



CATTLE
VALLEY



The Sound of
White

CAROL LYNNE

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The Sound of White

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

Cattle Valley

THE SOUND OF WHITE

Carol Lynne

Dedication

For Richie and Chad.

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Super Glue: The Super Glue Corporation

Chapter One

"Goddammit!" Richard yelled, running his fingers through his hair. He knew he'd left his tool-belt on the bar before going to his room. Eight hours later, the belt was nowhere to be found.

"Something wrong?" Collin Zeffer asked.

"Yeah. Lots. Have you seen my tool-belt?"

Collin's eyes scanned the room. "Nope. Haven't run across it. You losing stuff again?" Collin asked with a chuckle.

"There ain't no losin' about it. I put that damn thing right here before going to bed," Richard roared, slamming his fist on the bar.

Collin held up his hands. "Sorry." The tall slender man turned back to the electrical outlets he had been working on.

Feeling like shit, Richard walked over to stand behind the kneeling man. "I didn't mean to yell at you. It's just this seems to be happening a lot lately."

Collin nodded and looked over his shoulder. "That's okay. We're all under the gun to get this place up and running by New Year's Eve. It's natural to become forgetful with the stress you've been under."

Richard didn't correct Collin. Sure he'd been under a lot of stress, but he sure as hell wasn't going crazy. The phone attached to the holster on his hip began to play "Friends in Low Places."

Looking at the display, Richard rolled his eyes. "What do you want?"

"Good morning to you, too," Chad Neal, the lodge manager greeted.

Richard simply gave the little prick a grunt and waited.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me?" Chad finally asked.

Go to hell came to mind. "I don't have time for this, Chad. What do you want?"

"One of my employees found something of yours in room three-thirteen. Again."

Richard's jaw dropped. That was the second time in less than a week something of his wound up in that particular room. "Look," he said into the phone, "I don't know who's

fuckin' with me, but I'll tell you the same thing I told you the other day. I haven't been in any of the rooms except for my own suite."

"I'm not going to argue with you, *Dick*. I've got better things to do with my time. I'm simply calling to say that your property is at the front desk should you actually *do something* that requires it. The only thing I ask is that you close the windows next time. I'm not about to authorise an insane heating bill because you're trying to heat the entire outdoors in this god-forsaken wilderness."

"First of all, Mr. Miami, my name's Richard, not Dick. I believe we've had that discussion before. Secondly, if you don't like Wyoming, get the hell out."

Richard grinned as Collin stood and looked at him wide-eyed in surprise. No one talked to the lodge manager that way. Although small at barely five-foot eight, Chad Neal was a force to be reckoned with. He'd already earned the reputation of firing people on the spot for anything from insubordination to being late. Thankfully, Ezra and Wyn owned the Grizzly Bar and not Guy Hoistington. Richard didn't know if he'd be able to handle someone like Chad being his boss. *Hah. I bet it kills the man to know he has no power over me.*

"I call 'em as I see 'em," Chad replied. "I'll be up on the third floor in fifteen minutes. You can pick up your equipment then."

Richard chuckled. "Avoiding me?"

"Fifteen minutes," Chad replied, and hung up.

After clipping the phone back into its holster, Richard shook his head. "They found my belt in three-thirteen," he told Collin.

"Seriously?" Collin asked, his face losing some of its colour.

"Yeah. Are you okay?"

Collin shook his head. "There's something about that room that creeps me out."

"Why? It's just a room like the forty-nine others."

Collin ran his hand over the back of his neck. "No, it's not like the others. I've redone the wiring in that room four times."

"What's happening to it?" Richard asked, curious.

"I don't know. Things seem fine for a day or two then everything just stops working. If I didn't know better, I'd say that room had rats in the wall...or ghosts," Collin added.

Richard laughed. "You've been watching too many horror movies." Looking down at his watch, he motioned to the door. "I'm gonna go pick up my stuff. I want to get all the lights installed before Guy, Ezra and Wyn show up on Thursday."

On his way out, Richard looked around the large open space and smiled. The Grizzly Bar had come a long way since its inception, and he felt proud of the work he'd accomplished. In keeping with the lodge theme, the bar was rustic with the outer log walls left exposed. The copper, lantern-style lights would look absolutely perfect hanging from the overhead beams.

Wyn and Ezra had gone to a great deal of expense to add extra heating to the area in front of the soaring two-story windows. Richard smiled when he remembered that particular discussion. Well, argument was more like it. Wyn insisted they have the extra heat if Ezra was going to go ahead with his plans for the wall of glass. Ezra tried to disagree, saying the large pit fireplace in the centre of the bar was enough extra warmth. Wyn would have none of it. Insisting that if people came inside from skiing, they'd need to get warm. If they couldn't do it in the bar, they'd find some place else. Of course, like most of their 'discussions', Wyn won, and Ezra had put in three times as many heating ducts in the area in front of the windows.

Walking through to the large lobby, Richard headed for the front desk. His beloved belt lay haphazardly on the gleaming wooden surface with a note attached in Chad's scrolling cursive.

The Tall Pines has received the last of its firewood for the season. Abe said if The Grizzly Bar wanted more to give him a call.

Chad Neal, Manager

Richard read the note again. Unless Abe Cross delivered a hell of a truckload within the previous few days, Richard knew the lodge would run short. "Hell," he huffed, stuffing the note in his pocket. What would a man from Miami know about firewood consumption in the mountains of Wyoming?

He battled with himself for about ten minutes before going to search for Chad. He finally found him overseeing the laying of carpet on the third floor. "Can I talk to you?"

Chad looked up and scowled. "I'm busy. Can't it wait?"

Richard rolled his eyes. "I'm sure the carpet layers can spare your eagle eyes for a few minutes."

Grumbling under his breath, Chad followed Richard out of the room and into the hallway. "I don't appreciate you speaking that way in front of contractors."

"Get over it," Richard replied. He tried to help the little bastard, but that didn't mean he'd take any shit. He took the note out of his pocket and held it up. "I think you need to reconsider this. The Tall Pines will go through at least twice what you've already had delivered, and that's just to get you through winter."

"No way," Chad challenged, waving away Richard's concerns. "There's no need to waste the storage space. I've done a very careful calculation to determine how much the lodge will go through."

"Calculations? Seriously?"

Chad crossed his arms over his chest. "If the Tall Pines wants to waste money on additional wood, have at it, but Guy trusts me to stick to a budget."

Richard put his hands on his hips and looked towards the floor. If he had it his way the little pip-squeak would freeze his ass off in the coming months, but Richard knew it would drive away their guests. Guests that were needed to fill The Grizzly Bar.

"Look, I don't care anything about your damn calculations or budget. At least do yourself a favour and ask one of the locals. This isn't Miami. The fires won't strictly be for showing your date how romantic you are. The inserts were added for a reason. You'll need the heat from the fireplace to help warm that huge open lobby of yours."

"Are you finished?" Chad asked, turning back towards the room with the carpet layers.

"Yeah, I guess so," Richard answered, and walked off.

As he descended the side stairs, he flipped open his phone and sent Abe a text message. In the end, he added an additional fifty percent to the order he already had in mind. If he knew anything about Chad, he knew the man would never belittle himself enough to ask lowly employees their opinion on the correct amount of wood needed.

Snapping his phone shut, Richard went back into the bar to get started on what would prove to be a long day.

* * * *

Chad watched as the contractors rolled up the carpet remnants. The men had managed to get half the rooms finished by day's end. With only a couple of days until Guy came back into town, Chad was getting worried. They still needed the conference room floor finished as well as the hardwood in the ballroom.

Entering his office, Chad sat down at his desk. The little run-in with Richard earlier in the day still had him off-kilter. He couldn't believe the arrogant ass had the nerve to confront him on the firewood issue. Chad knew from the talk in town that Richard had recently moved up from Oklahoma. What the hell did someone from Oklahoma know about what kind of winters they had here in Wyoming?

A knock sounded at his office door. "Mr. Neal?"

"Come in," he answered, leaning back in his chair.

A man in his mid-twenties stepped into the office. "It appears the contractors have all left for the day. Would you mind if I took off? I need to drive into Sheridan for a class, and it's getting late."

"That's fine, David. Just make sure you're here by eight sharp. We've still got a lot to do before Thursday."

"Yes, sir," David said and let himself out.

Chad watched his assistant manager leave and wondered what to fix for dinner. He knew he hadn't been eating right lately, and the body he'd worked so hard to achieve was starting to suffer. Thinking through the contents of his refrigerator, Chad sighed. Unless he wanted to dine on eggs again, he'd have to go into town. Maybe he should eat at the diner? He could always stop at the grocery store on his way out of town.

Living at the lodge was handy, but the drive down the mountain could be pretty treacherous in the dark. The town of Cattle Valley may have leased the land to Guy, but it hadn't included anything more than a gravelled road and utility lines.

Chad knew Guy planned to pave the winding mountain road the following summer, but in the meantime, it gave him the willies. He briefly thought about asking Richard to go into town with him, but quickly shut down that idea. He could easily pass off the late night dreams of the man as having gone without for too long, but being in the same vehicle with Richard was simply playing with fire.

Besides, Chad justified to himself, despite being small, he was a top all the way. With Richard's size and commanding presence, Chad doubted the man was anything but pure

Alpha. He'd learned the hard way that two Alphas in a relationship was nothing but a recipe for disaster.

Shrugging into his new coat, Chad couldn't help but pull up the image of Richard in his mind. The man was hot, no disputing that fact, but Chad wanted more than a hot guy to warm his bed. He wanted someone who could fulfil his every desire, both in bed and out.

Submissives were good to fuck, but he rarely found them interesting on a daily basis. He liked a challenging partner, one who wouldn't back down from an argument. Once again, a picture of Richard came to mind. "Stop it."

* * * *

Sitting at a table in the diner with his friends Jax and Logan, Richard rolled his eyes when Chad walked in. "Great."

Jax looked behind his shoulder. "You wanna call him over?"

"Hell, no. I see enough of that frustrating ass at work." Richard squirmed in his chair, trying to discreetly readjust his sudden hard-on. Fuck. He hated the effect Chad had on him. He didn't even like the man.

"Sounds like there's trouble in paradise," Logan chuckled.

"No trouble as long as he stays on his side of the lodge." When Richard looked back towards the door, Chad stared straight at him. He couldn't help but travel the man with his eyes. From the firm ridge pressing against the fly of the smaller man's jeans, Richard knew he wasn't the only one affected. Shit. Knowing Chad was sexually attracted to him made it even harder to stay away from the asshole.

After shaking his head as if to clear it, Chad gave Richard a dirty look and took a seat at the counter.

"Damn," Jax laughed. "I don't have to ask what the two of you are hungry for."

Richard shrugged, unable to deny it. "Doesn't matter. It wouldn't last, and I refuse to get involved with someone I have to work with on a daily basis."

"Who says it won't last? Hell, give it a shot at least," Logan said.

Richard chuckled. "Despite the Harley and tattoos, I do believe you're a romantic."

"Nothing wrong with romance," Logan proclaimed in a defensive tone.

“Not for you. You’ve found the man you want to spend the rest of your life with, but I don’t know that a man like that exists for me. I’ve been down that road before. Trying to please someone enough to make them love you only ends up biting you in the ass.” A picture of Daddy Paul popped into his mind. Once upon a time, he’d thought Paul was the perfect dominant for him. That was until the beatings had started. By the time he realised Paul wasn’t good for him, he was deeply in love and screwed in more ways than one.

“Richard?” Jax prompted.

Richard looked up. The waitress stood over him waiting to take his order. “Sorry. I’ll have the chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes and country gravy.”

Chapter Two

Closing the door to room three-eleven, Chad swiped his master key card in the next door. He only had two hours before Guy was due to arrive. Although the finishing touches hadn't been done, the rooms finally had furniture. He'd kept his crew working until well after midnight, making sure everything was ready for his boss's inspection.

Opening the door to three-thirteen, Chad's jaw dropped. He immediately slammed the door closed. What the hell? Running towards the stairs, Chad took them two at a time until he reached his office and picked up the phone.

"Cattle Valley Sheriff's Department," a calm voice announced.

"Yes, this is Chad Neal at the Tall Pines Lodge. I need to speak with Sheriff Blackfeather."

"He just got in. Hold on a second," the dispatcher ordered.

While he waited for Ryan to pick up, Chad ran his fingers through his short hair. Why was this happening?

"How can I help you, Chad?" Ryan asked.

"I need you to come up to the lodge. I think someone might've been killed."

"What? Hold on. Did you find a body?"

"No. I was doing a walk-through, and one of my rooms is covered in blood. I mean it's everywhere. On the walls, ceiling, floor. I've never seen anything like it." Chad clenched his shaking hands. Damn. He was starting to believe the whispers of his contractors. Maybe the room really was haunted.

"I'm on my way. I'll need you to make sure no one enters that room before I get there."

"Okay," Chad agreed. "I need to call Guy, but I'll send my assistant manager up until you get here."

"Give me thirty minutes."

Chad hung up and went to find David. He found him building a large fire in the lobby's two-story stone fireplace. "I need you to go upstairs and make sure no one enters room three-thirteen."

David closed the grate and stood. "Why?"

Chad bit his lip. Should he tell him what had happened, or would it freak the young man out? "There's been some damage done to the room. I called the Sheriff, and he's on his way. Ryan asked that no one step foot in there until he arrives."

"But what's wrong with it?" David asked.

"Just do as you're told. No one, and I mean no one, gets into that room. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," David answered in a clipped tone then walked towards the elevator.

Back in his office, Chad looked at the phone. The last thing he wanted was to call Guy. The former Olympic skier was normally laid back, but he was like a dog with a bone if something didn't go his way. Chad knew Guy would pepper him with questions and grill him like an expensive steak.

Chad took a deep breath and picked up the phone. He knew it was better to prepare his boss before he arrived. Pulling up to the hotel to find a cop car parked in front would not be a good first impression.

* * * *

Abe Cross parked his battered pickup next to the woodpile. The sky told him to prepare for snow, and he needed to finish filling his orders. He still had two cords to deliver to people in town and another five to the lodge.

As he began tossing split logs into the back of the truck, the pager on his hip began to vibrate. Brushing off his hands, Abe read the display and felt like he'd been punched in the gut. *Jill Foster? I haven't seen that name for damn near four years.*

He put the pager back into its holster and picked up another log. *What could she possibly want?* The last time he'd talked to his ex-agent, he'd told her not to call again. Jill was nice, but after the accident, he couldn't take the pitying looks. He'd packed up his possessions and moved to the vacation cabin that had been in his family for several generations.

As far as he knew, the Cross Timbers was the only privately owned land for miles, tucked neatly into a pocket on the side of the mountain. Many people had tried to buy his grandfather's land over the years, but Amos Cross had refused all offers telling the would-be buyers his memories weren't for sale. Now it was all Abe's, left to him when his grandfather passed away at the young age of seventy-six from a heart attack.

Abe took a bandana from his back pocket and wiped the dripping sweat from his forehead. The radio morning show he'd listened to earlier had warned to expect at least six inches over the weekend. Looking up at the sky, Abe had a feeling they'd underestimated it by a long shot. One thing he'd learned from his dad and grandfather was how to read the weather. Living on the side of a mountain, learning weather patterns was the best way to save your life.

As he stuck the rag back into his pocket, his pager went off again. He didn't need to look to know it was Jill calling back. As much as he hated the thought of talking to his one-time friend, Abe knew he'd have to return her call when he went inside for lunch. Until then, he had work to do. Jill could wait, the storm could not.

* * * *

Chad felt like pulling his hair out. It was barely noon, and already the lodge was in chaos. When word had leaked that something was once again wrong with room three-thirteen, he'd had several workers quit on the spot, spouting crap about ghosts and evil spirits.

Yes, Chad admitted to himself, something was definitely going on with the third-floor room, but he doubted a spirit would check in to a brand new lodge. He'd been so busy putting out the gossip fires, Chad hadn't even had the chance to talk to Ryan since his arrival.

Waiting for the elevator, he prepared himself for the inevitable. Guy was already upstairs with the sheriff, a deputy and several technicians from the county crime lab. The doors opened, and Chad stepped inside. Before they could close, Richard slid inside to stand beside him. *Great, just what I need, another distraction.*

"Hey," Richard greeted, taking a sip from the coffee mug in his hand. "This place is buzzing."

"Tell me about it," Chad replied with an exaggerated eye roll.

"So, you gonna fill me in before I get up there?" Richard asked.

The last thing Chad wanted to do was continue the rumours, but it had looked as though someone had been murdered in three-thirteen. "I'm on my way up to talk to Ryan. I don't really know anything yet other than the room's been trashed. At first I thought...never mind."

The doors opened, and Chad started to step out but stopped. Holding the heavy sliders so they wouldn't close on him, he turned back to Richard. "Wait a minute. Why are you up here in the first place?"

Richard shrugged. "Don't know. Ezra just called and told me to come up."

"Ezra's here?" Chad asked. He'd been so busy he hadn't even known the big man had arrived.

"Yep. Wyn's with him," Richard replied. "Can we go now before you get me into trouble?" Richard took a step towards Chad, their bodies only an inch apart.

The electricity sparking between them had Chad's cock taking notice. *Trouble, trouble, trouble*, he reminded himself and turned to walk away. The room at the centre of his problems was decorated in crime scene tape complete with Deputy Roy standing guard in the hall. "Roy," he acknowledged in greeting.

"They're waiting for you in three-eleven," Roy mumbled, looking a little green around the gills.

Chad didn't blame him. The quick glance he'd gotten earlier of the room had been enough to keep him as far away as he could get. He knocked on the neighbouring door and waited.

"Don't worry. If you get scared you can hang on to me," Richard whispered in his ear.

Chad was saved from a reply by the opening of the door. Ryan's gaze shot from Chad to Richard and back. A brilliant smile appeared on the bad-ass looking sheriff's face. "Come in," Ryan welcomed and stepped back.

Chad entered the room, uncertain what to think of the sheriff's obvious amusement with the situation. Wyn and Ezra were seated side by side on the edge of the bed, while Guy took up a position on the window ledge.

Ryan gestured towards a small table with two chairs. "Have a seat."

Not looking back at Richard, Chad chose the chair closest to the door. "What's going on?" he asked.

Ryan leaned against the desk with his hands on his hips. "The lab guys are finished with the room. Hopefully, they'll be able to come up with some answers for us. In the meantime, I'm putting a pretty serious lockdown on the lodge.

Chad's head whipped towards Guy. "What? How's this going to affect the January opening?"

Guy shook his head. "We don't really know. We're hoping to get a lot of the answers from the two of you," Guy said, motioning between Chad and Richard.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Richard jumped in to ask.

"I want to lock down the lodge to all outside workers. Until we can get a clear picture of what exactly is going on, the fewer people traipsing in and out of the building, the better."

"But...how?" Chad shook his head. "The lodge isn't finished yet."

"What exactly is left that needs completing before opening?" Guy asked.

Chad mentally ran through his to-do list. "Sconces in a couple of the hallways, pictures to hang, furniture to move, then there's just getting the rooms themselves dressed with bedding and towels." Chad ran his fingers through his hair. "I'm a good worker but not that good. No way I can do all of that by myself in two and a half weeks."

Ezra spoke up. "Richard? Isn't the bar about ready?"

"Yeah, except for getting the food stocked and hanging some signs and stuff, we're good to go."

"What about Collin? Could he take care of some of that for you?" Ezra asked.

"Sure."

"He'll have to stay on-site," Ryan added. "Will he be able to do that?"

Richard shrugged. "Not sure. I can ask."

"So," Guy began. "Collin can help with the sconces and decorating. Is it possible the three of you, working together, will have enough done for opening?"

Chad could see very little sleep in his future. "It can be done, but what about thirteen?"

Everyone's head turned towards the wall separating the damaged room from the one they were sitting in. "Get the carpet torn up and disposed of and the walls repainted. We'll leave it empty for now," Guy instructed.

Chad looked at the sheriff. "How long before you know anything?"

He hated to bring up the rumours, but he also knew he wouldn't be able to do damage control if he was at the lodge. "People are saying the room's haunted."

"That's ridiculous," Ryan scoffed.

"I agree with you, but it's what some of the contractors are saying. If we lay them off, the rumours will only get out of control. By nightfall, everyone in town will have heard them. Who's gonna stay in a haunted lodge?"

"I'll take care of it," Guy assured. He turned to Ryan. "Do you have time to make a few rounds with me? It might help if people know the pranks are a police matter and not a spiritual one."

Ryan shook his head. "I've got too many irons in the fire. I can send Roy with you. He's off duty in another couple of hours, but I'm sure he'll welcome some overtime just before Christmas."

Ezra stood and pulled Wyn to his feet. "Why don't you ride into town with me and stock up on enough food to last until the orders arrive for the opening," Ezra said to Richard.

Richard nodded. "You eat anything special?" he asked Chad.

"Can I make you a list?" Chad replied. He'd never grocery shopped for three weeks' worth of food before. He wasn't sure what he'd need until he sat down with pencil and paper.

"Go on down, and I'll stop by your office as soon as I show Ezra and Wyn around the bar."

Chad turned to Guy. "Is there anything else you need from me?"

"No. I trust that you'll be able to pull everything off. It's the reason I hired you in the first place."

"Thank you." Chad dipped his head in acknowledgement before leaving the room. How the hell was he supposed to spend every day working side by side with Richard and not die of blue balls?

Chapter Three

Connecting the wiring for one of the sconces, Collin glanced at the door to room three-thirteen. He'd never been overly superstitious, but that room gave him the creeps. Hadn't he told Richard just days before the blood incident that there was something wrong with that particular room?

Collin knew he was a damn good electrician, but even he couldn't figure out what kept happening to the electrical work in three-thirteen. He pulled a screwdriver out of his utility belt and reattached the faceplate to the wall.

If it weren't for the money, he knew he would've quit along with several of the others when the rumours had started. But bills needed to be paid, and there wasn't a lot of new construction around the area this time of year. Winter was generally his slow time. The offer from the lodge had nicely padded his bank account. He'd have plenty of feathers in his nest to see him through until spring.

"There you are," Richard declared, coming down the hall.

"Yep, here I am," Collin replied, screwing a light bulb into the fixture.

"I need you to do me a favour and run this cheque to Abe Cross," Richard said. "It was due upon receipt of the last load, but he must've dropped it off sometime before dawn."

Happy for the excuse to get out of the lodge, Collin took the cheque Richard held out. "Not a problem."

"It's been snowing for about an hour now, but you should make it there and back before the real heavy stuff starts. You can take my truck if you want," Richard added.

"That's okay. My pickup's gotten me through plenty of winters in Cattle Valley. She's a honey in the snow."

Collin followed Richard towards the elevators. As they entered, he pushed the button for the second floor. "Thanks for doing this," Richard expounded. "I've got my hands full, keeping up with Chad. Man that guy loves to give orders."

Collin smiled. He'd observed the two men working together on numerous occasions. Richard could say what he liked, but Collin had a feeling Chad's orders didn't bother the bar manager nearly as much as he claimed.

Stepping off the elevator, he turned towards Richard. "I'm just gonna get my coat, and I'll be on my way."

"Sounds good. Thanks."

The doors closed, and Collin walked to his room. It felt strange to be living in a hotel room. His family had never been the kind to take vacations while he was growing up. Life on a dairy farm left very little time for anything else.

Slipping his key card into the slot, he took off his tool belt and put on his coat, stocking cap and gloves. Walking over to the window, he parted the curtains and looked outside. The snow was coming down pretty heavily. From his vantage point, there appeared to be at least four inches already on the ground. It would have to be a quick trip if he were going to make it there and back before it started to get dangerous.

After making sure he had his wallet, Collin left his room and headed for his truck. With the old blue beast parked under the lodge entrance, it took no time to get the windows cleared.

As he pulled out and onto the gravelled road, Collin tried to remember the way to Abe's place. He'd only been there once before and that was several years earlier when he'd done some work on the new addition Abe had built.

Thinking of the larger-than-life woodsman had Collin's cock pressing against the fly of his jeans. There was something about the reclusive man that fascinated him. The entire time he'd worked for Abe, he bet the man only uttered a couple dozen words. Spotting Abe in town was damn near impossible, so nothing had ever come of his attraction, but maybe....

Collin cursed himself. *What am I thinking? No way would a man like Abe be interested in someone like me.* He caught his own reflection in the rear view mirror. He wasn't a bad looking guy, but that was really the only weapon in his arsenal. Men like Abe didn't go for boring guys like him.

He spotted a turn-off road that looked familiar and took it, his back tires sliding on the slick surface. The fish-tail startled him, and it took several moments to catch his breath. "Concentrate on the road and not your dick," he chastised out loud.

He'd only gone about a mile down the road when the sky started dumping snow. His windshield wipers were barely able to keep up as he slowed the truck to a crawl. *Should I turn back?*

No, he knew he couldn't. Not only was Richard depending on him, but he couldn't pass up the chance to see Abe. Just looking into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen was worth it. He'd often wondered what Abe looked like without the heavy beard and moustache, not that he had anything against facial hair. At least Abe's was always kept neatly trimmed. When he found his thoughts drifting to the incredibly built six-foot-four body, Collin shook his head. He took one hand off the wheel and pressed it against his thickening cock.

A white-tailed deer chose that moment to dart out of the surrounding woods. Swerving to avoid the animal, Collin's truck slid off the road and down an embankment, striking a tree.

Opening his eyes, he blinked several times. *What happened?* He lifted his head from the steering wheel, wincing in pain. His hand went to his forehead and came back covered in blood. Shit.

He tried to focus on his surroundings. Was it his imagination or had the snow gotten deeper? The way the front of his pickup was wrapped around the tree, Collin knew he'd have to get out and walk for help. Luckily, he thought he was only about a mile from Abe's place.

He unfastened his seat belt and leaned over to open the glove compartment. Grabbing a faded red bandana, Collin placed it over his wound and pulled the stocking cap down to hold it in place.

After making sure his gloves were on and his coat securely fastened, he tried to open the door, but it didn't budge. He slid across the seat and tried the passenger side. It took some effort, but he was eventually rewarded when the door opened.

Getting out of the wrecked truck, Collin steadied himself against the bed. There was little doubt in his mind he'd obtained a concussion. His vision was still blurred and his balance off. He just hoped he could make the blizzard trek without falling.

* * * *

"Here, let me help you," Chad offered, holding the door open.

"Thanks," Richard replied, pushing the dolly stacked with wood into the lobby. He'd already filled the bar's wood storage area and was working on the lobby's.

"How much more?" Chad asked, helping Richard unload.

Looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows, Richard shook his head. "I'd say at least another two to be on the safe side. It doesn't appear the blizzard's gonna let up anytime soon. There's a good chance the electricity'll go out. If that happens, we'll need to stay in the bar, less space to warm."

Chad looked nervous. Richard knew the man had never been around snow and didn't know what to expect. He wasn't really trying to scare Chad, but he wasn't going to sugar coat their situation, either. "If we lose power, we'll have to go around and turn on the water so the pipes don't freeze."

"What about the generator? Isn't that why we paid a fortune for it?" Chad asked.

"Yeah, but it takes gasoline to run, and we only have enough in the tank for a day, maybe two. Even at that, we wouldn't be able to run the heater at full capacity."

"Do you really think the power will go out?"

"Yeah. It's just a matter of when. Luckily, we have plenty of blankets and wood, so we should be fine."

Chad nodded and once again started unloading the dolly. The worried look on his face melted Richard's heart. "Hey," Richard said, reaching out to clasp Chad's shoulder. "We'll be fine."

"What about Collin? Do you think he'll make it back okay?" Chad asked.

"Hopefully, he'll be able to hole up at Abe's place. It would be suicide to try and drive back across the mountain in this weather."

* * * *

Stretched out on the couch with his feet warming in front of the fire, Abe idly scratched his dog, Lobo, behind the ears. The howling wind outside the house didn't bode well for the storm stopping anytime soon. "Told ya it was gonna be a doozy," he commented, as Lobo shifted to rest his head on Abe's lap.

Winter was the hardest time of year for Abe. He could pretend he didn't need companionship when he had other things to keep him busy, but sitting in front of the fire, he longed for someone besides the dog to keep him warm.

He smiled at the thought of one of his many past lovers curling up with him in a cabin in the middle of nowhere. The men he'd dated wouldn't have been caught dead in anything

less than a five-star resort. Abe sighed. Maybe that was his problem. He'd always dated men as superficial as he'd been.

Lobo's head popped up from his dozing position. "What's wrong?" Abe asked the German Shepherd.

With a stream of barks, Lobo jumped from Abe's lap and went to the door. Abe knew it wasn't a need to pee that made his dog behave that way. Grabbing his rifle from above the fireplace, Abe quickly stepped into his boots. It was most likely a deer that had come wandering into the yard, but better safe than sorry. There'd been bears and wolves in the vicinity lately and going up against one of those without a rifle was just plumb insane.

Bracing himself for the blast of cold air that was sure to slap him in the face, Abe opened the door. Lobo pushed his way past Abe's legs as he took off into the yard barking. "Who's there!" Abe yelled, his rifle positioned at the ready.

"Help me," he heard a faint voice yell back through the blinding snow.

Abe didn't recognise the voice, but that was no big surprise. He wasn't much of a conversationalist these days. He leaned the rifle against the front door, confident he wouldn't need it. Abe made his way through the drift of snow blocking his porch steps and tried his best to follow the sounds of Lobo's continued barking.

When he spotted the huddled mass of blue, clinging to a tree, he picked up his pace. "Lobo! Back off," he yelled, as he neared the man. "You okay?"

The man's head lifted slowly. "Collin?" Abe couldn't believe his eyes. "What're you doing out here?"

"Truck ran off the road. I don't even know for sure how I managed to find your place," Collin slurred.

It was then Abe noticed the dark streaks of dried blood on either side of the man's face. "Shit. Let's get you inside," he proclaimed, wrapping his arm around Collin's waist. Collin managed to take two steps before his legs buckled. Without a thought, Abe swung the smaller man up into his arms.

Collin tried to twist from his grasp, but Abe tightened his hold. "Stay still. You need to conserve your energy."

Battling the deepening snow, Abe tried to shield Collin with his body as much as possible. He moved the rifle to the side of the doorjamb as he stepped into the warmth of the cabin.

In the light, Collin's face looked even worse than it had outside. He quickly lowered the freezing man to the hearth and began removing his clothing.

"What're you doing?" Collin questioned when Abe began unbuttoning his shirt.

"Trying to save your life," Abe answered. "We need to get you warmed up."

Once Collin was down to his underwear, Abe remembered the blood. He reached over and pulled a thick blanket from the back of the couch and wrapped it around the shivering man. "Let me get my first aid kit. Sit tight."

Abe retrieved the old tackle box from under the kitchen sink. He found a worn but clean rag and ran warm water over it before heading back to the living room. When he entered the room, Collin had curled into a ball and was visibly shaking.

"Shit!" Abe dropped the first aid supplies onto the floor and began to undress. "Hang on, Collin. I'll get you warm."

It wasn't until Abe was undressed and wrapped around the still shivering Collin that he realised his mistake. Despite being on the verge of freezing to death, the man in his arms felt damn good, too good. Abe wondered if he'd ever want to let the near-stranger go.

Chapter Four

Richard hung up the phone. "That was Abe. Collin's truck ran off the road on his way to pay Abe the money the bar owed him."

"Is Collin okay?" Chad asked from his position in front of the fireplace.

Richard put a couple more logs on the fire and took a seat next to Chad. They'd moved to the bar in order to conserve body heat and wood. "He suffered a pretty nasty cut to his forehead. According to Abe, it needed stitches, so our resident woodsman did the next best thing and Super Glued it shut."

Chad whistled. "Ouch."

"Yeah. Abe assured me Collin would be okay with him until the storm passes, and the roads are cleared." Deciding to stop beating around the bush, Richard leaned closer to Chad. "That means it's just you and me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Chad asked.

Maintaining eye contact, Richard dropped to the floor to kneel in front of Chad. He insinuated himself between Chad's already spread thighs and ran his hands up Chad's muscular legs. "It means I'm tired of walking around with a hard-on."

"I don't think we're compatible in that department," Chad hastened to reply, shifting in the chair.

"What? You don't like guys?" Richard asked. He could tell by the nipples hardening under Chad's shirt that the lodge manager was turned on.

"No. I'm as gay as they come, but I'm also a top, nothing but," declared Chad.

Richard almost jumped for joy. "Even better," he whispered, closing the distance to suck on Chad's lower lip.

Chad gave a half-grunt half-growl before grabbing the back of Richard's head to pull him in for a deep kiss. Damn, the man tasted good. Chad took control, and Richard gladly gave it.

"Off," Chad commanded, ripping at Richard's shirt.

Breaking the kiss, Richard sat back on his heels and pulled the long-sleeved T-shirt over his head. He watched as Chad bared a surprisingly well-muscled chest. Who knew the much

smaller man was built like a brick shithouse under the managerial dress clothes? And a hidden tattoo?

"Christ," Richard groaned, going to work on Chad's pants.

Chad lifted his hips as Richard struggled to get to what his mouth had been watering for. Uncovered, his lover's cock was a thing of beauty. He looked up at Chad for permission before continuing.

A slight nod was all he received in return. Lowering his head, Richard ran his tongue over the mushroom-shaped crown. He was rewarded with a large drop of pre-cum. Moaning at the strong flavour, Richard eased the thick shaft past his lips to tease the sensitive area under the head.

A hand to the back of his neck and a pelvic thrust was all it took for Richard to relax his throat and accept the invasion of Chad's entire length. "Yes! Suck it," Chad ordered, as he began to fuck Richard's face.

Richard gave up control and allowed Chad to use him as needed. He knew most people would find it hard to believe, but he actually got off on giving pleasure. From the look on Chad's face, he was doing a good job.

Chad pulled Richard's head back with a yank to his hair and came, the hot streams of cum coating Richard's face and neck. "Yes," Chad shouted, as he continued to empty his balls.

When Chad slumped back in his chair, Richard reached for his shirt. "Wait," Chad panted.

Richard dropped the shirt and gazed into Chad's deep brown eyes. With a slight smile, Chad pulled him back in and began cleaning the drying cum with his tongue. The action was so erotic, Richard quickly unzipped his fly and took his cock in hand as Chad continued to lave his face and neck.

"You're one sexy motherfucker," Chad noted between licks.

Richard felt his impending orgasm quickly approaching. "Gonna," he moaned.

"Yes. Give it to me," Chad instructed, reaching down to cup Richard's balls.

One forceful squeeze was all it took for Richard to paint the front of the leather chair with his seed. The forceful climax wiped Richard out. His head dropped to Chad's bare lap as he tried to regain his breath. He hadn't come like that in a very long time.

Richard glanced up at Chad. "I think I need a nap."

Chad grinned, the action exposing one of those cute dimples. "Well, we've got blankets and a fire. What more do we need?"

"Condoms," Richard replied. "But they're in my room, and I don't think I have the energy to get up."

"Later," Chad offered and slid down to the floor to cradle Richard in his arms.

With a little effort, they managed to reach the blankets and cover themselves. Spooned together, Richard sighed. "This is nice."

"Yeah," Chad agreed. "But we've still got a lot of work ahead of us."

"We'll figure it out, a day at a time," Richard said, bringing Chad's arms tighter around him.

After a few moments, Chad cleared his throat. "I was actually talking about the hotel."

Richard felt like he'd been punched in the gut. Was Chad saying he didn't want a future? That what they'd just done was a purely physical release? A soft kiss to the back of his neck helped take the sting from Chad's statement, but it still left Richard uneasy.

* * * *

Collin woke to a room filled with dancing light and shadows cast by the fire. He tried to sit up, but the pain in his head stopped him. "Aahh," he moaned, putting his hand to his temple.

"Take it easy," a gruff voice soothed from somewhere in the shadows.

"Where am I? Who are you?"

The strike of a match startled him as a kerosene lamp was set aflame. Seeing Abe's face brought the earlier events back to him. *I wrecked my truck. Dammit!* Looking around, he saw it was dark outside. "How long've I been here?"

"A couple hours. It's not as late as it looks, only around seven-thirty. The blizzard took out the electricity about an hour ago. I've got a propane tank for heat and a generator for electricity, but I thought I'd hold off for a while."

Collin's fingers ran lightly over the bandage on his forehead. "I hit my head," he said, remembering.

"Yeah. You suffered a pretty nasty cut that needed stitches. I couldn't do that, of course, but I sealed it shut with some glue. I hope you don't mind, but you'll probably have a scar."

As the haze in his mind started to clear, Collin remembered Abe warming him. *Shit, not just warming me, holding me.*

"Did you hear me?" Abe asked.

What? Oh, he hadn't realised he hadn't commented on the scar statement. "Yeah. Sorry, I'm still a little fuzzy. Scars don't bother me. I've played sports all my life. You're bound to pick one up every couple of years."

Abe got a strange look on his face. *Did I say something wrong?* "I appreciate everything you've done for me," Collin added, patting the beast of a dog that jumped off the couch to sniff him out.

Abe made a noise deep in his throat and stood. "I imagine you're hungry. I'll go make you a bowl of soup."

"You don't have to do that," Collin proclaimed, seconds before his growling stomach started making noise.

Turning back towards him, Abe grinned. "It's okay. It's no problem. Come on, Lobo. I'll feed you while I'm at it."

Wanting to follow the tall, handsome man, Collin tried to stand. It was then he realised he wore only his underwear under the heavy blanket. He felt the heat of a blush creep up his neck and face as he looked around the room for his jeans. "Um...excuse me, Abe? Where are my clothes?" he asked loud enough for Abe to hear him.

Holding another lantern he must've had in the kitchen, Abe reappeared in the doorway. "Sorry. They were wet, so I put them into the dryer before the power went out. Let me see if they had time to dry."

After Abe disappeared again, Collin wrapped the blanket around himself, toga-style, and ventured into the kitchen. He practically ran into Abe as he rounded the corner. "Sorry," Collin choked, excusing himself.

Abe quickly held up Collin's clothes. "No. I'm the one who should be sorry. I should've checked on these earlier. They aren't dry, so I'll have to set them out on the hearth."

Collin nodded. "I can do that."

When he reached out to take the clothes, he felt the blanket begin to slip. Trying to juggle the clothes and grab for the only thing covering his body, everything ended up on the floor in a heap. Embarrassed, Collin sunk to his knees, trying to shield his almost nude body.

Abe knelt down and gathered Collin's damp clothes. When Abe made no attempt to stand, Collin finally glanced up and locked gazes with the gorgeous woodsman. He watched as Abe's nostrils flared, desire clearly written on his face. Collin's own desire pressed against the thin material of his bikini briefs.

The memories of Abe's firm body warming him earlier assaulted him. Collin leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss on Abe's lips. The kiss lingered where it was, not going deeper, not breaking, for several long moments. Finally Abe pulled back.

"I can't do this," Abe groaned, and stood.

Collin's ass hit the floor with the rejection. He pulled the blanket around him like a shield. *How stupid am I? Of course a man like Abe wouldn't go for a guy like me.* He heard the slap of his jeans against the stone hearth as Abe laid out his clothes.

"I'll find you something to put on until they're dry," Abe mumbled from behind Collin.

Geeze, how bad was it when a guy was practically begging you to get dressed? After a few moments, a T-shirt and a pair of soft flannel pyjama bottoms landed on the floor next to Collin's leg.

"They'll be too big, but they've got a drawstring. I'll go see about that soup," Abe excused himself, leaving the room.

Gathering the dark-green-and-blue plaid bottoms and white T-shirt, Collin made his way back to the sofa. He could tell the pants had never been worn. Maybe Abe slept in the nude?

With a sound of utter disgust escaping him, Collin got dressed. He tightened the drawstring as much as it would go, ashamed of his small frame. It wasn't the first time, he'd wished he were built like the guys he was attracted to. It didn't seem to matter how much he worked out or how many hours he put in on the athletic fields, he was a scrawny shrimp.

Collin was so busy cataloguing his flaws, he didn't even hear Abe come back into the room. A tray filled with soup, crackers and milk was set on the coffee table in front of him.

"I hope you like milk. I've got other stuff if you'd prefer?"

"No. Milk is fine. Thanks." He picked up the glass and took a drink as if to prove his statement. As Abe sat heavily in the lone chair beside the couch, Collin suddenly felt the need to apologise.

"I'm sorry about all this." He gestured to his forehead. "I came over to drop off a cheque from Richard."

A thought suddenly occurred to him. "Richard! I need to call him. He'll be worried."

Abe shook his head. "I've already taken care of it. He knows you'll be here with me until the roads clear enough to get you back to the lodge."

Collin looked towards the window. "How bad is it out there?" He couldn't imagine being a burden for more than a day or two.

"Bad. Worse than I've ever seen it. Mark my words. We'll be measuring it in feet not inches by morning."

Feet? How long would it take for the roads to clear? He knew the town didn't normally plough the mountain roads, especially for only one man. Collin inwardly groaned. He could be in for weeks of torture.

* * * *

After getting Collin settled into the spare bedroom, Abe let Lobo out once more. "Stay close," he instructed his faithful companion. The last thing he wanted was to lose his dog to a fucking blizzard.

He shut the door and waited. Lobo didn't like the cold anymore than he did, and in a matter of seconds, the dog let out a bark. Abe opened the door, and his dog squeezed past him to sit on the mud rug. Abe took a towel from a peg near the door and wiped down Lobo's feet and body. "Good boy," he said, patting Lobo's head.

Instead of going to his cold bedroom, Abe decided to just stretch out on the floor in front of the fireplace. As a boy, it had been his assigned spot. Abe grinned, remembering the weekends he'd spent up here with his dad, granddad and brother. It was always the typical guys' weekend. No bathing, no balanced meals. Just the sun, nature and whatever they happen to catch in the stream for dinner.

They were all gone now, his dad from a heart attack, his granddad from a stroke and, most recently, his brother. Abe closed his eyes and tried to block out the pain the memories of his brother always brought forth. His fingers absentmindedly ran through the heavy beard to the scars hidden beneath.

He tried to steer his mind away from the accident and on to a different topic. *Collin*. What was he going to do about Collin? More importantly, what was he willing to do about the attraction he felt for the much smaller man?

It would be easy to just let go and fuck like rabbits in the days ahead, but he didn't think Collin deserved that. In the past, it wouldn't have bothered Abe. In his years as a model, he'd spent many weekends fucking nameless men. It was understood that a few days was all Abe was willing to give, but Collin was different. This was a guy he'd not only continue to run into occasionally, but someone he genuinely liked.

He was thankful Collin had been too out of it earlier to feel the erection pressing against the front of Abe's briefs. Getting the man warm had been heaven and hell rolled into one. Abe looked towards the room where Collin slept. It would be so easy...

Chapter Five

Richard turned the faucet until a pencil-thin stream of water flowed from the tap. "Six down, forty-four to go," he drawled, exiting the room.

He'd hate to see the water bill after this storm passed, but it was better than replacing all the pipes. Richard had jumped at the chance to get away from the bar when Chad had suggested he turn on all the faucets in the hotel. It was not only a smart thing to do, but it gave him a good excuse to escape Chad's questioning eyes.

Richard still couldn't believe the way he'd acted the previous night. As welcome as the tight grip on his hair had been during the blow job, it had also been a painful reminder of his past. He'd made up a hasty excuse and practically ran to his small apartment. His body still hadn't warmed up after spending the night alone in a room without heat.

He felt like a fool. For hours after going to bed, he'd kicked his own ass. He didn't know Chad well, but he could already tell the man was not only extremely dominant but, also, nothing like Daddy Paul.

Thinking of his former partner, Richard fingered the scar on the back of his head. For years, Paul had him so far under his domination, Richard wouldn't think of telling him no. The last night he'd seen Paul in the Maverick could very well have been his last night on earth.

When Paul had grabbed Richard's balls and ordered him outside, Richard hadn't thought twice about obeying. The welcoming party in the alley had taken him by complete surprise. Then Daddy Paul had informed Richard that no one walked away from him. The ensuing beating at the hands of four men had left Richard close to death.

Richard smiled as he continued his way down the hall. At least the bastards were paying for it in jail. He hoped Paul had been turned into a bitch by a guy named Bubba.

The radio on his hip crackled before Chad's voice invaded his happy thoughts.

"What floor are you on?" Chad asked.

Unclipping the radio from his belt, Richard put it to his mouth. "Slave driver! I'm only half-done with the first floor."

Chad actually chuckled. Richard didn't remember ever hearing the stern manager laugh before.

"Not why I called. I'll find you," Chad proclaimed before signing off.

As Richard clipped the radio back onto his belt, his hands began to sweat. What was it about that man that got him so flustered? Hell, it wasn't like he was physically afraid of Chad. Richard knew he could more than hold his own in a fight with the man. Chad might have impressive muscles on his small frame, but Richard had the same basic build plus eight inches and a good sixty pounds on the guy.

Finishing up another room, Richard heard footsteps coming towards him. Looking over his shoulder, he slowed his steps to allow Chad to catch up with him.

"I got a call on the radio from the sheriff."

Richard stopped completely and turned to face Chad. "Yeah? What did he want?"

"To know if we were okay and to tell me they closed the lab in Sheridan. He won't have any answers on the blood samples from three-thirteen until they reopen," Chad reported.

"And until then?" Richard asked. He hated not knowing what they were up against, especially trapped on the side of a mountain.

Chad shrugged. "Ryan said he'd have his radio with him at all times if we needed to get hold of him."

Looking down into Chad's brown eyes, Richard wondered why the conversation with the sheriff had been important enough to track him down. "Okay," Richard replied and turned to enter the next room.

Chad pulled out his skeleton key card and went to the door across the hall. "Since I'm already here, might as well help you out."

Richard bit the inside of his cheek. *Damn*. The reason he'd agreed to do the mundane task in the first place had been to get away from those commanding brown eyes. Now they'd be following him. It was going to be a long, torturous day.

* * * *

"It's still snowing? Are you kidding me?" Collin whined, shuffling into the living room.

Abe turned away from the window towards his houseguest. Collin still wore the insanely baggy pyjamas Abe had loaned him the previous night.

"I've never seen anything like it," Abe mused. He wasn't sure if he was referring to the snow or the sexy man in front of him, both maybe.

"Have you heard an updated weather forecast?" Collin asked, scratching his T-shirt covered chest.

Abe tried not to drool as he thought about running his hands under Collin's borrowed shirt. "Um, they think it'll continue for at least the next thirty-six hours." He shook his head to dispel his wayward thoughts. "Want some coffee?" Abe gestured to the old-fashioned coffeepot sitting on the grate next to the fire.

"Sounds good. I could use something to warm me up," Collin said.

Biting back a groan, Abe picked up the potholder and a cup before advancing towards the fire. "I turned on the heat earlier. It should become bearable soon. How's your head?"

"Fine. Headache's almost gone," Collin claimed, stepping up behind Abe.

"You sleep okay?" Abe asked, handing Collin his cup without turning around. He heard Collin set the coffee on the table moments before a hand slid down his spine.

"I was cold. Wishing I had you to warm me again," Collin whispered against Abe's ear.

Closing his eyes, Abe's body betrayed him by leaning into the caress. "You only say that because you don't know me well enough," Abe mumbled.

Collin's hands burrowed their way under Abe's flannel shirt to tease at his nipples. "But I want to," Collin answered.

Abe reached behind Collin and pulled him closer. With the evidence of Collin's arousal pressing against his upper thigh, Abe savoured the moment. He didn't know how long it would last between the two of them, but he was tired of fighting the inevitable. He felt pressure against his own erection and moaned, thinking it was Collin.

Opening his eyes, Abe looked down, expecting to see the long-fingered hand covering the fly of his jeans. What he saw instead was Lobo's nose pressed against his cock. "Lobo!" he yelled, getting the dog's attention. "Go lay down."

With sad eyes, his faithful companion turned and walked away. Abe felt bad for yelling at the poor dog.

"Is someone jealous?" Collin asked, his hand moving southward.

"I guess," Abe replied. "I'll have to give him a dog treat later to make it up to him."

Before Collin's hand could slide inside his jeans, Abe turned around. "I wanna hold you," he confessed.

Collin nodded and began to unbutton Abe's shirt. The lips that landed on his chest nearly took Abe's breath away. God, it had been so long since he'd let go of his guilt long enough to become intimate with someone. Not since the accident...

Abe pushed the thoughts away and pulled Collin's shirt over his head. "Skin," he ground out between clenched jaws. The desire to be buried to the hilt inside the man in his arms was suddenly overwhelming. "Shit," he cursed.

Collin stopped in the process of taking off Abe's shirt. "Something wrong?"

"Yeah. No condoms. Fuck," Abe cursed again.

"I've got one in my wallet," Collin declared.

Looking out the window at the blizzard still raging, Abe shook his head. "One? We'll be here for at least a week, maybe more. How am I supposed to have you only once?"

Think goddammit. Abe berated himself for not being prepared. He knew once would never be enough with the handsome, blue-eyed man.

"We could go without?" Collin offered.

"No," Abe replied. "I've seen too much to take that sort of chance."

With a resigned sigh, Abe led Collin towards the sofa. "I guess its rub-offs and hand jobs until the weather clears."

"And kisses," Collin added, straddling Abe's lap.

"And kisses," Abe agreed, taking Collin's mouth in a deep kiss. Christ, the man tasted good.

Abe began untying the drawstring at Collin's waist without breaking the kiss. He wasn't sure what felt better, holding Collin's long, thin cock or Collin fisting his. Either way, Abe knew he wouldn't last long, especially when his lover began sucking on his tongue.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Abe concentrated on giving the lean man in his arms as much pleasure as possible. Damn, he wanted to fuck him. The picture of Collin riding Abe's cock tipped him over the edge.

Abe felt the warmth of his own cum jet between them, as his muscles constricted in ecstasy. Collin cried out Abe's name a few seconds later, adding to the sticky mess. It suddenly occurred to him the water heater had been turned off. Even if he turned it on now, it would take a good while before the water was hot enough to shower.

As the smell of their mixed seed reached his nose, Abe decided that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Yeah, he could get used to the smell of their combined pleasure. He pulled Collin tighter against his chest. "Thank you," he whispered.

Collin chuckled. "You're thanking me? I think you have that backward. I'm the grateful one."

"Grateful?" Abe was confused.

Collin looked towards the window, refusing to make eye contact. "I'm a nobody. You're...Abe."

Abe's entire body tensed. Did Collin know who he was, or rather, who he used to be? Is that what all this was about, making it with a has-been supermodel? "Why'd you say that?" he finally asked.

"What, that I'm nobody?" Collin shrugged. "Because I am. I'm probably the most boring man in Cattle Valley."

Abe shook his head. "Not that, though we'll get back to that statement in a minute. Why'd you say 'You're Abe'?"

Collin looked at him like he was crazy. "Because you're big and gorgeous and sexy. Why would someone like you be interested in someone like me?" Collin grimaced. "Well, except for the whole snowed in thing."

Abe was dumbstruck. Had he actually found a man with lower self-esteem than his own? He'd learned soon after the accident that low self-esteem could happen to anyone. Abe had been the toast of New York, but none of that mattered once he realised how ugly he was on the inside. He was just sorry it took the death of his beloved brother to drive the truth home.

Reaching up, he cupped Collin's narrow face in his hands, making the smaller man look into his eyes. "You're beautiful inside and out. How can you say something like that?"

"I'm skinny," Collin began.

"No, you're lean, big difference," Abe corrected.

"I'm boring," Collin tried again.

"Why do you think that? You volunteer at the fire department. From what I read in the local paper, you're a wiz at sports. How can such a well-rounded individual think of himself as boring?"

"I don't have many friends. That has to say something, right?"

"I don't have any friends. Do you think that makes me boring?" Abe countered.

"No. But you probably don't have any because you don't want any. There's a difference," Collin noted, his bottom lip protruding in a boyish pout.

Abe studied Collin for a few moments. He could tell by the earnest expression on the man's face he wasn't fishing for compliments. "First of all, I don't have friends because I don't feel that I deserve them. Secondly, I think you underestimate your appeal. If you don't have close friends, it's most likely because you don't let people get to know you."

Collin shrugged.

Abe kissed the bandage covering Collin's forehead. "I'd like to be your friend."

Collin's eyes brightened. "Really? Because I'd like that."

A warmth invaded Abe's chest, filling spaces that had long been void.

Collin pulled back and looked down. "It looks like a sponge bath is in order."

Abe lay down and rolled Collin on top of him. "Later. After a morning nap."

* * * *

"So...we gonna talk about what happened?" Chad asked, as they finished the second-floor rooms. His body was still reeling from the blow job Richard had given him the previous night. One moment, he thought he'd found nirvana in the form of a six-foot-four hunk, and the next, he'd been left to sleep alone.

Richard's steps faltered. "Sorry about that. Just got a little spooked."

"Am I scary?" Chad asked. Maybe he'd misread Richard. "It appeared that you enjoyed giving up control."

"I did. I do. But I've found it isn't good for my health."

Brows furrowed, Chad tried to puzzle out Richard's statement. "You have some type of venereal disease?"

Richard chuckled and shook his head. "No. I'm clean. My one and only Daddy liked to use me as a punching bag when he wasn't fucking my brains out."

Chad once again took in Richard's size. No way. "And you let him?"

Richard continued up the stairs. "I loved him. Paul started slow, building his beatings until I was completely under his thumb. I would've done anything for that man. A friend of

mine, Curt, finally set me straight. Through his help and a couple of other friends, I managed to break away from Paul's control."

Richard's down-turned head told Chad he hadn't heard all of it. "And?" he prompted.

"And Paul and a few of his buddies nearly beat me to death. They're serving time down in Oklahoma."

Chad's protective instinct took over. He charged up the steps in front of Richard and pulled the bigger man into his arms. "I'm sorry," he said, peppering kisses along Richard's jaw. "You didn't deserve to be treated like that, no one does. And Paul most certainly wasn't the man for you."

"And you are?" Richard whispered.

"I could be. Given the right circumstances." Chad ran his hand down Richard's chest to cup his balls.

Richard squeaked. "Shouldn't we finish turning the water on first?"

Chad squeezed the heavy package in his hand. "Yeah, might as well get work out of the way. But afterward, I plan on keeping you occupied for the rest of the day."

He released his hold on the bigger man and continued to the third floor. As soon as he stepped out of the stairwell, he noticed it. "Richard?"

"Yeah?" Richard asked, coming up behind Chad.

Chad pointed down the hall. "Do you see it?"

Richard's quick intake of breath signalled to Chad that he did indeed see the open door halfway down the corridor. "How?" Richard asked, looking down at the key card in his hand.

"I don't know, but I'm damn sure gonna find out," Chad huffed, as he took off at a jog towards room three-thirteen.

"Wait!" Richard screamed, grabbing Chad's arm and pulling him to a stop. "Let me. Despite our unusual sexual preferences, I'm bigger."

Chad looked into Richard's eyes. "We'll go in together."

Chapter Six

Collin woke to a pair of sad brown eyes. "Hi, Lobo," he greeted in a soft voice.

The large German Shepherd licked Collin's face and whined. "You need to go out?" Collin asked, gently climbing off Abe's chest.

Lobo ran to the door and paced back and forth. "I'm coming," Collin chuckled. The first blast of frigid air almost knocked the breath out of him. Damn. The snow seemed to be coming down harder than ever. At this rate, he'd be Abe's houseguest for Christmas.

A smile lit his face. No hardship there. It would be a lot better than being stuck down at the station with the rest of the fire house bachelors.

"Hey, where'd my blanket go?" Abe asked, from his spot on the couch.

"Lobo looked like he was about to burst."

"Well open the door and get him back in here. Then get that sweet ass of yours back over where it should be."

Feeling cheeky, Collin shook his butt as he opened the door and yelled for Lobo. The snow-covered Shepherd sprinted past him and straight to the couch before shaking the wet snow from his smooth coat.

"No, Lobo!" Abe yelled, trying to dodge the cold spray of melting snow.

Laughing, Collin picked up the towel he'd seen Abe use, and called for the goofy dog. "Come here, Lobo."

With a tilt to his head, the big dog trotted over. Kneeling on the floor, Collin dried Lobo before hanging the towel on the hook to dry. "Should I get him something to eat?" Collin asked.

"Naw. He can wait for dinner," Abe groaned, stretching out his arms towards Collin.

Happier than he'd been in ages, Collin threw three logs on the dying fire. "Do you mind if I grab a blanket out of the bedroom?" he asked.

"Not at all. I thought about it, just too lazy to actually get up."

With a bounce in his step, Collin opened the door to the guest room and pulled the heavy patchwork blanket from the bed along with a pillow. If they were going to spend the day in front of the fire, they might as well do it in comfort.

He carried his cache back into the living room and dumped it on top of Abe. With a mischievous grin, Collin pulled off the large pyjama bottoms and spread them out on the hearth.

He still didn't understand why, but Abe seemed to like the look of his body. The deep groan coming from the couch was proof. Feeling bolder than he'd ever been, Collin stood in front of Abe fully nude for the first time.

Gesturing towards Abe, he asked, "You gonna snuggle in those jeans?"

"Not if you'll help me get 'em off," Abe answered, pushing the heavy denim down.

Bending over the sofa, Collin gripped the waistband and pulled. When Abe's heavy erection sprang free, Collin almost whimpered. Like the rest of the man, Abe's cock was beautiful. He'd always had a slight kink for a heavily veined, throbbing erection, and Abe's was definitely throbbing.

Collin's eyes remained glued to the large drop of pre-cum at the tip. With one last tug, the jeans and underwear were off and on the floor. The action dislodged the pearly drop from its perch, sending it cascading down the more than generous shaft.

His mouth watered at the glistening moisture. "May I?" he asked, his mouth mere inches from its prize.

"Only if you'll turn around and let me taste you at the same time," Abe moaned, running his hand down Collin's spine to cup his ass.

"Sounds like a good deal to me," Collin answered.

Abe readjusted on the sofa cushions to make room for Collin's thigh. Straddling, his lover's face, Collin wrapped his hand around the base of Abe's shaft and ran his tongue down the length.

His body jumped when he felt his ass cheeks parted moments before a wet tongue glided across his hole. "Fuck," he moaned. No one had ever done that to him. He'd had his share of lovers. You couldn't really live in Cattle Valley and not hook up once in a while, but for him, this was even more intimate than fucking.

"You like that?" Abe chuckled, spitting on Collin's tight pucker.

"Hell yeah. I've never...no one's ever," he babbled incoherently when Abe lightly bit the sensitive area.

Abe slapped Collin's ass. "In that case, let's do this right."

Collin was lifted and shifted until both knees were on the couch, and he was leaning on the back of the sofa. With his back towards his lover, he waited.

Abe rose and kissed Collin's neck. "Be right back."

Collin turned his head to watch Abe's naked ass as he disappeared into the bathroom. A long thin scar ran down Abe's right side, from just under his arm to his hip. *Why didn't I notice that earlier?* He wondered if the healed wound had anything to do with Abe's isolation.

He forgot all about the scar when Abe came back through the door holding a bottle of lube. Collin's eyes zeroed in on the bouncing erection. God he wanted that particular work of art inside of him. "Please tell me you're gonna fuck me?"

Abe stopped in his tracks. "Not yet." Abe continued forward until he was once again kneeling on the floor behind Collin. Abe ran his middle finger between Collin's cheeks and pressed lightly against the puckered skin. "Once I'm inside this perfect body, I'll want to take it again and again. We should wait until we have access to a big supply of condoms."

Abe leaned forward and replaced his finger with his tongue. Collin felt ripples of pleasure up and down his body. It felt like his asshole was attached to every nerve in his body, and they were all singing out for more.

"Besides," Abe continued. "There are plenty of ways to play with this ass without fucking it with my dick." Abe began licking the sensitive skin in earnest.

Collin reached down and pulled the blanket up to cover the back of the couch. If he was gonna shoot, he might as well be polite about it. He heard the click as Abe opened the bottle of lube.

"Someday I'm gonna work my tongue as far up inside this sweet ass as possible, but for now, my fingers will have to do," Abe divulged.

Collin moaned as the first masculine finger breached his body. "Yeah!" Collin reached down and fisted his cock as Abe continued to talk dirty to him.

"So hot. You're gonna singe my dick once I'm finally buried inside you."

Abe added another finger, taking time to glide across Collin's prostate. "I'm gonna come," Collin panted.

"Not yet," Abe ordered, biting Collin's butt cheek.

Trying to stave off the impending orgasm, Collin reached down and squeezed the soft skin between his cock and balls. He felt Abe shift behind him seconds before a third finger was introduced. Collin gritted his teeth.

When a wet tongue laved his balls, it was too much. Collin aimed his cock towards his chest and came.

"Fuck," Abe roared, as the fingers sawing in and out of Collin faltered.

Even in his post-orgasmic haze, Collin knew his lover had come as well. It made him feel good to know he wasn't the only one getting pleasure from this new and exciting experience.

Slumped forward against the back of the couch, Collin tried to regulate his breathing. He'd never come so hard in his life. What would it be like when the two of them finally made love? The thought jolted his eyes open. Made love? He'd never used that particular term with a partner. Hell, he'd never even thought it.

Stop it, he reprimanded himself. Just because the sexiest man you've ever met is interested in a couple weeks of fucking, doesn't mean it'll ever be more than that. He felt Abe's fingers slip free and then a rush of cold air as his lover stood.

Looking over his shoulder, he watched Abe disappear into the bathroom again. There was that scar, reminding him of his earlier thoughts. *Do I have the right to ask?*

Abe came back into the room with a wet washcloth. "Would you rather take a shower?" Abe asked, as he started wiping the lube from Collin's ass. "Or a bath. The water seems warm enough now."

"A bath? In that big claw-foot tub? The two of us? Oh, I'm so there," Collin chuckled.

"You'd better be. No one else I'd want to take a bath with."

After the skin on his butt was cleaned, Collin turned around and took the cloth from Abe's hand and started wiping his chest. When he was finished, Collin tossed the cloth to the end table. "I'm all nice and warm. Care to snuggle?" he asked, opening his arms.

Abe grinned and spread the blanket over them as he sat down beside Collin. "My grandma would blush if she knew there was cum on her handmade quilt."

"I'm sorry," Collin quickly offered up.

Abe pulled Collin into his arms and kissed him. "Don't be. Grandma always was a bit of a stick in the mud."

Collin leaned in and licked Abe's bottom lip, feeling the bristles of his lover's beard against the tip of his tongue. "I've never kissed anyone with a beard before, it tickles."

Abe reached up and ran his hand over his trimmed facial hair. "It's been four years, and I'm still getting used to it."

Abe made a face that led Collin to believe he didn't enjoy the beard and moustache. Collin ran his finger over the thin scar barely visible under the whiskers. "Is this the reason you grew it?"

Staring into the flames of the fire, Abe shrugged. "That's one of them, but mostly because I couldn't stand to look at myself in the mirror every morning to shave."

There seemed to be a world of pain in that one sentence. Collin remembered what Abe had said earlier about not having friends. "Care to talk about it?" he asked, not wanting to push too hard.

"Not really," Abe answered. He turned his attention back to Collin. "So, it looks like we're going to be together for Christmas. Do you feel like bundling up and finding a tree?"

Collin shook his head. "Maybe later. After the snow stops." He snuggled against Abe's chest, running his fingers through the dense, light brown hair. "Is there anywhere you were supposed to be for Christmas?"

"Nope," Abe answered.

"No family gatherings planned?" Collin asked, prodding further into Abe's personal life.

"Some distant cousins, but no one I'm close to. An old friend of mine called to ask if I'd be interested in coming to New York for the holidays, but I turned her down. Jill's a nice enough lady, but she has her own family to celebrate with."

"I doubt she would've asked if she didn't care," Collin soothed.

"Oh, she cares. The problem is I think she cares more about her wallet than me."

"Huh?"

Abe sat motionless for several moments before speaking. "I used to model. Jill was my agent."

"Really? I mean, not that I don't believe you. You're one hell of a good-looking guy, but if you could be living the high-life, why lock yourself away on the side of a mountain in Wyoming?"

"Personal reasons. I opened my eyes one day and realised I didn't like the person I'd become. I dropped out and moved here to try and find myself again."

"And have you?" Collin asked, running his fingertip through the hair surrounding Abe's nipple.

"Not yet, but I think I'm on my way," Abe answered.

"Anything I can do to help?"

"Yeah, keep doin' what you're doin'," Abe moaned with a smile.

Collin stretched out and licked the pebbled nub. "All week, if I have to."

Chapter Seven

Richard was surprised when he automatically reached down to take Chad's hand as they neared room three-thirteen. His heart beat a mile a minute as they came to a stop at the threshold.

"Fuck!" Chad yelled.

Once again, the room was splattered in blood. Richard quickly reached out and pulled the door shut. He knew it would take a while for his mind to process the scene. "Let's go call Ryan."

Chad nodded, but said nothing. Richard squeezed the smaller man's hand. It was unlike Chad to show weakness, which proved just how shook up he was. "Come on," Richard said, leading Chad back to the stairwell.

They made quick work of the steps and headed towards Chad's office. The large communications radio sat in the corner of the room, installed for just such an occasion. Chad fired up the radio and called the sheriff.

Richard hadn't been in Chad's office before and took the time to look around. He studied the hotel management degree from the University of Miami hung on the wall. Chadwick Neal. *Chadwick?*

Richard's gaze dropped to the picture on the bookshelf under the diploma. An older woman stood with her arm around Chad in his cap and gown. It surprised Richard that Chad's mom was taller. He'd just assumed Chad's family must be of small build.

"Okay. Yeah, we'll be careful," Chad affirmed.

Richard turned away from the photograph and went to stand by Chad. Gone was the shaken man of a few moments earlier. Back in control, Chad signed off and rubbed his forehead.

"What'd he say?" Richard inquired.

"That we should carefully do a search of the building. Ryan still doesn't believe it's anything more than a man trying to get back at the lodge or Guy."

"And if we find the person responsible? What then?" As far as Richard knew, there wasn't even a gun on the premises. How were they supposed to hold this guy?

Chad ran his fingers through his short hair. "We could set the food storage locker up to house our criminal."

Richard pictured the large walk in room. It had a heavy-duty lock on the outside of the door, perfect for keeping their prisoner in place. "That'll work. We can take out what we'll need in the way of food and bottled water and still leave enough for whoever we catch to eat and drink."

Chad nodded, coming out from around the desk. "I'll gather enough blankets to keep him from freezing to death. You find a big, empty bucket for him to use as a toilet."

Chad ushered Richard out of the office and locked the door. Before going their separate ways, Richard pulled Chad into a hug. "Be careful," he warned. "Stick to the first floor unless I'm with you."

Smiling, Chad stood on his tip-toes and wrapped his arms around the back of Richard's neck, pulling him down for a kiss. "Don't forget the toilet paper."

Richard chuckled and stole one more kiss before going to the room they used to store all the leftover paint and construction supplies. He quickly found two empty five-gallon white buckets. Out of decency, he also managed to scrounge up two lids.

Buckets in hand, he walked towards the kitchen. Chad was busy carrying arm loads of boxes from off the storage shelves. "Wow. You must be hungry," Richard commented, looking at all the boxes stacked on the floor.

"Better safe than sorry. I don't like this guy having access to our entire inventory."

The hair on the back of Richard's neck prickled. His gut knew it had to be a person destroying the rooms, but his nerves were beginning to wonder. How could someone get in and out of the lodge without anyone seeing them? Where was the blood coming from? That more than anything gave him the creeps.

"You okay?" Chad asked.

"Yeah. It's just weird, ya know?"

"What? Knowing someone's lurking around the lodge undetected? Knowing they could've been watching us in front of the fire?" Chad questioned.

"Yeah. All of that," Richard agreed. *Damn.* He hadn't thought about someone watching him give Chad head the previous night.

Once the room was finished, Richard checked the lock once more. "I don't suppose you have a gun?"

"Nope," Chad responded. "You?"

"No. But I've got a baseball bat. I planned to keep it behind the bar," Richard remembered.

"That should work as long as our guy doesn't have a gun."

"Gee, thanks," Richard gulped.

Chuckling, Chad wrapped his arm around Richard's waist and walked with him to the bar. After retrieving the bat, Richard looked down at his companion. "Are you sure we have to do this now? I'd much rather get naked and worry about the vandal later," Richard bargained.

Chad gave Richard's ass a healthy swat. "Good try, but the sooner we figure out what the hell is going on around here, the quicker we can play."

Richard shook his head. "I've played enough over the years. I'm ready for real life." He shuffled his feet. God, he couldn't believe he was about to pour his heart out for Chad to scrutinise. "I can't do casual anymore. I won't."

Chad rubbed his jaw, obviously thinking. "I've never done serious. Hell, we haven't even fucked. What if I'm not what you need?"

"You are," Richard assured. "I don't need your dick up my ass to prove it. Just tell me you'll take whatever happens between us seriously? I don't think I could stand it if I knew I was just a simple fuck to you."

"Oh, there's absolutely nothing simple about you, Richard Johnson," Chad replied.

Richard gave a short nod. "Cool. Then let's go find this bastard. I've got better ideas of how to spend my time."

Chuckling, Chad led Richard towards the lobby. "Don't forget, we still have a hotel to get ready."

"I didn't forget, but I work much faster with a smile on my face."

* * * *

By the time they returned to his office, Chad was pissed. They'd spent hours searching the lodge and came up with nothing, not even a food wrapper out of place. How was that possible?

More than anything, Chad was pissed at himself. He'd spent his entire adolescence being afraid. It had taken him years to overcome the effects taunting children had had on him, but walking from room to room with only a bat to protect them had allowed that old feeling to creep back into his psyche.

Chad knew he needed to get control of himself, fast. After radioing Ryan to inform him they'd found nothing, Chad turned to Richard. "Condoms. Now," he ordered.

The commanding sound of his voice definitely seemed to have an affect on Richard. The bigger man's hand automatically went to his crotch. "They're in my apartment," Richard choked.

Gesturing towards the door, Chad knocked the hand away from Richard's filling erection. "Let's go."

The short journey to Richard's suite of rooms, gave Chad time to gather his wits. So what if they hadn't found the guy responsible for the vandalism. It didn't mean he didn't exist. There were no such thing as ghosts, and even if there were, there would be no reason a ghost would haunt the lodge.

As they neared Richard's apartment, Chad's control hung on by a thread. This is the reason he'd gotten into the lifestyle in the first place. His first exposure had been his junior year at college when he got drunk and told a bigger guy to suck his cock. The football player had looked a bit surprised, but had immediately dropped to his knees and done as instructed.

Suddenly, the years of being tormented by bigger kids had slid away. Chad knew, at least in the bedroom, he could take control. For the first time in his life, his smaller size didn't matter. With a commanding voice and no-nonsense attitude, Chad became a dictator in the area of pleasure.

Head bowed slightly, Richard opened the door and stepped back to allow Chad to enter first. Looking around the small three room apartment, Chad nodded, approving of the clean space. Nothing bothered him more than a slob. It showed a total lack of self-discipline in Chad's mind.

Not bothering to look over his shoulder, Chad strode into the bedroom. He heard the door locks engaged moments before Richard was at his side. "Strip," Chad barked, sitting in the chair beside the bed.

With heavy-lidded eyes, Richard began to silently remove his clothing. Yes, the man was a natural-born submissive. Chad's cock filled, pressing against his pants. He wanted nothing more than to reach down and take himself in hand, but that would be a sign of weakness. Something he definitely didn't want to show his new lover.

Once Richard's furry chest was revealed, he toed off his shoes. Chad's mouth watered as Richard unfastened his jeans and shoved them down to his ankles. Chad swallowed a groan as the long thick cock sprang up to slap Richard's stomach.

Richard stepped from his jeans and kicked them aside, the movement causing his heavy balls to swing like a pendulum. "Socks," Chad pointed out.

When Richard started to bend over to remove the white athletic socks, Chad stopped him. "Turn around first."

Richard's breathing picked up as he turned to face the bed. With a slow, deliberate movement, he bent at the waist. The sight of the swirling hair surrounding Richard's hole was enough to drop a normal gay man to his knees, but Chad was stronger than most.

With socks removed, Richard started to straighten. "Stop right there and hold onto the bed," Chad ordered.

He rose and went to the bedside table. Bingo. He found several boxes of condoms and a large bottle of slick. Extracting one of the small foil packets wasn't easy. Chad stood between the table and Richard, unwilling to allow the man a glimpse of his shaking hands.

After using his teeth to open his bounty, Chad unzipped his pants and fished out his swollen cock. With nothing but his erection exposed, he rolled on the latex barrier. He turned back towards Richard and grinned. "You ready for this?"

Richard glanced up, his eyes riveted to the sheathed cock. "Yes, Sir."

Bottle in hand, Chad took position behind his lover. He normally didn't rim, but Richard's hole was a feast waiting to be tasted. Falling to one knee, he forcefully separated those sweet ass cheeks and swiped the puckered skin with his tongue. *Oh fuck I'm in trouble.*

The sexy noise that erupted from Richard, made the experience all the better. Chad's tongue delved in for another taste, swirling its way across the soft hair and ridged flesh. He may not have enjoyed rimming in the past, but Chad had a strong feeling nothing would be business as usual when it came to fucking Richard.

Without removing his tongue from its assigned task, Chad opened the bottle of lube. With his fingers doused, he removed his face from the crack of Richard's ass. "Gonna shove my cock deep." Chad pressed two fingers against the winking opening of Richard's body.

"Please," Richard begged, pressing back on Chad's fingers.

Chad slapped Richard's ass. "You move when I say. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

Without preamble, Chad added a third finger. For someone who claimed to have been celibate for months, the pliant muscles told a different story. Chad slapped Richard's ass a second time. "You been sticking toys up this ass, boy?"

When Richard didn't answer quickly enough, Chad's hand came down against the reddened flesh once more.

"Yes, Sir," Richard admitted.

"You're not to do it again unless I give you permission. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

Removing his fingers, Chad squirted another dollop of slick onto his sheathed cock. Holding onto the base of his erection, he teased Richard for a few seconds by jabbing at his anxious hole.

Richard's moans sounded in the cold room as his lover spread his legs wider. A glance over Richard's shoulder had Chad smiling. The bigger man's knuckles were white as he gripped the comforter in his fists.

Lining up once again, Chad inserted the crown of his cock past the outer ring of muscles. Once his dick was in place, Chad removed his hold and rested them on Richard's hips. "Here it comes. Take it all," he said, as he pressed forward, his cock disappearing inside his lover, an inch at a time.

He felt Richard's body tremble as Chad pushed in to the root, his balls resting against the lightly furred cheeks of his lover's ass. The squeeze of the bigger man's body was absolute heaven. Chad knew right then and there, he needed to own this man.

"You're mine," Chad said, withdrawing his cock before plunging it forcefully back inside.

"Yessss," Richard hissed. "Make me yours," he begged.

With bruising intensity, Chad began to fuck the stronger man. He used the nails of one hand to scrape the flesh down Richard's spine. The small rivulets of blood that appeared on

the surface turned Chad on even more. He'd never felt the need to mark a lover as his own, but Richard was different. The thought both scared and delighted him. Could he live up to the challenge presented by the strong-headed bar manager?

"I can't hold it, Sir," Richard informed him.

"You will until I'm finished," Chad shot back, jabbing his cock into Richard's body with even greater force. Needing a breather before he did just that, Chad withdrew his cock. "Middle of the bed. Hands and knees," he commanded, punctuating the statement with a slap to Richard's red ass.

The quick way in which Richard followed orders pleased Chad very much. It would never work between them if he had to argue with his submissive. He needed his instructions to be carried out to the letter, both in bed and out.

Once Richard was in position, Chad climbed up and stood over his lover. Bending his knees until he was in a squatting position, he entered Richard once again. The slightly different angle allowed his cock to pummel his lover's prostate on every thrust.

Richard's howls of pleasure combined with the vibrant mark on his lover's back, had Chad slipping over the edge in no time. He roared his release as he leaned down to bite on his man's shoulder blade.

The orgasm was intense, almost too intense, as Chad continued to empty his seed into the condom. Spots danced before his closed eyes as he blindly reached for Richard's cock. With his fist firmly wrapped around the large dripping erection, Chad finally voiced his need. "Come for me."

With a groan, Richard bucked against Chad's hand and came. After the initial quaking spasms of Richard's body subsided, Chad pushed his lover onto the bed.

Still connected to the large man in his arms, Chad's mind wandered to the biggest bully on the playground. How many times had Mike stolen his lunch money, pushed him down, or called him a fairy boy?

Out of self-preservation, Chad had learned to master men almost twice his size. He wondered if Mike was as big as Richard. In looks, the two were similar. Is that what this was about? Did he feel the need to dominate Richard simply because he reminded him of Mike?

"Thank you," Richard said, turning his head to the side.

The smile on his lover's face shut the thoughts down immediately. No, Richard was nothing like Mike.

Chapter Eight

Collin woke to the sound of chopping wood. He blinked several times, trying to get his bearings. Why would Abe be outside working when they had an entire stack of firewood on the back porch?

Throwing off the covers, he reached towards the hearth for his clothes. Shrugging into the warm garments felt odd. He'd spent the previous three days under the covers wrapped in Abe's strong arms, clothes not only unnecessary but unwanted.

Collin shook his head as he laced his boots. Had it only been four days since he'd run his truck into the tree? "That's just sad," he admitted to the empty room.

He'd lived more in three days than he had in the entire thirty-two years he'd been on earth. What was it about Abe that made him feel so good about himself? The answer came quickly. *Abe thinks I'm interesting.* It was a nonexistent occurrence in his lifetime.

Collin had always been the kid who seemed to blend into the woodwork. Even at home with his family, growing up. He wasn't either the good or the bad son. He was simply Collin, invisible to everyone, including his parents.

Abe had asked about his folks, and Collin had been honest, telling his new lover his parents lived in Missouri. He admitted he didn't often see them at the holidays, instead choosing to volunteer at the fire department. Collin knew it wasn't that he wasn't welcome at his parents' home, but he really wasn't missed either.

Shoving the thoughts away, Collin stood and put on his coat, hat and gloves. Presently, none of that mattered. What was important was finding out why Abe was outside in the cold, doing work that had already been done.

Opening the back door, Collin stepped out onto the covered porch obviously shovelled earlier by Abe. What time had the man woken up?

With his back towards the porch, Abe continued to swing the heavy axe. It afforded Collin with a breathtaking view of his powerful body. Surrounded by a heavy blanket of snow, Abe looked like a character in a fairytale. The blizzard had finally blown over, and the sun had come out to play. The effect was mesmerising. Every surface in sight glittered like diamonds in the frigid morning air.

Seeing that Abe was finished with the current log, Collin stepped off the porch and followed the narrow, shovelled path. "Morning," he greeted.

Abe set the axe down on top of the chopping stump before turning around. "How'd you sleep?" Abe asked in a cordial but aloof manner.

"Good," Collin answered. He couldn't figure out what had happened between them in the few hours he'd been asleep.

Gazing around at their surroundings, Collin tried to make conversation. "It's breathtaking out here. So quiet, it's almost spooky."

"The sound of white," Abe offered. "That's what my granddad used to call it."

"How does white have a sound?" Collin asked.

Abe looked around, obviously lost in his own thoughts. "White is the sound of nothingness. Like a void on the planet, and you're smack dab in the middle of it." Abe gestured towards their surroundings.

Collin tried to follow Abe's reasoning. "I never thought of it like that. When I look out the window after a heavy snowfall, I see beauty, sparkles in the sunlight. Everything looks clean, like a fresh start."

Abe started gathering wood, refusing to make eye contact. "It's deceiving in its beauty. Snow doesn't allow you to see what's underneath. It's a temporary blanket of cleanliness before the imperfect landscape begins to show through, giving you a false idea of what's really there."

The way Abe said it led Collin to believe they weren't simply talking about the snow any longer. "Is something wrong? Did I say something to make you mad?"

Abe closed his eyes and tilted his head back. "Just the opposite. You being here is like the sun finally shining down on me, warming me. But I know in my heart, the snow will melt, and the imperfections will once again rise to the surface. It's just a matter of when."

Collin scratched his head under the edge of his stocking cap. "What's hidden under your snow, Abe?"

Abe's head snapped towards Collin. "Huh?"

"What has you living up here alone, burying yourself under a blanket of nothingness?" Collin knew until he found out some of Abe's secrets, he'd never truly know the man he'd made love to for three days.

Abe took several steps until he stood in front of Collin. "It doesn't matter. The important thing is the sun's out, but it's not warm enough to melt the snow. Let's enjoy it while it lasts." Switching gears, Abe picked up the axe. "Care to go find that Christmas tree we talked about?"

Collin tried to read the dark brown eyes staring back at him. Should he push the subject, or do as Abe suggested and enjoy the time they had before the clouds returned? It was basically the same thing he'd been telling himself. He knew Abe would get bored with him, sooner or later, they all did.

"Yeah. Let's get this house ready for Christmas."

* * * *

After getting two sets of snowshoes out of the shed, Abe led Collin into the woods. Even with the appropriate footwear, the going was tough. There had to be at least five and a half feet of snow on the ground. Abe would venture to guess the mountain had set an all new record snowfall for one storm.

"Ooofff," he heard come from Collin.

Abe turned to see his lover face first in the snow. With a grin, Abe adjusted the axe strapped to his back and walked over to help the man to his feet. "You okay, Frosty?" he asked, brushing the flakes from Collin's face.

"Never better," Collin quipped.

His lover looked so adorable, Abe couldn't resist pulling him into his arms for a deep kiss. The snowshoes made it more difficult, but Abe managed to insinuate his thigh between Collin's legs.

Despite the freezing temperatures, Collin began to ride Abe's thigh. Moaning, Abe reached down and squeezed the tight little ass he'd come to love so much. He couldn't wait to bury himself deep inside his lover. He felt his balls draw up tight against his body and broke the kiss. "If we don't put a stop to this, we'll both be coming in our jeans. Although that's not necessarily a bad thing, out here it could prove quite uncomfortable."

Collin laughed. "What? You got a problem with cumcicles?"

"Not in theory," Abe chuckled, imagining himself licking the frozen seed from Collin's skin. "But in reality, yeah. Come on, let's find our tree and get back home."

Abe finished brushing the snow from Collin's coat and jeans, before taking one more kiss. "Yeah, let's hurry," he grunted, his cock becoming painfully hard again.

No longer in the mood to search for the perfect tree, Abe pointed towards one about fifty yards away. He could only see the tip of the tree poking through the snow, but it seemed like the perfect height. "That look good enough to you?"

"It's perfect if it'll get us back home quicker."

Abe nodded and trudged his way to the tree. It took about twenty minutes to dig the tree from its frozen hiding place. "Stay back," he advised, as he released the axe from its pouch.

In no time the small, five-foot tree was on the ground, leaning against the bank of snow. Abe secured the axe to his back and hoisted the tree over his shoulder. "Let's go."

"I can carry the axe," Collin said.

Abe shook his head. "I'm used to it. Besides, the possibility of you falling down with a sharp object in your hand is out of the question."

Collin batted his long black eyelashes. "Oh, you do care," he crooned.

The statement took Abe off guard. He realised he couldn't lie to the man. "Yeah, I do." *Maybe too much.*

Abe took off towards the house. What had he done? He'd sent himself to the mountain to atone for his sins. Falling in love had no place in the hell he'd created for himself.

A picture of Charlie's smiling face popped into his mind. *What should I do?* he silently asked his dead brother.

"Abe?" Collin's voice sounded from behind him.

"Yeah?" Abe's steps slowed.

"What's your snow hiding?" Collin asked.

Abe almost lost his grip on the tree. He hadn't answered the question when Collin had posed it earlier. Did the man behind him deserve to be shut down a second time? Abe knew how fragile Collin's ego was. It had become obvious in the previous days Collin thought himself not good enough. Should he tell Collin the truth? Prove to the handsome man that he was not only good enough for Abe, but too good?

"We'll talk later," he finally answered.

"Okay," Collin mumbled.

Abe had a distinct impression the snow would be melting sooner than he'd hoped.

* * * *

Finishing off his plate of canned stew, Richard set the dish aside and snuggled back into the V of Chad's spread legs. Resting his head against his lover's groin, Richard sighed when Chad began idly stroking his chest hair.

"This thing with the lodge really has you off-balance doesn't it?" Chad inquired.

Although he knew it was completely ridiculous, Richard found himself nodding. "I just wish we knew what, I mean, who it is."

Chad ran his fingertips across Richard's pierced nipples. "You tell me. Who would want to see the lodge fail?"

"Brewster," Richard answered without hesitation. "But how?"

"I don't know. Maybe he hired someone," Chad offered, kissing the top of Richard's head.

Turning over onto his stomach, Richard buried his face in Chad's briefs. He was sated at the moment, but the musk of his lover helped soothe his racing heart. "Possible," he finally said. "But what if... Do you believe any of the gossip that's been going around?"

"Ghosts? No."

Chad tapped Richard on the shoulder and motioned for him to get up. Once Richard was on his knees, Chad readjusted until he was lying on their thick pallet of blankets.

His lover patted the area beside him. "Come here," Chad ordered.

Richard stretched out and was quickly enveloped in a protective embrace. "We'll find whoever's responsible. Until then, we'll stick together."

"What about afterward?" Richard blurted out.

"What are you asking me?"

God, am I about to go all needy girly on him? "I just wondered if this thing that's happening between us is a diversion for the length of the storm or the real deal." Richard looked at the fire, unable to maintain eye contact.

"Richard." The commanding voice got Richard's immediate attention.

"Yes, Sir?"

"I don't play games," Chad claimed. "I am what I am. And if we can both give what the other needs, I see no reason this needs to be temporary."

Richard felt like he'd been given the key to the golden city. Someone wanted him, no, not just someone, Chad. He'd have to make sure he did everything his new lover needed. Richard knew that was the only way. "What do you require from me?"

"Obedience. Honesty. Submission, of course."

No love? Why hadn't Chad said anything about feelings? Richard knew the three things listed wouldn't be a problem as long as he was treated fairly, but would Chad ever be able to love someone like him?

"Have you ever been in love?" Richard finally asked.

"No. I'm more of a novelty to most of my partners. They push. They try to challenge my orders." Chad shrugged. "I've never had a submissive for more than a couple of weeks," he conceded.

Richard brushed his lips across Chad's nipple. He knew following Chad's dictates in the bedroom wouldn't be a problem. He didn't even see a problem with everyday life, but work? Now, that might be a problem. "I'll be managing The Grizzly Bar, working for Ezra and Wyn. Will that be a problem between us?"

With a hand to Richard's neck, Chad pulled him up until they were face to face. "I'll just have to try and keep my distance from you during the day. It would be all too appealing to order you to your knees at the drop of a hat, but I understand how important this job is to you."

"I'd get on my knees if you wanted me to," Richard admitted. He knew, at that point, he'd do damn near anything to keep the man holding him happy.

"I know. That's why I shouldn't feel the need to ask," Chad explained.

A crash sounded, startling both men. Richard jumped to his feet and grabbed the baseball bat. "That sounded like it came from the lobby."

Chad nodded and stepped into his pants. "Get your jeans on, and let's go get this fucker."

Richard handed the weapon to Chad and did as instructed. He was not surprised when Chad chose to keep the bat and crept towards the bar exit. Richard quickly zipped his jeans but didn't bother with the top button before following his lover.

As they stepped together inside the lobby, Richard pointed towards the stack of fallen firewood. Chad nodded, acknowledging the source of the disturbance. Richard leaned in and whispered in Chad's ear. "If you'll cover the stairwell, I'll flush him out from down here."

Before letting him go, Chad searched through the fallen woodpile, and handed Richard a small starter log. "Be careful."

Richard grinned. "You, too." Without wasting time, Richard began to search the hidden alcoves around the perimeter of the lobby as Chad took up position at the stairs. He hoped whoever it was hadn't already escaped to another floor.

After the lobby was thoroughly canvassed, he moved to the rest of the first floor rooms. Exasperated, Richard jogged back over to where Chad waited. "Nothing."

"You searched every room?" Chad asked.

"Yeah. Everything except your office and apartment. I figured you were the only one who held keys to them."

Chad started to nod but stopped. "Shit," he spat and moved towards his office.

"What?" Richard asked, shadowing his lover's footsteps.

Chad stopped in behind the registration desk. "There's only one other person who has a skeleton key to every lock in this hotel." Instead of speaking his name, Chad gestured towards the Assistant Manager's office.

"David?" Richard couldn't believe that sweet kid could have something to do with all the trouble they'd been experiencing.

"It's the only thing that makes sense," Chad responded.

"I hope you're wrong." Richard moved with Chad down the narrow hallway to stand in front of David's office door. He hoisted the piece of wood over his shoulder, ready to swing, as Chad inserted the skeleton keycard.

Throwing open the door, Chad and Richard moved in as if they were trained professionals. Poor David never had a chance. The younger man was huddled in the corner under a pile of blankets.

The assistant manager's hands went up. "Don't hit me," David pleaded.

Standing over their culprit, Richard glanced down at Chad. "He doesn't look too dangerous now."

Chad's gaze swung from Richard back to David. "Why?"

David's hands fell to cover his face as he confessed. "Money. Jim Brewster said he'd pay me if I stalled the opening until he could sell Brewster's Place." David looked beseechingly at Chad. "Please. I'm so sorry."

Chad lowered the bat in his hands. "You really fucked up, boy." He looked up at Richard. "Did you know Brewster was selling his bar?"

Richard shook his head. "It's news to me. I knew he wasn't happy about The Grizzly Bar opening but selling? Just doesn't make any sense."

Swinging his attention back to David, Chad sighed. "We've gotta lock you up. You know that, right?"

David nodded, refusing to make further eye contact with his ex-boss. Richard actually felt sorry for the little fucker. He walked across to the door and gestured for Chad to follow. Once they were out of direct earshot, he whispered. "Now that we know who it is, I'm starting to reconsider the storage room idea. I doubt David's much of a physical threat, and with the weather like it is, I doubt he'll be running off."

Chad rubbed his bristled chin. "What would you suggest?"

Richard was taken aback. Paul never asked his opinion. That Chad had, spoke a lot about the kind of Daddy he'd be. "We could put him in my apartment. Do you have any extra interior locks? We could just install one on the outside of the door."

"Yeah," Chad agreed, his gaze going back to the younger man in the corner. "I trusted him. Hell, I hired him. I still can't believe he'd be capable of something like this."

Chad turned from Richard without a backward glance. "I'll go find a lock. You take him to your apartment."

Richard felt the increased chill in the air. From the little he knew about his lover, it was obvious trust didn't come easy for the man. David's betrayal didn't bode well for Richard's chance at breaking down Chad's walls anytime soon.

Chapter Nine

"Lights?" Collin asked, when Abe pulled out a long string of the multi-coloured wonders.

Abe grinned and shrugged. "I thought I'd kick the generator on for our Christmas Eve celebration. Can't have a tree without lights."

The thought of making love to Collin next to a brilliantly lit tree had his cock pressing against the fly of his jeans. He wished he had more of a present to give Collin besides the gift of his body.

He somehow managed to get the lights strung on the tree despite his raging hormones. When he was finished he stepped back. "We won't know for another twenty-eight hours or so if they work, but at least they're up."

"They'll work," Collin declared confidently.

Abe reached behind and took Collin's hand in his. He tugged and pulled the thinner man into his arms. "It's been a long time since I spent Christmas with someone. I'm glad your truck ran off the road."

"Same here," Collin agreed. "I'm not happy about my truck, but I'm happy to be spending the time with you."

Abe couldn't resist stealing a kiss. Collin's lips opened immediately, letting Abe's tongue delve inside. Without breaking his hold, he walked Collin backward until his lover hit the wall.

"Can't get enough," Abe mumbled, as he continued to kiss Collin. He reached down and lifted Collin's thigh until it rested on his hip, allowing him to get closer. When even that wasn't enough, Abe broke the kiss. "Wrap your legs around my waist."

Before doing as he asked, Collin reached down and shoved the flannel pyjamas down and off. Abe groaned as his lover's hard cock sprang free of the soft material. He swiped the pearly drop from the slit on Collin's crown with his thumb. Instead of tasting the sweet nectar himself, Abe held it to Collin's lips.

Staring into Abe's eyes, Collin opened his mouth and sucked the thumb inside, scraping his teeth against the pad as he gathered the pre-cum on his tongue.

"Damn that's sexy," Abe decreed.

Once Collin released his thumb, Abe reached down and hoisted the man into his arms. Collin's long legs wrapped around Abe's waist, putting their cock directly inline with each other.

Humping his arousal against Collin's, Abe pressed three fingers to his lover's lips. "Get 'em wet for me," he grunted.

Mimicking what he'd done to Abe's cock earlier in the day, Collin quickly took the digits into his mouth. The feel of Collin's tongue working his fingers was almost enough to push Abe over the edge. "You're almost too good at that," he commented, withdrawing his hand, filling Collin's mouth with his tongue instead.

Moving his hand to the slighter man's ass, Abe wasted no time. He plunged two fingers into his lover's hole.

Collin gasped, breaking their kiss. "Please. Make love to me. I'm clean. I swear it," Collin pleaded.

Abe looked into Collin's blue eyes as he inserted a third finger. He'd never in his life had sex without a condom, knowing it was playing with fire. But there was something about this man that made him want to throw out the rule book. *Do I dare?*

The tight clench of Collin's sphincter muscles drove all of his common sense out the window. All Abe knew was he wanted inside this warm willing body he was beginning to love.

"Hang on," Abe ordered, as he reached between them and unfastened his jeans. Shoving the barrier down his legs as far as he could reach, Abe spat into his palm and lubed his cock. "You sure about this?" he asked, removing his fingers from Collin's body.

"More than I've ever been sure of anything," Collin returned.

Holding the base of his erection, Abe kissed Collin's hole with the head of his cock. He groaned in pleasure as Collin's ass slowly swallowed his entire length. When his lover was fully seated, Abe stilled. "Give me a second. I want this to last."

Collin's mouth opened and closed, before the slighter man nodded. It seemed they were both overwhelmed by the feel of their joining. Abe knew it was more than fucking without a condom. It was fucking someone he actually cared about for the first time. Until then, he hadn't realised the difference it would make. In New York, fucking was like breathing. He

not only took the act for granted, but also the men who flocked to his cock, never giving any of them more than a good time.

Now, as he withdrew his cock from its warm nest, Abe actually felt the loss in his soul. Thrusting back inside wasn't merely a choice, but a necessity. *God I'm so screwed.* How would he get through the rest of his life if Collin left him? He briefly wondered how long it would take for the town to miss their resident Jack of all trades if Abe chose to lock the doors and never let Collin out of his sight.

Abe continued to piston his hips, working his cock in and out of Collin's welcoming body. He grunted his pleasure, speech no longer a viable option. The mating had completely transformed Abe into the barbaric mountain man others had accused him of being.

Collin shook in his arms as Abe felt his lover's release shoot between them. Abe was able to stave off his own impending orgasm for a few more thrusts. When his cock erupted, spewing its seed deep into Collin's ass, Abe's knees buckled with the intensity. He held his lover as they both hit the hardwood floor, his cock still embedded inside Collin. Rolling to the side, Abe buried his face against Collin's neck. His emotions were so close to the surface, he felt like crying.

Collin's long, gangly limbs wrapped tighter around Abe as they tried to regain their breath. "I'm falling in love with you," Collin whispered against the top of Abe's head.

"You don't know me," Abe confessed. "I've done things..."

"They won't matter," Collin panted. "You can tell me, but I know my feelings won't change."

Abe knew he'd put off the inevitable as long as he could. "I killed my brother," he blurted out.

Collin's body tensed. "What? How?"

Abe remembered back to the arrogant son-of-a-bitch he used to be. "My life was one big party. Doing drugs, getting drunk, fucking nameless pretty boys, it was all par for the course back then."

"What's that have to do with your brother?"

"Charlie was going to college in Colorado. He called one day and asked if he could come to the city for Spring Break." Abe stopped talking, remembering the excitement in his younger brother's voice at the prospect of rubbing elbows with the celebrities.

"I didn't really care one way or the other," Abe confessed. "By that time, I was so into myself there wasn't a lot of room to care for others, but I said yes."

Abe gazed down at Collin. "I think a part of me wanted to show off. You know, show the smarter brother just what I'd made of myself just because of the way I looked. Anyway, Charlie had only been in town two days when an acquaintance called about a party. I asked Charlie if he was interested, and he jumped at the chance. Until then, he'd been happy hanging out at photo shoots or in my loft."

He remembered Charlie coming out of the bedroom in jeans and a pullover golf shirt. Abe had taken one look at his brother and laughed. "You can't wear that, you'll embarrass me. You look like a fucking hick from the Midwest," Abe continued to berate his little brother.

Charlie had looked down at his clothes. "They're the best I have. I'll stay home if you want me to."

With a feeling of utter disgust, Abe disappeared into his room. He searched his huge walk-in closet until he found an appropriate outfit for his brother. Walking back into the living room, he threw the clothes at Charlie. "Put those on."

"Thanks." Charlie beamed as he looked at the black slacks and silk shirt.

Abe felt the sting of tears. Why hadn't they both just stayed in that night?

Collin brought him back to the present with a hand on his cheek. "Are you sure you're okay to talk about this?"

"It's time you knew the truth." Abe gave Collin a soft kiss before continuing. "I insisted on driving that particular night. Why, I don't know. I think I wanted to show off my seventy-thousand dollar sports car to Charlie." Abe shrugged.

"I don't remember much about the party. It was the usual crowd of people. Like always, the drugs and booze were like party favours. I pretty much ignored Charlie, choosing instead to get stoned on pot and high on Scotch. Around two in the morning, Charlie started nagging me to leave. I was pissed. Said some pretty rotten things to him but agreed to take him home." Abe relived the nightmare as he recounted that night to Collin.

"Give me the keys," Charlie demanded, holding out his hand.

"Fuck you," Abe returned, weaving his way towards the elevator.

"You're in no condition to drive!" Charlie yelled.

Abe turned and backed his brother against the wall. "Don't you dare take that tone with me. I practically raised your ass after dad's death," Abe slurred.

"Grandpa raised me, asshole. You left me for this!" Charlie gestured towards Abe.

The look of utter disgust on his brother's face was more than Abe could stand. He'd originally gone to work as a model to put food on the table. At the age of eighteen, Abe had very little choice if he was going to make enough money to support his brother.

After six years in the business, he was finally at the top of his game. Now this? "What do you think pays for your fancy private college? This, this is part of it. Do you have any idea how many deals are made at a party like this?" Abe shook his head. "Go back to Colorado where you belong."

Charlie pushed Abe away and strode towards the elevator, pressing the down button. "I didn't ask for any of it. All I really needed was my brother. I'd have been content with beans and going to the community college on scholarship. Anything would've been better than watching you become someone I'm ashamed of."

Before he could think better of it, Abe swung and struck Charlie in the jaw. "You ungrateful little prick." Abe grabbed a still reeling Charlie and led him into the elevator. "Once we get home, pack your bags. I don't need a spoiled kid hanging around."

"That was the last thing I said to him. On the drive back to my loft, I ran a light. Charlie was killed instantly."

Abe wasn't even aware he'd begun to cry until Collin reached out and dried his tears. "The only reason I'm not in prison is because Jill got me a damn good lawyer, who got me off on a technicality. I tried to fight it. I knew prison was exactly where I belonged, but Jill convinced me to shut up and let the lawyer handle it."

Gazing into Collin's eyes, Abe tried to read his lover's thoughts. "As soon as I was cleared, I came here."

"To a prison of your own making," Collin supplied.

"Yeah. Something along those lines," Abe agreed. He held his breath as Collin seemed to process everything he'd been told.

"I don't think I would've liked you much back then," Collin finally admitted.

"Wasn't much to like."

"I don't think you're the same person you were four years ago." Collin smoothed a tendril of hair from Abe's forehead.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because I never would've fallen in love with a man like that. But even now, after listening to your story, my feelings haven't changed. I love you, Abe Cross," Collin declared.

Abe felt the metal bars encasing his heart begin to bend with the warmth of Collin's statement. Had he suffered enough to allow himself this second chance? What about Charlie? "I wish you could've met him. Charlie would've approved."

"Approved of what, me?"

Abe snuggled closer to Collin. "He would've approved of me loving a man like you. Charlie wasn't keen on the whole gay thing, but then he'd only seen me with men I didn't really care about."

Collin smiled. "Charlie may not be here physically, but I've a feeling he'll always be with you spiritually. You should talk about him more. It serves Charlie's memory a lot better than locking yourself away on the side of a mountain."

Chapter Ten

After once again checking to make sure David was still locked inside Richard's apartment, Chad began unpacking boxes of desk accessories for the rooms. He still had the linens and towels to wash, but that would have to wait until the power was restored. With only enough gas in the generator to last a day or two, Chad needed to schedule his time carefully.

He'd yet to call the sheriff about their prisoner. Something told him to hold off until he could speak with Guy. Chad knew something would need to be done with David, but ending the boy's future because of a stupid mistake just seemed wrong.

David wasn't the kind of person to become a habitual criminal. The whole thing was a momentary lapse in judgement. After talking to Richard earlier, they'd decided to ask Guy if he'd plead leniency on David's behalf with the courts. The younger man hadn't honestly done anything besides vandalise room three-thirteen.

The radio on his hip crackled. "I just finished hanging the pictures in the rooms. Is there anything else you want me to do while we still have light?"

Chad unclipped the radio and put it to his mouth. "Do you have time to start distributing the hospitality items?"

"I can give it a go. Not sure if I'll finish, but I'll work on it until it gets too dark to see."

"Do what you can. If I don't pass you in the hall at some point, I'll meet you in the bar for dinner."

"Sounds good," Richard chirped before signing off.

Chad clipped the radio back to his waistband and carried the first of many boxes out of the main storage room. His list of things yet to do seemed to be getting longer. It seemed every time he ventured into the storage room, there was another box of something he'd forgotten about. With the New Year's Eve party only a week away, he and Richard had their work cut out for them. Maybe he'd get David to help? That might go a long way in persuading Guy and the courts to go easy on him.

Shaking his head, Chad let himself into the first room. Damn, who the hell would've guessed he'd become a softy? He'd built his entire career on his firm but fair handling of his employees. Had letting his guard down with Richard ruined him for management?

After setting up the first desk, he started to go on to the next room, when he spotted the red flannel of Richard's shirt rounding the corner. Just looking at the man had Chad's blood pumping south. He suddenly realised he didn't care if his managerial skills weren't what they used to be. Richard made him truly happy for the first time in years.

"Hey, stranger," Richard greeted, a large box in his arms.

"Perfect timing. We can make the deliveries together."

Richard giggled, the sound totally unexpected from the much bigger man. "I'll go ahead and confess. After getting my orders, I actually fell down the stairs trying to rush and catch up with you."

Chad readjusted the box in his arms and shook his head. "You could've hurt yourself. Do you need a spanking?"

"Yes, please," Richard smirked.

Imagining his hand reddening Richard's tight ass, Chad groaned. "Remind me later."

"Definitely," Richard beamed.

* * * *

Richard worked beside Chad as the sun began to set. As he unloaded the complimentary shampoos, conditioners and soaps, he fantasised about the evening to come. He'd been asked before why or how he could enjoy being whipped, and he still didn't have a definite answer.

He'd been twelve when his dad had run off with a woman from town, leaving Richard to work the farm as well as try and attend school. He'd grown up, hard and fast. His mom had depended on him for damn near everything. The day his youngest brother had turned eighteen, Richard had informed his mom she'd either need to sell the farm or work it herself. He still felt guilty about it, but he couldn't breathe under his mother's strict Bible-belt roof.

His first sexual experience in giving up control had been an eye-opener. Allowing someone else to dictate his actions left Richard free to simply feel and experience. The unfortunate beatings at the hand of his former Daddy had dulled some of his expectations

for a future D/s relationship, but suddenly, things were looking up. Chad appeared to be everything he'd ever dreamed of in a partner.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Chad asked, exiting the last room on the first floor.

Richard knew it was too soon to voice his aspiration of being Chad's fulltime boy, but he also knew he couldn't lie. "Just thinking about you and how good you make me feel," he admitted.

Chad started down the hall. "We'll see if you feel the same way after your punishment," Chad threw over his shoulder.

Happily picking up the box at his feet, Richard followed. He couldn't have asked for a better outcome to his earlier clumsy mishap.

* * * *

After checking on David, Chad went to the kitchen to find Richard. He was glad his lover had thought enough to empty his apartment of lube and condoms before they'd locked up their vandal.

Chad stood in the doorway and watched Richard cook on the small propane grill. The light cast by the lantern shadowed Richard's face, but did nothing to conceal the beautiful bulge behind the light-weight robe. Someone was still thinking about their earlier punishment.

He couldn't help the grin that blossomed. Richard had been a dream, taking everything Chad gave him and begging for more. At one point Chad had to put the brakes on the spanking. There was still too much work to be done on the lodge to put his only worker out of commission for a few days.

Moving further into the room, Chad's hands tingled with the memories of what they'd done. "What's for dinner?" he asked, stepping up behind Richard.

Before Richard could speak, Chad lifted the back of the robe and ran his hand over the still red, heated flesh. Richard gasped and Chad rubbed harder. "I asked you a question," he reminded his lover.

"Hamburgers," Richard squeaked.

Hiding his lack of control, Chad fished a condom out of his pocket and held it in front of Richard. "Dinner will wait. Get into position."

Richard immediately turned and dropped to his hands and knees. Not bothering to strip, Chad tore open the foil package and once again flipped the robe out of the way. The sight of his hand prints still marring the skin of Richard's ass was absolutely breathtaking.

For the first time in his life, Chad considered the possibility of a long-term relationship. Richard would be a challenge out of the bedroom, of that there was no doubt. Could he give up some of his needed control to form an actual partnership? He didn't want a pet. He wanted a man, this man, to share a life with.

On one knee, Chad stilled, his cock poised at Richard's hole. *Fuck. I'm in love.* His hand went to his chest and kneaded the skin over his heart. *Am I happy about it?* Chad knew the power of love. He'd seen it first hand with his mother and father. It hadn't mattered how many times his dad strayed, fucking anything that moved, his mother always took him back. Chad had been powerless, like a ping-pong ball batted, back and forth, between the two of them.

"Is something wrong?" Richard asked without turning around.

His lover's voice snapped him back to the present. Chad's hand went from his chest to land on Richard's ass. "Did I tell you to speak?"

"No, Sir," Richard answered, his head downcast.

Not wanting Richard to pick up on the sorrow the memories had triggered, Chad plunged his cock into the still-stretched hole. The merging of his body with Richard's proved to be more than a fuck. Chad felt something tickle his cheek as he slowly sawed in and out of his lover.

Lifting his hand, Chad expected to find a bug of some sort, but was floored when his fingertips came back wet. *Crying?* He hadn't cried since he was a boy. Where the hell was all of this coming from?

The answer eluded him, but the weakness pissed him off, not only at himself, but at Richard. Chad took out his anger on the man at the centre of it all. He fucked Richard with a brutal intensity as he dug his hands into the welted flesh under him.

Control, he said to himself over and over. Control was the only thing he had to protect him. Showing weakness was not an option. If someone knew his weaknesses, they could exploit them. Chad would be damned if he'd let that happen again.

His orgasm surprised him. Evidently, his mind and body weren't on the same page. Another thing he couldn't afford. Once his balls were dry, Chad pulled out and stood.

"May I come?" Richard asked.

"No," Chad replied and stripped off the condom. "Get dinner ready." He turned and left the kitchen. He had to get himself together, fast.

* * * *

Richard heard the sound of the swinging door as Chad left the room. "What the fuck?" His balls were about to explode, his ass felt completely raw, and now his ego was bruised. Despite everything, Richard was unable to allow himself the sweet release he craved.

Resting his head on the cold vinyl floor, he tried to think of something else, anything, besides his immediate need to come. What had just happened? Was Chad more like Paul than he'd thought, because leaving him fucked and needing on the floor was definitely a Paul trick.

Richard rose from his position on the floor and braced himself against the counter. Looking down at the raw hamburger patties, he felt lost. He racked his brain trying to come up with answers. *What did I do?*

The longer he thought about it, the sadder he became. He'd thought Chad was the one. How stupid. Chad was just like the rest of them. Richard knew he could've been anyone kneeling on the floor. All Chad had cared about was sticking his dick into a warm orifice.

Turning the grill back on, he seasoned the hamburger. The more he thought about it, the more pissed he became. Fuck no. There was no way he'd sit by and let another man use him. Richard flipped the burgers and strode out of the kitchen. If he was going to have it out with the man he'd foolishly fallen in love with, he was going to be clothed.

He found his pile of clothes on the floor outside his apartment. He grabbed a pair of jeans before thinking better of it. With his ass still on fire, the jeans would feel like sandpaper. He tossed the heavy denim down and picked up a pair of seldom worn sweats. Not really the look he was after, but anything was better than his robe.

With the grey sweats and white T-shirt in hand, he re-entered the kitchen. The burgers smelled a little overdone, but that was the least of his worries. Richard turned off the grill and got dressed.

With two plates of food in hand, he stalked into the bar. Chad was sitting in a chair beside the fire. After taking a deep breath, Richard walked over and practically dropped the

plate onto the table in front of the manager. "I hope you choke on it," he barked, before taking his own plate to sit at the bar.

As he sat with his back to Chad, Richard looked at the hamburger in his hand. Who the hell was he kidding? No way could he swallow around the unnatural lump in his throat. He set his food back on the plate and cradled his face in his hands. He'd been so pissed, he hadn't thought twice about plopping his ass on the barstool.

As his sensitive flesh protested, Richard squirmed. He deserved to be uncomfortable. It was just punishment for opening himself up again.

"Aren't you going to join me?" Chad asked, still seated at his table.

"Nope," Richard quipped.

He heard a chair scrape against the wood floor. Moments later, a hand landed on his shoulder. Richard flinched, dislodging the touch. "Don't."

Chad rested his hip on the stool next to Richard and crossed his arms. "So it's like that is it? Something doesn't go your way, and you're ready to just pack it up and move on?"

Pushing his plate away, Richard turned to stare at Chad. "I may be submissive when it comes to sex, but don't you dare think I'm not a man."

Richard pointed towards the kitchen. "You fucked me in there like some street whore. Well no thanks. I've had that kind of relationship and still have the goddamn scars to prove it."

With his anger out in the open, despair took its place. Richard buried his face in his hands, hiding his emotional turmoil. "I thought you were different."

Chad's fingers threaded through Richard's dark brown hair. "I think I am. That's what scared me so much in there. You bring out my weaknesses. Falling in love with you has changed me. All my life I've been smaller than the people around me. I learned to assert myself in order to survive. To take command of a situation and use it for my own benefit, but things are different with you."

Chad pulled Richard's face from their hiding place. "Do you know, in the previous several days, there have been times when I actually wanted to ask you for comfort? To hold me? That doesn't fit into the lifestyle I've carved out for myself. So yeah, I took that weakness and punished you for it."

Leaning in, Chad gave Richard a soft kiss. "And I'm so sorry you have to be saddled with such an inept partner, but I don't want to give you up."

Richard gazed deeply into Chad's brown eyes, trying to see truth behind the words. The building moisture he witnessed, shocked him. Paul had never shown such remorse after one of their sessions.

It suddenly dawned on him. How could a relationship between them have a chance if he continued to compare Chad to Paul? "You know. I don't think there's an actual rulebook involved in the lifestyle. Who says we can't make our own rules and boundaries?"

Chad slowly nodded his head. "Tell me what you need from me, and I'll do the same."

Richard shrugged and turned on his stool to completely face Chad. "I'm actually a pretty simple guy. I just want you to love me and treat me like I'm the most special thing in your universe."

"You are," Chad butted in.

"I enjoy being dominated in the bedroom, giving up control heightens the experience, but it's not a deal breaker by any means. I don't expect you to show me a face that you don't feel. If you need a hug, tell me. I won't think less of you."

Chad bit his bottom lip. "I'll try to show you my softer side if you promise not to exploit it. I'll probably always have a dominant personality, though. But if I get too pushy, it's okay for you to call me out." Chad grinned. "I think."

Chuckling, Richard leaned in and wrapped his arms around Chad. "Do you think it'll work between us?"

Chad slid down from the stool and stood between Richard's thighs, putting them closer. "I think if it doesn't, we only have ourselves to blame. Love can't fix everything."

"I agree." Richard kissed Chad, slipping his tongue into his lover's mouth. "We may have our work cut out for us, but it's already my favourite job."

Chapter Eleven

Wearing his borrowed snow shoes, Collin walked beside Abe towards his wrecked truck. He knew it would still be days before the snowploughs cleared the road, but he needed to see what he'd be up against.

The accident and what had happened directly afterwards were still a bit blurry. If he was lucky, only the body had sustained damage, and they'd be able to get a truck to pull it out of the ditch.

Collin glanced at Abe. The man hadn't stopped smiling since their talk the previous evening. After hearing Abe's confession, Collin had proceeded to show his lover how much he still loved him.

It still amazed him that Abe could feel the same way, but Collin wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He'd take Abe's love and attention with open arms, even if he didn't think he was worthy. Abe may have been an asshole in the past, but he'd definitely changed.

"How much further?" Abe asked.

Collin chuckled. "I have absolutely no idea. Hell, we may not find it until the spring thaw, depending on how far off the road I travelled."

Abe clucked his tongue. "It would be a crying shame if you were trapped here until spring."

Collin playfully punched Abe's arm, and Lobo let out a bark of warning. "I don't think he likes me anymore," Collin pouted.

Abe reprimanded his dog before reaching down to rub the protective Shepherd behind the ears. "He's jealous, poor baby. Lobo's used to getting all my attention. He's not used to taking a backseat."

"He'll have to get used to it, because I don't plan on giving up my spot any time soon." Collin reached up and pulled Abe's head down for a kiss. "My lips are so numb I barely felt that," he commented, before taking the kiss deeper. He definitely felt the glide of his tongue in the warm interior of his lover's mouth, along with the erection straining against his zipper.

Collin pressed closer, thrusting against the hard ridge of Abe's apparent desire. "Why do I always get horny when it's too cold to do anything about it?"

Abe's hands moved down to Collin's ass as he continued to grind against him. "We've barely been dressed since you showed up on my doorstep. It's just a little harder to act on our feelings when we're dressed and standing in the middle of the road."

"Let's forget the truck," Collin moaned, as Abe's thigh pressed against his cock. "I want skin. Maybe by spring I'll feel like getting dressed again."

He continued to ride Abe's thigh until he felt his balls begin to draw up. "If you don't stop I'll come. A chapped cock won't be much fun for either of us," he panted.

Laughing, Abe released his hold on Collin. They were just about to turn back towards the house, when a noise disrupted their quiet surroundings. "Is that what I think it is?" Collin asked.

"Yep. Guess the road crew is ahead of schedule."

Collin looked at Abe. He wasn't ready to go. "Can I stay with you until after Christmas?"

Abe blinked several times. "Of course."

"Thank you." Things suddenly felt strained between them. Moments ago they'd been talking about staying naked until spring, and now Collin was grateful Abe would let him stay for two more days.

As they walked back to the house, Collin decided to make the most of the time they had left. He knew in his heart, it wasn't over. After all, they'd proclaimed their love for one another, but Collin was a realist. He knew once he went back to his apartment, things would be different between them. They'd continue to date a couple of times a week. Abe might even occasionally let him come up for weekends, but real life would intrude. It always did.

What if Abe asked around town about him? Would Abe's feelings change if he knew just how invisible he was to the other residents? By the time they reached the porch Collin had worked himself into quite a funk. "Do you mind if I take a bath?"

Abe gave him a peculiar look. "Go ahead. I guess I'll put the ham in the oven."

Before Collin could ask, Abe turned and strode into the kitchen with Lobo on his heels. Stripping off his clothes in front of the fire, Collin spread them out on the hearth to dry. Maybe a nice warm bath would pick up his spirits.

* * * *

Abe sat on the kitchen chair and scratched Lobo behind the ears. "From the sound of it, we'll be on our own again before long."

His gaze drifted towards the living room. He knew the relationship with Collin had been too good, too fast, to last. Soon he'd be driving his lover down the mountain. Collin would once again get involved in work and volunteering, neither of which made dating easy.

Feeling a cloud of despair begin to envelope him, Abe stood. *I've still got a few hours left. Maybe I can make enough memories to last me through the winter.*

* * * *

"Come on, it's Christmas Eve. Can't we knock off early?" Richard asked.

Chad adjusted the picture he'd just hung on the wall. "If we quit now, we'll just have to work that much harder later."

"Okay, sounds good to me," Richard quipped.

Chad turned and put his hands on his hips. "The party's in a week."

"Yeah, but the guests aren't coming for another couple of weeks. We've got plenty of time."

Narrowing his eyes, Chad reached out and tugged Richard's nipple piercing. "You're a bad influence."

"I'm simply a boy at heart, who enjoys Christmas Eve," Richard defended himself. "Besides, we can scratch off another chore on the list by putting up the big artificial tree in the lobby."

Chad rubbed his chin. "Yeah. That makes sense."

"I know, and we can drink hot buttered rum and sing Christmas songs while we do it. Please," Richard pleaded.

"I don't sing. Hell, I don't think I even sang Christmas carols as a kid."

"You will tonight, because I'm gonna get you liquored up," Richard chuckled.

"Evil, evil man," Chad condemned, shaking his finger at Richard.

Richard waggled his brows in a lascivious leer. "I'll show you just how evil I can be, but only if you say yes."

A horn honking outside drew Richard's attention from his dirty thoughts. "Someone's here?"

"Sounds like it." Chad took off towards the door. "They must've cleared the road."

Richard reached out and tugged on Chad's shirt. "What about David?"

He had spent a little time with the young man and had come to actually feel sorry for the guy. David confessed he needed the money to pay off his school loans so he could put his younger sister through college. Richard could definitely identify with the younger man. He'd been in a similar situation and knew how it felt to have the people you love dependant on you.

"We'll figure it out," Chad said, taking Richard's hand.

Chad unlocked and opened the big set of doors to the parking lot. Sure enough the snowplough was clearing the lot.

They watched the guy until he was finished before waving their thanks. After the plough had disappeared, Chad turned to Richard. "Let's go talk to David."

When they reached Richard's apartment, he knocked. "Coming in," he announced, before unlocking the door.

They found David sitting on the side of the bed wrapped in blankets. "Road's cleared," Chad announced.

Richard watched as David visibly stiffened. "What'll happen now?" David croaked.

Chad released Richard's hand and went to sit beside the younger man. "Well, that depends on you. With the snow cleared there's no reason to keep you locked up here anymore. Looks like we have two choices. We can take you down to the Sheriff's Department, or we can take you home."

David's face lit up at the prospect of seeing his sister. It was just the two of them, and Richard knew David was worried about her.

Before David could get too excited, Chad continued. "If we take you home, you'll be expected to turn yourself in the day after Christmas. I think everyone will go easier on you if you voluntarily confess to your crime. If you don't, then we'll take matters into our own hands."

"Why? Why would you do this for me?" David asked, clearly moved by the offer.

"Because we don't think you're a bad person, just a stupid one. I'll talk to Guy and try to explain the circumstances. With any luck, he'll see things the way we do."

David smiled and nodded enthusiastically. "I'll do anything you ask."

"You'll still have to answer for the damage you inflicted on the room."

"Yes, Sir," David agreed.

Standing, Chad rested his hands on his hips. "Get your stuff together. We'll leave in thirty minutes."

David stood and looked around the room. "I don't have anything. I hadn't planned on being trapped by the snow."

Chad nodded. "Straighten up the room then, and meet us in the lobby."

"Thank you," David said before Chad led Richard from the room.

Once in the hall, Richard pulled Chad into his arms. "I'd like to say thanks, too. This is a nice thing you're doing."

Chad gave him a mock-scowl. "Just don't go spreading it around."

* * * *

Collin was surprised when a naked Abe stepped into the bathroom. "Care if I join you?"

"No," Collin replied. "Not at all." He scooted forward as Abe climbed in behind him. Collin remained upright until Abe pulled him back against his chest.

Closing his eyes, Collin drank in the intimate moment. "Did you get dinner in the oven?"

"Yeah," Abe said, trickling warm water over Collin's skin. "It'll take a while, so we've got plenty of time."

Collin turned to lie on his side, resting his cheek against his lover. "Time sounds good," he mumbled.

"So tell me how you celebrated Christmas growing up?"

Collin knew they were both avoiding the elephant in the room but decided to play along. "I don't know. I guess we did the typical family stuff, tree, ham, and presents."

"Are you the youngest?" Abe asked.

"No. I've got an older brother who was a god on the football field, and a younger sister who's damn near a genius."

"That explains a lot." Abe gave Collin a hug.

Looking up, Collin stared into Abe's eyes. "What's it explain?"

"You've been afflicted with the middle child syndrome. For some reason, you have it in your head they're better than you."

Collin scoffed. "You wouldn't say that if you met them. Vanessa's a gorgeous, hugely successful lawyer, and Matt's the coach for a three-time state champion football team." He shrugged. "Somehow being an electrician and volunteer fireman just can't compete."

Abe tilted Collin's chin up further and stole a kiss. "Tell me how you decided on becoming an electrician."

"It's what my dad did before he retired. Kind of a family thing. It was the only way I could spend time with him growing up. Seems other than work, he was too busy rushing off to one of Matt's games or one of Van's dance recitals or something. I started following him around during school breaks, and it kinda came natural for me, made me less invisible."

Abe shook his head. "I'm sorry you didn't get the attention you needed, but you're anything but invisible."

"You're just saying that because you want in my pants," Collin joked.

"Yep, the first time I laid eyes on you. Believe me, an invisible man wouldn't have put my cock through hours of torture. Watching you work fuelled my fantasies for a long time."

"Really?" Collin couldn't help but smile. He'd never been the object of someone's fantasies. "I like that," he boasted. "I like that idea a lot."

"Don't let it go to your head," Abe said, splashing water on Collin.

"Too late," Collin announced, and brought Abe's hand to his cock.

After giving Collin's erection a squeeze, Abe bit him on the shoulder. "Let's get out and dry ourselves in front of the fire. I'll need more room than a tub to do everything I've fantasised about."

Collin stood and helped Abe up. "Ooh, everything?"

"Everything," Abe said, swatting Collin's ass.

"Kinky bastard," he joked.

"You don't know the half of it," Abe shot back.

* * * *

"God, I feel so much better now," Richard said, handing Chad a warm mug of hot-buttered rum.

Chad took a sip. "Damn. This is good."

Richard nodded. "It's my grandma's recipe. I'm glad you like it, you'll be drinking plenty of it before the night is over."

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" Chad chuckled.

"Damn straight. How else am I gonna hear that singing voice of yours?"

Chad already felt so good that his lover might get his wish, after all. After taking David to the small apartment he and his sister shared, they'd stopped by and talked to Guy. It was the first time either of them had been in the huge house that had once belonged to Palmer Wynfield.

"Shame Guy didn't have anyone to spend the holidays with," Chad remarked, thinking out loud.

"Yeah. Just goes to show that money and fame can't buy happiness."

"Still, it seemed like he was in a pretty generous mood, agreeing to talk with the sheriff on David's behalf." Chad finished off his mug of spirits and handed it to Richard for a refill.

"Let's just hope the courts are as forgiving as Guy." Richard walked over to the crock-pot on the lobby counter and refilled their cups.

Chad stepped back and looked at the tree. "I don't know if I've ever seen a tree this big," he commented. "I think it might take us the rest of the week to decorate the damn thing."

Richard handed Chad his drink. "At least it's pre-lit. Can you imagine trying to wrestle with that many lights?"

Chad gave an exaggerated body shiver. "Don't even joke about that." He watched as Richard set down his drink and picked up a box of ornaments.

"I'll start on the top of the tree while you get the bottom."

"Is that a crack about my size?" Chad pouted. The fact that he could even playfully pout in front of his lover and not feel awkward said a lot about their growing relationship.

"Not at all, my dear. The bottom of the tree is what most people see. I know your expertise is required down there to get the ornaments placed properly."

Laughing, Chad picked up a box of baubles. "Good save."

"I thought so," Richard said, from atop the ladder.

Hanging a red bulb on a branch, Chad silently released a sigh of contentment. It was nice to finally have the latitude to be himself in a relationship instead of a title. He could definitely get used to the feelings.

* * * *

"Leave those for later. I'm turning on the lights," Abe called from the living room.

Collin looked at the pans still left to wash. "Later, dudes. I've got a Christmas Eve to celebrate."

He put the pots into the dishwater to soak and dried his hands. He was still so full from dinner the pyjama pants actually felt a little snug. Stopping in the doorway, Collin quickly released the tie on the flannel pants and let them fall to his ankles.

Abe whistled from his position beside the tree. "Is that my present?"

Smiling, Collin sauntered over to his lover. "If you want it. Of course, I could always put a bow on it for you."

"No need," Abe said, reaching down to take Collin in hand. "Gift wrapping is overrated. I prefer the natural look."

"Then you're in luck." Collin thrust against Abe's fist. "So, about these lights."

"Oh, yeah," Abe chuckled. "You get close, and I forget about everything else."

While Abe messed with plugging in the tree, Collin walked over and dragged their pallet of blankets closer to the tree. The sparkle of multi-coloured lights suddenly filled the room.

"Beautiful!" Collin exclaimed, clapping his hands together.

"Your skin looks fantastic, all decorated in red, green, blue and yellow," Abe commented, beckoning Collin with open arms.

Collin sauntered over, playfully putting an extra sway into his walk. Before snuggling against Abe, he began to undress his lover. "Too many clothes."

Abe rubbed his stomach. "I don't know, babe, I'm still full as a tic. If I go rompin' on the floor, I just might lose my supper."

"Okay, no rompin', but how about a little bit of cuddling?" He tugged Abe's pants off and tossed them aside.

Abe fell to the floor, pulling Collin down with him. "You are the snuggliest man I've ever had the good fortune to meet."

Collin burrowed as close to Abe's nude body as he could get. "I can't remember ever enjoying a Christmas more."

"I feel the same way," Abe mumbled.

Within minutes, Collin heard a light snore coming from the man he was using as a bed. "Oh, my poor baby's worn out."

He ran his hand over Abe's chest. Collin was perfectly content to lie in the woodsman's loving arms. He tried to imagine life without Abe. Nope, not an option as far as he was concerned. He may be going home in two days, but he'd make sure he was remembered before he left. Maybe, if luck was on his side, he could convince Abe to be his date for the big New Year's Eve party at the lodge.

Chapter Twelve

The lobby of the Tall Pines was absolute chaos as employees scrambled to complete the finishing touches. Chad checked his watch on the way to the large industrial kitchen in the hotel's main restaurant.

"Are we still on schedule for a nine o'clock dinner?" Chad asked the restaurant's chef, Allan.

"All set, boss."

After a quick glance around the room, Chad nodded and strode towards his apartment. The first guests were due to arrive in thirty minutes. With luck, he'd have time to shower, slip into his tux and pick up his date before Guy, Ezra and Wyn arrived.

Rounding the corner, his steps faltered at the sexy man leaning against his door. *Damn*. He'd thought Richard looked good in flannel, but the larger man was devastating in a tuxedo. "Oh no you don't," Chad admonished, holding up his hands.

"What?" Richard asked innocently. "I just came to see if you needed any help getting ready."

"No, you didn't. You came to distract me." Chad bumped Richard out of the way with his hip. "You look hot by the way."

"Thanks," Richard preened.

Chad smiled. "Wait for me in the lobby."

"But..."

Chad quickly slammed the door, before Richard could charm his way inside. Chad smiled as he set about getting ready for the party. Once naked, he squirted a generous amount of paste on his toothbrush and turned on the hot water.

The previous week had been a whirlwind of activity at the Tall Pines. The city had restored power two days after Christmas, and Chad had hit the ground running. He'd gotten permission from the sheriff to call back his employees and had spent the rest of the week overseeing details and training new staff.

Chad sent up a quick prayer that everything would go according to plan. He knew there would be kinks that would need to be worked out, but as a whole, he thought he had a top-notch staff.

After a quick scrub of his body and hair, he dried off and began brushing his teeth. Giving the steamy mirror a swipe with the towel, Chad gazed at his reflection. He didn't even feel like the same person who had accepted Guy Hoisington's generous job offer. At least the employees reaction to the more laid back man he'd become was favourable. Chad still wasn't sure how Guy would react.

Fumbling with his bow tie, Chad wished he had an extra set of hands. A picture of Richard came to mind. Scratch that. If Richard were here, he'd be lucky to get dressed in time for the New Year's countdown.

Looking in the mirror, Chad scrutinised his appearance. Shiny shoes...check. Cufflinks...check. Bow tie...check. Hard-on...check. Shit!

He glanced at the clock before stalking to the door. Swinging it open, Chad wasn't surprised to see Richard still leaning against the wall, a smug smirk on his face. "Get your ass in here," Chad scolded.

Richard stepped into the apartment. "Need something?"

Without comment, Chad reached down and unzipped his fly. By unspoken command, Richard dropped to his knees and took Chad's length deep into his throat. Threading his fingers through Richard's perfectly groomed hair, Chad began to thrust his hips. He knew he could have waited until after the party for release, but why torture himself when his lover was always so willing?

"That's good," Chad encouraged. "Suck on the head."

Like always, Richard followed his instructions to the letter. The man really was an excellent cocksucker. With one eye on the clock, Chad slid his hand to the back of his lover's head and jammed his cock as far into Richard's warm depth as he could get. His orgasm ripped through him at lightning speed. "Fuck!" he grunted, making Richard take every last drop of his seed.

Looking down at his lover, Chad shook his head. "Did I give you permission to touch yourself?"

Richard sheepishly looked up at Chad. "I didn't want to ruin my tux."

It was then that Chad noticed the thick cream covering Richard's hand. "I'll let it go for now, but we'll need to discuss this after the party."

Richard stood. "Are we talking discipline?"

"Maybe," Chad grinned, tucking himself back into his underwear. He handed Richard some tissues. "Clean up your mess and let's go."

Richard wiped his hands and the few strands of cum that had landed on the floor. After righting his clothes, Richard nodded, indicating he was ready. "It should be a hell of a party."

"It'd better be, or my ass is toast."

* * * *

Collin once again wiped his hands on his suit pants. He was nervous as hell for some reason. He hadn't had the time or money to rent a tuxedo. Would Abe be ashamed to be his date? They'd agreed to meet at the lodge to save time since Collin had volunteered all day at the firehouse.

It would be his first time seeing Abe since the day his lover had driven him down the mountain to his apartment. He'd tried to fill his time doing odd jobs around town and at the lodge, but Abe was always forefront in his mind.

The evenings spent alone were brutal. He'd spoken to Abe a few times on the phone, but it couldn't compare to actually being in his lover's arms. Pulling his new, used pickup into the parking lot, Collin tried to calm his racing heart. Would Abe be happy to see him?

Before he was even out of his truck, a gorgeous man appeared on the Tall Pines steps. As Collin shrugged into his suit jacket, he walked towards the lodge. The closer he came to the building, the better he could see the man who stood there. Holy fuck. "Abe?" He almost didn't recognise his lover without the beard. Damn, no wonder Abe had been a top paid model.

Abe rubbed his jaw. "You like it? I thought it was time I stopped hiding."

"Uh...fuck...*you're* hot," Collin sputtered, joining the man he loved.

Abe wrapped his arms around Collin before pulling him in for a deep kiss. "I've missed you."

Collin warmed at the sentiment. "I've missed you, too. More than you'll ever know." He ran his hand over the jaw with the thin scar. "This is sexy, by the way."

"Well, I figured since you've put up with the ugly side of me, you might as well enjoy my best feature," Abe said.

Collin shook his head and rested his hand on Abe's chest. "That's not true. Your heart is your best feature. Looks are just trappings that make our lives easier."

"Hey, you two gonna stand out here all night or come in and enjoy the party?" Nate Gills asked, coming up the steps with Rio and Ryan on either side of him.

The three men looked devastating in their tuxes. Once again, Collin felt embarrassed by his black suit. "We'll be along in a minute. Just don't drink all the alcohol before we get there," Collin teased. He liked Nate, but then who in town didn't?

"Do you know if they're renting rooms? Because I don't see the three of us making it home without..."

Nate's mouth was covered by Ryan's hand. "That's enough. These men don't need to hear about our private life."

Removing Ryan's hand from his mouth, Nate reached out and twisted his lover's nipple. "I was gonna say without drinking, perv." Nate looked over at Collin and winked. "Come on. Let's leave the lovebirds to it."

After the threesome left them alone, Collin gave Abe one more kiss, before stepping back. "Sorry about the suit."

"What're you talking about? You look fantastic!"

Collin looked down at his only pair of black dress shoes. They were old, but he'd polished them to a decent shine. "Everyone else will probably be in tuxedos. I was worried you wouldn't want to be seen with me."

He gestured to Abe's million dollar look. "I'd never be able to afford something like that. Besides, I wouldn't look as good as you no matter what I wore."

With an audible sigh, Abe led Collin up the remainder of the stairs and inside. Instead of joining the party however, Abe pulled Collin into one of the many alcoves. Once hidden from view, Abe once again embraced Collin.

"I thought you were getting over the whole 'I'm not good enough' thing."

Collin felt the sting of tears. Blinking rapidly, he tried to swallow around the lump in his throat. "I'm sorry."

Abe tilted Collin's chin up. "I love you the way you are. I just wish you loved yourself more than you apparently do." Abe gestured towards the lobby. "I don't need this to have a good time. You're the only one I care to be with to ring in the New Year. If you'd feel better about it, we can leave right now and go back to my place."

"But you got all dressed up."

"For you," Abe said. "Although I'd be just as happy to undress for you. I thought coming to this party was what you wanted."

Collin shook his head. "It was an excuse to see you again. I didn't want to seem forward and invite myself over for New Year's Eve. I was afraid I'd already worn out my welcome at your home."

Abe grabbed Collin's shoulders and gave him a healthy shake. "First of all, you don't need an excuse to see me. I've missed you like crazy since you left. And secondly, the house no longer feels like a home without you there. If I thought you would've agreed, I'd have tied you to my bed and never let you leave in the first place."

Collin climbed Abe's body, wrapping his arms and legs around the man he loved. "Really? You'd live with me?"

"It's not just that I want to live with you, it's that I can't live without you. Besides, Lobo's been a pain in the ass since you cut out on us. I think he misses you as much as I do."

Collin took Abe's mouth in a deep kiss, the torture of the previous days a distant memory. "Dance with me," he moaned, sucking on Abe's lip.

"I think we're supposed to eat first," Abe supplied, squeezing Collin's ass.

"Okay. I don't mind waiting for that dance as long as I know where I'll be spending the night."

"A lifetime of nights, if I have my way," Abe replied, tilting his chin back to give Collin room to play.

"If you insist," Collin mumbled.

* * * *

As the dinner plates were being taken away by the wait staff, Chad started to stand. Without looking, Richard reached out and tugged on his partner's sleeve until Chad plopped back in his chair. "You're off duty."

"I need to make sure everything is running smoothly in the kitchen," Chad argued.

"No you don't. You hired people who're good at their jobs, let 'em do it."

Richard nearly squealed as Chad reached over and grabbed his nuts. "Are you trying to tell me what to do?" Chad asked.

Despite the pain, Richard felt his cock come to life. "I'm trying to make sure the man I love doesn't die of a coronary before he's forty."

Evidently Chad picked up on Richard's predicament, because his lover decided to torture him further. Moving his hand from Richard's balls to his cock, Chad took him in hand. Leaning forward, Chad bit Richard's earlobe. "You'd better plan on taking a couple of days off work, because the way you're acting, you won't be able to get dressed for at least that long."

Richard's breathing picked up as he envisioned Chad's particular brand of punishment. "Clothes pins?" he asked hopefully.

"Among other things."

"Is there a problem, Gentlemen?" Guy asked from across the table.

Chad released Richard's cock. "No. Just reminding Richard who the boss is."

Richard wiped the sweat from his brow. "Like he'd ever let me forget," he quipped, knowing he was only digging himself a deeper hole.

Guy grinned with a knowing look. They'd informed the lodge owner of their newly developed relationship the previous day. The man had been really cool with it as long as it didn't disrupt lodge operations. Richard glanced at Chad and grinned. "Love you," he chirped.

Guy chuckled and turned his attention back to the Mayor. "So, Quade, Ezra tells me you're getting ready to go on vacation."

"Yeah," Quade acknowledged, downing the rest of his Scotch. "I go to Hawaii every winter. If I didn't, I'd probably go insane."

"Why? You don't like snow?" Richard asked, curious.

Quade gestured to the waiter for another drink refill before answering. "I get cabin fever when I can't get outside and enjoy the sun. And by this time of year, I'm sick to death of Carol and all her meddling."

Richard grinned. He'd heard quite a few tales of Quade's relationship with his secretary. They both claimed to hate each other, but the entire town knew they were more like brother and sister than enemies.

The waiter came back with Quade's drink just as Chad stood. "If you all will excuse me, I'm going to check on dessert," Chad informed, before taking off like a shot.

Richard turned his attention back to the conversation between Guy and Quade. Suddenly, the Mayor began to choke. Wyn, who was also at their table, reached over and pounded Quade on the back until he could once again breathe.

"I don't believe it," Quade whispered. Without another word, Quade rose and started across the room.

Richard looked from Quade back to Wyn. "What just happened?"

Wyn pointed towards a tanned, devastatingly handsome man in the doorway. Richard watched as the mystery man broke out into a huge smile, flashing the whitest teeth Richard had ever seen. "Who is he?"

"That, my good man, is Kai Hachiya. The professional surfer Quade's talked about for a year," Wyn announced.

A professional surfer? In Cattle Valley? Richard's gaze went back to the doorway. The two men were locked together at the lips. "Damn. Looks like they missed each other."

"I'll say," Ezra laughed. "Maybe it'll put Quade in a better mood."

Looking at Kai's lean body plastered to Quade, Richard felt his cock begin to fill. "It would sure as hell put me in a good mood."

As soon as the statement was out of his mouth, he felt a presence behind him. Shit. "Hey, Chad," he greeted his lover.

"Can I speak to you in private?"

Richard nodded and stood. "Excuse me," he said to the table.

As he turned to follow Chad, he heard Ezra and Guy begin to laugh. *Yeah, laugh it up.* Richard knew exactly what he was in for and couldn't wait.

Chad led him out of the ballroom and down the hall. "Don't you need to stay and make sure everything's running smoothly?" Richard asked, starting to get nervous.

"Everything'll be fine until we get back," Chad barked.

"You know I didn't really mean that crack I made about Kai, right?"

Chad didn't respond. His lover pulled out his keycard and unlocked his apartment door. "Bedroom," Chad ground out between clenched teeth.

Richard did as he was told and went to stand beside the bed. "Seriously, Chad. You know I was joking, right? I don't want anyone but you."

"Pull your pants down and bend over," Chad commanded, before walking to his dresser.

Richard wondered how he was going to rejoin the party if his ass was too sore to pull his pants back up. "I thought we were going to do this afterwards?"

Again Chad was silent. The slamming of the drawer let Richard know his lover had found what he was searching for. Richard started to look over his shoulder but a crack to his ass stilled his movements.

"Eyes straight ahead," Chad ordered.

Gazing out the window, Richard waited for his punishment. He hadn't expected the cold slide of lubricant against his asshole. "Chad?"

Richard gasped as Chad eased a silicone plug into his hole. When the plug was fully seated, Chad finally spoke. "You'll wear this for the rest of the evening. If I see you even contemplating jacking off in the bathroom, I'll put an even bigger one in. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Sir," Richard acknowledged.

"Good. Now get dressed. We have a party to attend."

Richard stood and pulled up his pants. With every move the plug rubbed against his prostate, keeping him on edge. How the hell was he supposed to enjoy himself when all he really wanted was for Chad to fuck him?

Turning around, he faced Chad. "You're trying to kill me, right?"

Chad pulled Richard's head down for a kiss, using his other hand to jiggle the plug. "Just trying to remind you exactly who this ass belongs to."

Richard knew some men would be put off by the declaration of ownership, but not him. He loved that Chad considered him his. "I don't think you'll ever let me forget. Of course, it wouldn't hurt to remind me from time to time."

"Oh, I plan to remind you daily." Chad gave Richard's ass another swat.

"I couldn't ask for anything more, Sir." Richard followed Chad out of the apartment, confident he'd finally met his perfect match.

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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