

"What are you doing for Christmas dinner?" she asked, a smile warming her face.

"Well, Casey will have services in the morning but nothing after that. Do you think the two of you would like to come and hear his sermon? You could come over afterward and we could all have a nice dinner. Maybe you should plan on just spending the weekend. I know I should've invited you over before." Hal buried his face in his hands. "I've been so

screwed up for so long." He looked at Ada. "Please give me another chance."

Ada dabbed at the tears in her eyes and scooted her chair back. Coming around the table, she pulled Hal out of his chair and wrapped him in an embrace. "I'll have to talk to Dave of course, but I'd love to hear your young man's sermon on Christmas morning."

Sniffling, Hal nodded. "Casey will be so pleased to have you there, and so will I."

Ada looked up at him. "You mean you'll be there?"

"Yeah, but I have to make a stop on the way home.

There's someone else I need to ask for forgiveness."

\* \* \* \*

By the time Hal pulled into the garage it was going on nine o'clock. After giving Casey a call, he'd decided to stay at Dave and Ada's for dinner after all. As he stepped out of the truck, the door to the kitchen opened and Casey was silhouetted to perfection. With the bright light behind him, he almost seemed to glow.

"You okay?" Casey asked, holding out his arms.

Hal wasted no time going to him. "I feel better at this moment than I ever have in my life." He surprised Casey by picking him up and carrying him into the bedroom.

Once naked under the covers, Hal straddled Casey's lap. "I want you."

Leaning forward, Hal pulled open the bedside drawer.

Instead of the box of condoms he was expecting to find, there

was an envelope beside the bottle of lube. Hal looked at the envelope before looking at Casey.

"Sam brought it by the hall on his way home from the clinic," Casey winked. "I think he must've known we'd want the information as soon as possible."

Hal looked at the back of the envelope. "You didn't open it?"

"No," Casey replied, with a slight shake to his head. "It wasn't mine to open."

Hal smiled, loving his man more every minute they were together. He wouldn't have minded Casey opening it, but it was nice that he respected Hal's privacy enough to resist the temptation.

"But if you don't hurry and open it, I'm gonna take it away from you," Casey teased.

Ripping the seam of the envelope, Hal looked at the paper inside. "Damn, we're going to save a fortune on rubbers." He grinned down at Casey.

Casey's brows shifted in question. Pouring lube onto his fingers, Hal circled Casey's tight pucker. "I've always wondered what it would feel like to make love bareback. I can't wait anymore. I want to feel my naked cock buried inside you."

Casey sighed and rolled his eyes. "If you must," he said dramatically, ruining the effect by letting out a loud moan as Hal entered him with one finger. After a quick stretch, Hal used the remaining lube on his hand to slick down his own cock. Positioning the bare crown of his cock at Casey's hole,

he looked into his lover's eyes. "I love you," he said as he slowly pushed his length inside Casey's tight channel.

"Oh shit," Hal groaned. His cock was made to be inside Casey's body. The pleasure was magnified without the tight sheath of the condom surrounding it. This was so much better than he'd ever imagined it could be. He was glad he'd never slipped and rode any of his other lovers bareback. This was...

"Oh Christ," he moaned as he began pumping in and out of Casey's sweet hole. This was more than he'd ever hoped for.

Using the hand on his uninjured arm, Casey began stroking his own cock. "Feels good ... harder," Casey panted, moving his head from side to side.

Never one to disappoint, Hal picked up speed, snapping his hips against Casey's ass, the sound of his balls slapping flesh on each forward thrust.

"Gonna," Casey said in warning.

"Paint me," Hal said watching the head of Casey's cock. The first spurt had Hal's sac drawing up tighter. By the third stream of white seed, Hal couldn't wait any longer and let loose a loud growl that echoed throughout the room as he emptied his cum deep inside the man he loved.

Not wanting to separate from Casey, Hal fell forward, but stopped himself with his forearms before crushing his small man. Still half-hard, he relished the feel of Casey's channel slicked with his cum.

Finding Casey's mouth, Hal kissed him, pushing his tongue deep. "Next time I want you inside me."

Casey's eyes went wide in the dim light of the bedroom. "What? I've never..."

"Neither have I, but I want to with you." Hal ran his hands over Casey's chest, pinching and pulling at the small pebbled discs. "Touch me," Hal moaned.

Reaching down, Casey ran his fingertips down the crack of Hal's ass. When he brushed across and then circled his hole, Hal moaned. Oh yeah, he wanted it. He'd never even imagined allowing anyone to do this to him, and the fact that this time, with this man, it had been his idea made it all the better.

Hal looked at the clock and grinned. They had plenty of time before morning.

#### Chapter Twelve

Going into work the following morning, Casey smiled up at Hal. "Walking kinda funny this morning, you sore?"

"Just enough to drive my cock crazy. I feel like I still have you buried deep inside me." Hal shook his head as they neared the door. "Don't ask me how I'm going to be able to keep my mind on work."

"I have faith in you." Casey unlocked and opened the door.

"Wow, you guys got a lot done while I was gone," Hal said looking around the room.

"Well, we were hoping we'd be able to start painting today, but we didn't have a chance to get stuff taped off, so that's first on the list." Casey gave Hal a kiss before walking over and grabbing two rolls of blue tape. Handing one to his man, he bounced a little. "Not really sure how this is going to work with me being pretty much one handed, but I'll give it a try."

"Why don't you go around and wipe the walls down instead? I can start on the tape."

Wipe the walls down? "What?"

"You have to make sure there's no dust on the walls before you can start putting on primer. Just go around, make sure all the seams are smooth, then check that all the nail divots have been filled and sanded. After that's good, run some cheesecloth over the walls to get up any stray dust. It'll make the paint spread better."

"Wow, you're like a builder-man extraordinaire. I was just gonna start slapping some paint up." Casey actually knew

most of what Hal suggested, but he liked the look on the bigger man's face when he was trying to explain it in layman's terms.

"I forgot to pick up the paint. I was going to do it while everyone was in church but got sidetracked and went to see Ada instead." Hal looked at his watch. "The hardware store won't open for another hour, I'll tape until then."

Casey nodded and picked up the package of cheesecloth. He and the rest of the guys had already made sure the walls were cleaned and smooth, but Casey went ahead and made a show of doing what Hal told him.

As he performed the mindless work of wiping down everything, Casey thought about the decorations for Christmas Eve. That brought up another question. "Are we gonna get a tree?"

"Huh?" Hal asked from across the room.

"A tree? Do you put up a tree every year?"

"Yeah, I usually go out in the back property and cut one a couple days before Christmas." Hal put down the tape and walked over, taking Casey into his arms. "We could do it over the weekend if you want?"

"No, I wanna do it after we get home later. Unless you'd rather string the popcorn and cranberry's before we cut the tree, which would be okay, too."

"I have boxes of decorations, babe."

Casey stood on his tip-toes and pulled Hal's head down for a kiss. "I'm sure your decorations are beautiful, but I want a tree of just you and me." Casey rested his head against Hal's big chest. "I know it probably sounds stupid, but I hope this is

the first Christmas of many for us. I want us to start our own traditions, and one of them is to have only ornaments we buy together or make together. Since a lot of our money's going to pay for new wallboard, I thought we could do it the old fashioned way."

"Okay." Hal kissed the top of Casey's head. "But you're not helping pay for the sheetrock."

"Am, too."

"Are not. It was my screw-up. I'll take care of it."

"I thought we were going to be a team?" Casey started to pull away, but Hal pulled him back into an embrace.

"We are a team, but for my own peace of mind, I need to do this one thing on my own."

Casey knew Hal still felt guilty over the fire. He was sandwiched between wanting to contribute and letting Hal do what he needed to. "On one condition," Casey finally said. "You show me the receipts so I can send them to the insurance company."

"Deal," Hal agreed. "I'm going to get the paint. Anything you need while I'm out?"

"Yeah, you can stop by Kyle's and see if he made any of those sticky pecan rolls. While you're at it, order dinner rolls, and some pies for Christmas day." Hal nodded and walked out the door. "Wait," Casey said running to catch up with him. "If Ada and Dave will be staying for several days, you might see about a couple of coffee cakes or something for in the morning," Casey yelled across the parking lot.

He could see Hal laughing as he waved a hand in the air, letting Casey know he'd heard him. Once he was alone, there

was no longer a need to pretend he was wiping down the walls, so Casey pulled out his phone and called Nate about the decorations for the Christmas Eve party.

\* \* \* \*

"Hello? Kyle?" Hal called, walking into the empty bakery.

"Back here," Kyle answered. "Is that you, Hal?"

"Yeah." Hal went through the swinging doors to the kitchen. "Where are you?"

"I'm back here putting a new lock on the door."

Passing the industrial oven, Hal spotted Kyle wrestling with the back door to the alley. "What's up?"

Kyle sighed and held up part of the dead bolt lock. "I'm trying to refit this door with a dead bolt, but it's not being very kind to me."

"Here, let me help." Hal took the lock and Kyle wheeled his chair out of the way. "So why do you need a new one?"

"I heard someone down hear rattling my door overnight. It really gave me the creeps."

"Don't blame you. Did you call the police?" Hal punched the old lock out and used the template to line up the pilot holes for the new one.

"I fell asleep on the couch. I heard the noise, but by the time I got into my chair and over to the phone, it stopped. I went ahead and came down but nothing seemed disturbed."

Hal shook his head. "You should've called them instead of coming down. What if the person had broken in?"

"Then I'd be a sitting duck whether I was up or down.

Better down here where I can at least try to get out the front or back door."

Looking at Kyle he forgot sometimes how helpless he must feel at times like that. He just seemed so capable in his every day life. "Next time, call the police, or better yet, call Gill."

"Why would I call him?"

Hal drilled the pilot holes and fitted the lock into place. Picking up the screw he started installing it as he thought about Gill. "He lives in town and he probably would've been here faster than the police."

Kyle picked at a loose thread on his apron. "Why would he do that?"

Closing his eyes briefly, Hal hoped Gill would forgive him. "Because I think he's kinda sweet on you."

"Really?" Kyle's big blue eyes widened before smiling. Hal didn't remember ever seeing those deep dimples in Kyle's cheeks before. It was a good look on him.

With the last screw in place, Hal checked the lock. "Why don't you come over and try it out." He stepped back, giving Kyle room to manoeuvre his chair.

"Works like a charm. Thanks a lot."

Hal picked up the screwdriver and drill and put them back into the small tool box. "I came by to get something sweet for Casey and order stuff for Christmas."

"Follow me," Kyle said wheeling toward the front of the store.

Before placing his order, Hal tore a sheet off the order pad and wrote Gill's home, business and cell phone numbers

down. "Here, keep these somewhere close and call Gill if you hear any more noise." Hal grinned, and twirled the pencil. "Or if you just want to talk to someone."

Taking the paper, Kyle put it into his pocket. "I'm sure if Gill wanted to talk to me he'd have already called."

Hal shook his head. "You two are quite the pair. So afraid of bugging the other that you both sit home alone." He put his hand on Kyle's shoulder. "Call him."

"Maybe," Kyle said. "So what's Casey wanting?"

\* \* \* \*

"Hey, Wyn, could you grab that side for me?" Casey asked, standing near the top of the ladder. This was his last strand of Christmas lights, but his hanging partner, Hal, had gone off to pick up the new table and chairs the church had purchased.

"Looks great," Wyn commented, coming over to give Casey a hand.

"Thanks. I think we're almost done. Once Nate gets back from Tyler's with the table arrangements we'll be all set for tonight."

Just then, Nate walked in carrying a big box full of poinsettia plants. "There's more in the back of my SUV," Nate told them.

Looking at each other, Casey rolled his eyes. "I guess that's our cue to get back to work." He shrugged into his coat before following Wyn and Nate back out.

Once the six large boxes were brought in, Nate went back out for one more box. "That's the last of it," Nate said setting it down.

Casey looked at the covered box. "What's that?" "Ah, that, my friend, is our ice breaker."

"Our what?" Wyn asked, trying to see over Nate's shoulder.

Pulling off the paper, Nate extracted his prize. "I had Tyler make it up for me. If I measured correctly it should be long enough to string from one side of the room to the other."

"Mistletoe? How on earth did Tyler find enough mistletoe to make that up?" Casey looked at the clear fishing line with sprig after sprig of mistletoe tied on with red curly-ribbon.

Nate looked at the long strand with a smile on his face. "I had him place the order weeks ago before he even opened his shop. Man that guy is skittish. I think I shaved about ten years off him when I walked into the shop to place the order."

Casey knew the reason Tyler was skittish, but it was said to him in confidence and he hadn't even told Hal. "Looks like he did a nice job."

"Yep, she's a beaut."

"So tell me what the point is?" Wyn inquired.

Nate sighed and punched Wyn in the arm. "We're gonna hang it across the hall so all kinds of people can get kissed."

"Excuse me?" Wyn rubbed his arm, still looking puzzled.

"Palmer Wynfield, are you telling me you've never been kissed under the mistletoe? Damn, besides the presents and the Christmas morning sex, mistletoe's the next best part of the holidays."

"Sorry, I must have missed that," Wyn said, brushing tinsel off his cashmere sweater.

Casey watched as Nate gave Wyn a devilish grin. "Maybe you can coax Ezra under it later?"

A bark of laughter erupted from Wyn. "Right, I'm sure Ezra James is coming to the party. The only reason that mountain of a man comes into town is to scare dogs, children and me."

Nate looked over at Casey and winked. They both knew Ezra planned to attend the party. He'd come out of his shell nicely since Halloween. Casey knew it was Nate's doing for the most part, but he hoped working on the reception room helped, too.

"Well just plant that tight ass of yours under one of these little sprigs and see what happens."

\* \* \* \*

As smiling faces began to fill the room, Casey couldn't help but feel proud of his congregation and all they'd accomplished the last few days. They'd all pitched in to paint, stain the trim and lay the floor. The result was a well-built room that would serve the community for years.

Feeling arms wrap around his waist from behind, Casey turned and tipped his head up to see his man. "Hey."

Hal leaned down and licked the shell of Casey's ear. "It's a good party."

"The best," Casey agreed. He turned in Hal's arms and kissed him, his tongue thrusting as deep as it could go before twining around Hal's.

"Mmm, what was that for?" Hal continued to brush kisses across Casey's forehead.

"You're standing under the mistletoe," Casey replied, pointing up.

Hal chuckled, "You can't walk ten feet in here without being under the stuff."

"Yep, that's the way Nate planned it." Grinning, he pointed toward Wyn. "Watch, you can see the sparks fly across the room. Pick a man or woman and study them. They're all giving out signs to those they want a kiss from."

Casey watched Wyn trying to pretend he wasn't watching Ezra out of the corner of his eye. He looked back at Hal, who was looking at a completely different couple. "Oh, wow, I wouldn't have suspected that match-up."

Chuckling, Hal bumped Casey with his hip. "I would. I'm just surprised it took them so long."

Watching in anticipation, Casey's breath caught as Gill went down on one knee and placed a soft kiss on Kyle's mouth. They broke apart, and Casey could see Kyle say something to Gill, before they kissed again, and this time the kiss seemed to go on for minutes.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

"Yeah, it is," Hal agreed.

As the party continued, Casey kept himself busy shaking hands and talking to his friends and neighbours. For the first time he felt he was really connecting with the community.

When Nate finally made his way over with Rio in tow, Casey hugged him. "Thanks for helping me get the place ready."

"It was my pleasure," Nate said, releasing Casey from his embrace.

Casey caught Hal coming out the door that led into the chapel. He started to go to him, but stopped himself when he saw the look of peace on Hal's face. Casey breathed a sigh of relief and smiled.

"You look happy," Rio kidded him.

"I don't think I could get any happier than I am at this moment."

\* \* \* \*

Cuddled together beside the tree, Hal traced Casey's chest with his fingers. They'd already made love and were enjoying the fire and the lights of their very first Christmas tree. "It is pretty," Hal commented, looking at all the homemade decorations. "It would be even prettier without that big root ball and plastic tub under it though," he chuckled.

"Shhh, it'll hear you," Casey grinned. "Don't you feel better knowing you saved a tree while still being able to bring it inside?"

"My back's still sore from digging that thing out of the ground. I'm gonna let you dig the hole to plant it in the front yard."

"It'll last that way 'til spring, right?"

Hal laughed and rolled over on top of Casey. "I love you, you goofball."

Casey put the palm of his hand against Hal's cheek, brushing his thumb across Hal's lips. "I love you, too."

"So does that mean I'm going to get you to move in with me?" Hal had been dying to ask but knew the time was finally right.

"What about my house?"

"Rent it out. I know it's part of your salary, so rent it out."

"I couldn't take rent money for a house that isn't even mine." Casey seemed to think it over for a few seconds. "I guess I could give the church the rent money, though."

"See, there you go, all worked out," Hal said, dipping his head down to give Casey a slow explorative kiss.

"You sure about me moving in? I know you think I'm perfect, but I do have a few bad habits." Casey started ticking them off on his fingers.

"I leave the toilet seat up, no matter how many dirty clothes are in the basket, I refuse to do laundry more than one day a week, and I enjoy walking around in the nude," Casey finished with a smile. They both knew that wouldn't be considered a bad habit to Hal.

"And you snore," Hal added.

Casey's jaw dropped, "I do? No one's ever told me that before."

"Good," Hal said, giving him another kiss. "Because I've noticed you only do it after a really long night of extreme sexual activity."

"Oh, well, there you go then, problem solved."

"As far as the toilet seat, I'm not sure if you've noticed, but I'm a guy. All guys leave the seat up unless they have a wife around to yell at them. And I'll continue doing my own laundry. My stuff gets pretty dirty anyway, it should be washed separate from your fine church clothes."

"Speaking of church..."

"Yeah, I know you saw me earlier. I went in and had a little talk with the man upstairs. Seems he's just been waiting all this time for me to get my head out of my ass." Hal didn't feel like going into detail with Casey. It was a very private moment when he forgave not only God but his mom as well. It was time to move on and heal old wounds.

Reaching under the tree, Hal handed Casey an envelope. "You get to open one gift on Christmas Eve, and this is it."

"We never open gifts until Christmas morning at home." Casey stopped and grinned. "I mean back in Kansas."

"This is my contribution to our new traditions list, now open it." Hal waited for Casey to open the envelope. The tears in his eyes told Hal he'd done a good job predicting what he wanted.

"I can't believe you got me a plane ticket to see my family." Casey looked at the ticket in the firelight. "When's it for?"

"First of March, and if you look a little closer you'll see there are two plane tickets in there. I know it was a little presumptuous of me, but I was hoping you'd let me tag along."

Casey pulled Hal down for a kiss. "Are you kidding? My mom will probably have a list a mile long of things she needs done around the house when I tell her I'm bringing home a big strapping contractor."

Laughing, Hal rolled them so Casey lounged on top of him. "I don't know what I've done to deserve you, but I'm not gonna question it too hard, you just might change your mind."

"Never, I'm yours for keeps."

\* \* \* \*

Sitting in the front row with Dave and Ada, Hal felt a wealth of emotion, pride being number one. The uncomfortable pew didn't even faze him. Neither did the crying infant in the back of the church. As he watched and listened to the Reverend Casey Sharp address his congregation, Hal felt his chest puff up just a bit. That was his man up there, drawing the people into the sermon he'd been preparing all week.

Casey stood in front of the church and lifted his hands, reaching out to the congregation as he spoke. "We may not be surrounded by blood relatives, but God has given us each other. And together, we are a family. The best part about us is that we are a family by choice. Take the time to turn to your neighbour sitting beside you and shake his or her hand. That person will most likely be the one on your doorstep in time of need, not just during the holiday season but year-round."

Hal turned and shook Ryan's hand before turning back to Ada. When she reached out, Hal shook his head, and pulled her into a hug. "Thank you for being my mother by choice," he said into her ear so she could hear above the noise of the congregation. He felt Ada's breath hitch as she hugged him tighter.

Releasing her he dabbed her tears with his knuckle. He reached beyond Ada to shake Dave's hand. He thought he saw a little moisture in Dave's eyes as well, but it could have

just been the lighting. Dave was one of the toughest men he'd ever met, although given time to think, Hal realised Dave had rarely yelled at him. Boy, did he have a lot of making up to do.

Deep in thought, Hal almost missed the rest of Casey's sermon. The one thing he kept coming back to was family and how every person in the room was family to the person next to them. Hal thought it was a good message. Many in Casey's congregation had been shunned by their own blood relatives for no more reason than who they chose to love.

A sense of peace settled deep within him as Casey ended the service with a prayer. With the only sound being Casey's voice, Hal closed his eyes, inhaling the smell of the fresh-cut pine swags that decorated the church. Hal found himself bowing his head and asking for forgiveness for all that he'd done to shun the one who'd always love him.

Casey stood at the back of the church and hugged every member that passed through the doors, paying special attention to the children in their holiday finery. As Hal watched him, he realised Casey was indeed made for this job. The peaceful expressions on people's faces attested to that fact. When the last church member had filed out, Hal stepped up and put an arm around Reverend Sharp. "That was beautiful."

Casey's cheeks turned slightly red as he ducked his head. "Thank you for coming, it meant the world to me."

"Oh, I plan on being in the front row every Sunday."

Hal realised Casey had yet to meet Ada and Dave. Their arrival minutes before the service hadn't left any time for

introductions. Hal squeezed Casey's hand. "I want you to meet my parents." He turned to the older couple still standing beside the pews and motioned them over.

"Casey, this is my mom, Ada, and my dad, Dave." Hal knew it was the first time he'd officially called them that, and their faces both showed it.

"It's nice to meet you both. I hope you'll be able to stay a few days." Casey shook Dave's hand, but Ada pulled him into a hug.

"That was a wonderful service, Reverend," Ada said.

"Thank you, but call me Casey." He kissed Ada's cheek before releasing her. Looking down at his white robe, Casey turned back to Hal. "I'm going to go change and make sure everything's blown out and locked up. Why don't the three of you do me a favour and run to Kyle's to get our goodies," Casey said hurrying down the aisle unbuttoning his robe as he went.

Without thought to the people beside him, Hal followed. "Wait." Casey stopped and turned. Hal took a couple more steps and pulled Casey into his arms. "I love you," he whispered, seconds before covering Casey's lips with his own. He felt the fire that always accompanied the taste of Casey and moaned. The kiss went on far too long to be considered appropriate in front of ones parents, but Hal didn't care. "Merry Christmas, baby."

"And a Happy New Year," Casey whispered back.

#### About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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