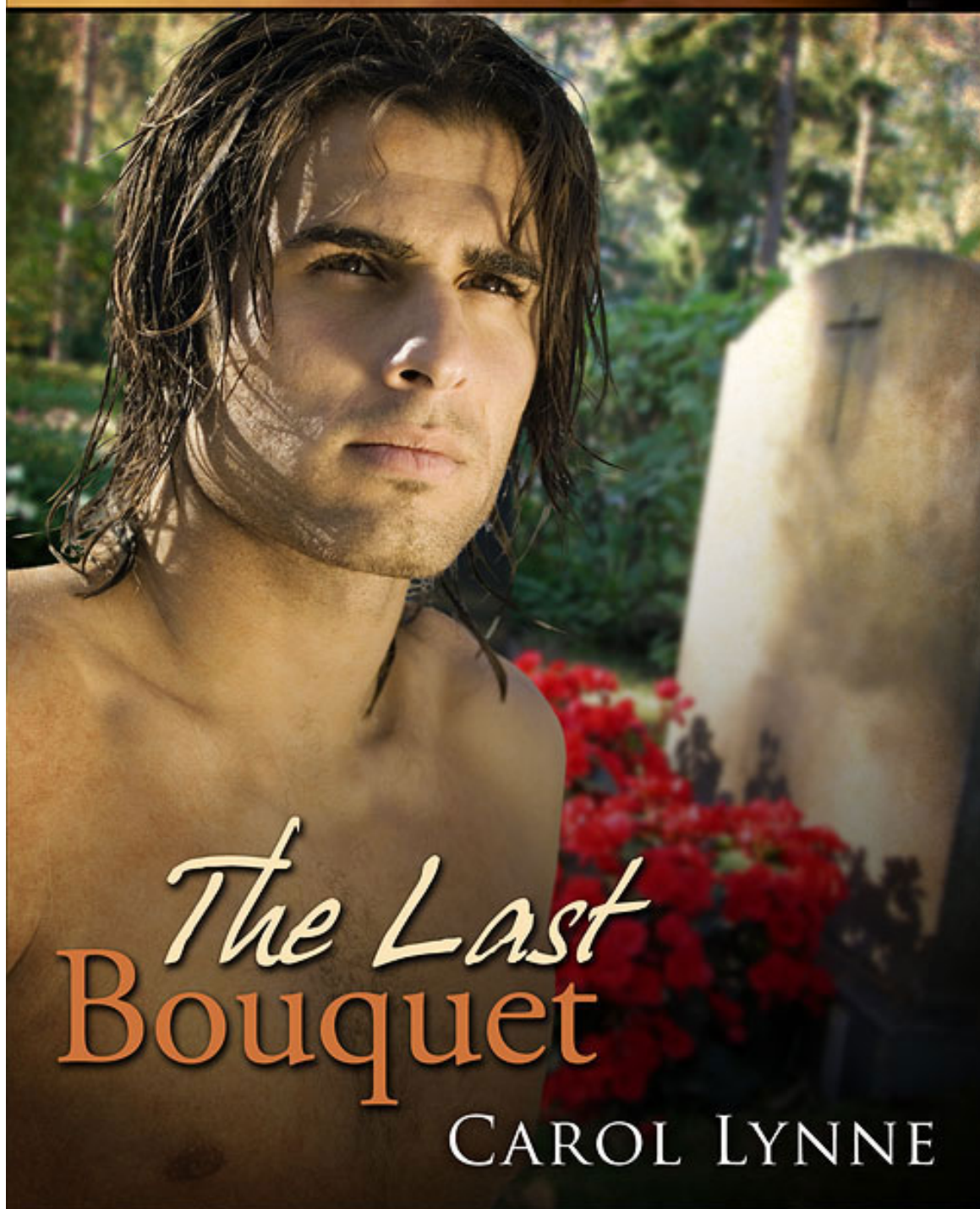




CATTLE VALLEY



The Last Bouquet

CAROL LYNNE

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The Last Bouquet

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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 LAST BOUQUET

Carol Lynne

Dedication

For my friends, Chel, Chris, Kelly and Deb.

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Chapter One

With Puccini blaring in the background, Tyler Manning stared at the heart in his hands. Unlike most floral shops, Tyler had waited until the first week in February to decorate the front windows of his store for Valentine's Day.

The homemade decoration wasn't fancy, red velvet glued front and back to a big piece of cardboard. He'd found the most exquisite lace in Sheridan and had applied it around the perimeter of the four-foot heart.

Feeling the sudden urge to rip the heart down the middle, Tyler set it aside. Maybe decorating with a broken heart wasn't such a good idea. Visions of Hearn came to mind. Tyler gazed at the refrigerated case holding the weekly bouquet he made for Mitch's grave.

How had he managed to fall in love with a man who was already taken? "Fuck!" he yelled, kicking the heart at his feet.

Sinking to the floor, Tyler buried his face in his hands. Crying had become a regular habit lately. Since the accident that had killed Hearn's partner, Mitch, his friend had barely given him the time of day. If it weren't for the standing order of a bouquet of flowers, Tyler doubted he'd see Hearn at all. *Why?* It still didn't make sense to him.

Before the wreck, he and Hearn had become almost inseparable. Then Mitch had been killed and...nothing. At first Tyler worried that Hearn had picked up on his more than friendly feelings, but he no longer thought that was the case. It wasn't just Tyler that was being given the cold shoulder. Hearn had withdrawn so deep into himself and his charity work in Sheridan that no one ever saw him.

A hand on his shoulder startled Tyler, making him jump. "Easy," Hearn's smooth voice soothed.

Tyler gazed up into the same brown eyes he saw in his dreams every night. The concerned expression on Hearn's face as he knelt beside him melted Tyler right then and there.

"Are you okay?" Hearn asked over the loud music.

Feeling like an ass, Tyler nodded and wiped the tears from his face. "Yeah. Sorry." He stood and walked behind the counter to reduce the volume on La Boheme. Taking a deep breath, he turned to find Hearn standing right behind him.

"What's wrong?" Hearn asked.

Knowing he couldn't out and out lie to the man he loved, Tyler gestured around the shop. "Valentine's Day." He shrugged. "Depresses me every year."

The corner of Hearn's mouth rose slightly. "Kinda in the wrong business then aren't you?"

Unable to resist that sexy grin he enjoyed so much, Tyler smiled. "Yeah. I guess you're right."

Hearn put both hands on Tyler's shoulders and squeezed. "You'll find someone."

"I already have," Tyler admitted.

A look of dark emotions passed momentarily over Hearn's face before disappearing. "That's good, Ty, real good." Hearn released his hold on Tyler. "But if you're still feeling down enough to cry maybe this guy isn't the one for you."

"He is. He just doesn't know it yet." Tyler broke eye contact and walked towards the refrigerator. "Your flowers are ready," he announced, pulling out the large daisy and rose bouquet.

Hearn took the flowers, and just like he did every week, put them to his nose and inhaled. It was the moment Tyler both loved and hated every time. For that brief few seconds, all Hearn's problems seemed to melt into the background, leaving the gentle peaceful man Tyler had come to love.

"Bill me?" Hearn asked, opening his eyes.

"Of course," Tyler agreed. Trying to buy himself a few more moments in Hearn's company, Tyler scrambled for something to say. "Have you heard about Quade?"

Hearn stopped on his way to the door and turned. "No. Did something happen?"

"I'll say. He quit. It was announced earlier. I guess my cousin George is taking over for him until a special election is held."

Hearn whistled. "Wow. Why the hell didn't I see that one coming?"

"No one did. Quade decided to move to Oahu to be with that guy, Kai, he met last year." Tyler shifted from foot to foot. "I was thinking. Maybe this would be a good opportunity for you."

"Huh?"

"Well, you're always complaining the city doesn't have enough activities to keep the kids busy during the summer months. Maybe this is your chance to do something about it?"

"What. Like run for Mayor?" Hearn asked, dark brown eyes going wide.

"Yeah."

"I don't know the first thing about running a town." Hearn took several steps to stand on the opposite side of the counter from Tyler.

"You do so," Tyler disagreed. "You have a business degree. You run the entire park system like a well-oiled machine. You can do this," he implored, reaching out to grab Hearn's hand.

"I can't. Scheduling the sports fields and making sure the gazebos are cleaned isn't the same thing as running an entire town," Hearn said, shaking his head.

Tyler focused on the dark brown locks of hair as they fell back into place. Hearn had let his hair grow. He didn't know if it was by choice, or lack of caring, but Hearn's hair reached just past his shoulders to fall in a shaggy cascade.

"Tyler?"

"Yeah?"

"It makes me feel good to know you believe in me, but I'm honestly not qualified." Hearn pulled his hand out of Tyler's grip and held up the flowers. "I'll see you in a week."

Tyler watched Hearn walk out the door and pounded his fist against the counter. "Dammit!" Why couldn't Hearn see in himself what Tyler saw? The answer came to him with a bitter taste. "Mitch." The asshole who'd berated Hearn over and over for wasting his college education being a glorified groundskeeper. Why couldn't Hearn see that he'd been so much more than that to Cattle Valley?

Pushing away from the counter, Tyler turned the music back up and went back to work on his display. He'd figure out a way to undo all the years of damage living with Mitch had done to Hearn.

* * * *

Hearn stopped his pickup in the usual spot and gazed out over the small cemetery. He couldn't get the things Tyler had mentioned out of his mind. *Mayor?* Hearn shook off the fanciful thought and reached for the bundle of flowers at his side.

After zipping his coat, he opened the door and stepped onto the still-frozen ground. It was another cloudy dreary day, but it seemed to fit Hearn's mood perfectly. He'd spent the morning doing what he did every morning, driving to Sheridan to volunteer a couple of hours at the children's home.

Although he loved spending time with the kids, their sad eyes seemed to follow him home each day, especially that day. Gracie had managed to lose her one and only toy, a doll given to her by Hearn. The two of them had spent nearly two hours tracking down the little blonde-haired baby doll. Seeing the joy on Gracie's face had been worth the effort, but it had driven home the need to find the sweet girl a family of her own.

Before he knew it, Hearn stood at the foot of Mitch's grave. He bent over and picked up the dead arrangement and replaced it with the fresh one. What would the town think of him if they knew he brought flowers out of guilt, rather than love?

Walking away from the grave, Hearn tossed the dead bouquet into the trash on his way back to his truck. Forget the town. What would Tyler think of him if he knew the truth? Knowing the fight he'd had with Mitch that night had not only led to Mitch's death but put Tyler's life in danger as well, still shamed him.

Hearn shook his head, surprised to find himself in his truck with the engine running. His head was so full of Tyler Manning he barely had time to think of anything else. Seeing those brown puppy dog eyes crying earlier had almost sent him over the edge. All he'd wanted at that moment was to scoop Tyler from the floor and protect him against the world. The news that Tyler was interested in someone came as a shock. He didn't know why. Tyler was the sweetest man he'd ever known, the kind of man who deserved to find love. So why did it hurt so much? *Because I want to be that man.*

* * * *

Stepping into Brewster's, Tyler spotted a group of his friends and made his way across the room. "Mind if I join you?" he asked the group from the EZ Does It.

"Not at all," Wyn replied, gesturing to an empty chair.

Tyler smiled and sat down. "I haven't seen you and Ezra in here in months," he observed.

Wyn gestured towards the bar. "We like the new owner. He's been up to The Grizzly Bar a time or two, so we thought we'd return the favour."

"Well you won't be disappointed. Sean makes an excellent burger." He signalled to the waitress. "Can you grab me a cup of coffee when you get a chance?"

"Sure thing," Kitty said.

"So how're things going?" Wyn asked.

Tyler had liked Palmer Wynfield the first time he'd met him. The older man had taken him under his wing and introduced him to every store owner on Main Street. "Okay. I'm hoping business picks up for the fourteenth."

"It will," Wyn nodded. "But I was asking about you, not the shop."

"Oh." Tyler shrugged and peered down at his hands in his lap. Wyn was one of the few people who knew about his feelings for Hearn. "No change in that department. Hearn still takes flowers to Mitch's grave every week, and I'm still left out in the cold."

"I can't believe Hearn's still carrying a torch for that sonofabitch," Ezra scowled.

Tyler glanced up to see several people were staring at him. Evidently he'd spoken louder than he'd realised. The look of pity on the faces of his friends made him groan. "Am I that transparent?" he asked, unable to meet anyone's gaze.

Logan's tattooed forearm reached across the table and tilted Tyler's chin up. "There's nothing wrong with caring about someone."

"Yeah. Except when the one you care about is still in love with a dead man."

Jax surprised him by scooting his chair back and leaving the table. Tyler followed the man's back until he disappeared into the restroom. "Did I say something wrong?" he asked Logan.

"No. You might've just said something right." Logan stood. "If you'll excuse me."

Tyler watched Logan follow in Jax's footsteps. "Are they having problems?" he asked Wyn and Ezra.

"Not that I know of," Wyn replied.

Tyler was almost finished with his hamburger when he spotted an obviously upset Jax walking out of the restroom on Logan's arm. Instead of coming back to the table and their now-cold dinners, Logan led Jax out of the bar.

He noticed the expression on Ezra's face as his foreman left. Whatever was going on, Ezra knew about it. Tyler glanced to Wyn, who still appeared oblivious to his partner's worried stare. Ezra caught Tyler's gaze and held it. "I think we need to talk."

* * * *

With his car idling in the cold winter's night, Tyler waited for Jax and Logan to immerge from Hearn's house. He knew if he had bigger balls, he'd walk right up to the front door and knock with the two visitors still inside, but he was a chicken.

Hell, he'd always shied away from confrontation. It was probably the reason he'd allowed himself to be used by so many men in the past. *Face it, Manning, you're a pussy.* As a kid he'd been beat up by practically everyone in his class at one time or another, both boys and girls. His father had tried on several occasions to teach him how to defend himself, but Tyler never could bring himself to fight back.

It wasn't that he was afraid of getting hit. It was the anger he couldn't stand. Whenever someone started yelling, Tyler's gut immediately began to cramp. On more than one occasion, he'd actually thrown up before the first punch knocked him to the ground.

So here he sat, all five-foot-five-inches of himself, waiting for Jax and Logan to leave. He didn't know what he'd say to Hearn once the two men were gone, but he knew in his heart he needed to be here for his friend.

A lump formed in his throat as he watched the front door open and the two men get into their truck. Staring at the silhouetted forms embracing, Tyler felt like an intruder. He knew it hadn't been easy for Jax to come clean with Hearn about his affair with Mitch, but just then, Tyler didn't give a fuck about Jax. He just needed the men to leave so he could check on Hearn.

Finally, after another ten minutes, Logan pulled the truck out of Hearn's driveway. Tyler waited until the taillights rounded the corner before getting out of his five-year old Civic.

By the time he crossed the street and walked up the porch steps, Tyler's stomach was in knots. Maybe this wasn't a good idea? What if Hearn didn't need him?

Pushing his fears away, Tyler took a deep breath and knocked on the door. When Hearn didn't answer, Tyler leaned over and watched through the living room window. Hearn sat on the couch, his hands balled into fists, staring straight ahead.

"Hearn?" he finally called out, knocking on the glass.

The much bigger man blinked several times before meeting Tyler's gaze through the window. "Can I come in?"

Hearn gazed at him for several moments before standing. Tyler straightened and stood in front of the door. Hearn's facial expression when he opened the door scared Tyler. He felt the bile rise from his stomach to his throat.

"What do you want, Ty?" Hearn asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Can I come in?"

Hearn stepped back and Tyler squeezed past him and into the living room. He didn't know how to break the news to Hearn that he knew what Mitch had done. "I...I was at Brewster's when Jax and Logan left."

Tyler tugged off his stocking cap and jammed it into his coat pocket. "Ezra told me about Mitch."

"He had no right!" Hearn exploded.

With a hand held against his queasy stomach, Tyler nodded. "Ezra was worried about you. He thought you might need a friend."

Hearn's gaze met Tyler's for the first time since he'd opened the door. "Are they laughing at me?"

"No!" Tyler exclaimed, rushing to Hearn's side. "I told you, they're worried. News that the man you loved wasn't faithful...it would devastate anyone."

Hearn started to chuckle, confusing Tyler. When the chuckle turned into a full-blown belly laugh, Tyler started to get scared for the sanity of the man he loved.

"I haven't been in love with Mitch for years," Hearn confessed, knocking a vase off the nearby table.

The action made Tyler jump. The obvious rage inside Hearn was more than Tyler's stomach could handle. Cupping a hand over his mouth, Tyler sprinted towards the bathroom. He barely got the toilet seat up before he lost his entire dinner in the bowl.

Resting his head on the cold porcelain, Tyler tried to calm himself. He knew Hearn wasn't mad at him, it was Mitch Hearn hated at the moment.

A large hand landed on his back. "Are you okay?" Hearn asked, all traces of anger gone.

God, he felt like an ass. Here he'd come over to comfort Hearn and he was the one being comforted. "I'm okay," Tyler lied, flushing the stool. "I've never handled anger well. Stupid, I know."

From their position on the floor, Hearn reached up and wet a washcloth. After wringing it out with one hand, he began cleaning Tyler's face. "Nothing stupid about that. I let myself lose control, and I'm sorry you suffered for it."

"You've earned the right to lose control."

Hearn tossed the washcloth to the side and reached for a bottle of mouthwash, passing it to Tyler. "You're right. I have earned the right to be angry with Mitch, but that doesn't mean I should take it out on you."

Tyler took a big swig of the minty mouthwash before spitting it into the toilet. "Don't apologise for that. I came over because I thought you might need a friend."

"Can you stand?" Hearn asked, getting to his feet.

"Yeah." With Hearn's help, Tyler stood. In the small space provided, Tyler was practically sandwiched against Hearn's tall frame. He hadn't stood this close to the man since the night of Kyle and Gill's wedding reception, when Hearn had danced with him.

Without thinking, Tyler rested his cheek against Hearn's broad chest. "Thank you," he whispered, wrapping his arms around Hearn's waist.

Hearn returned the embrace, resting his own cheek on top of Tyler's head. "No. Thank you. Knowing what I now know, it was pretty brave of you to come over here to check on me."

"You're the most important person in the world to me. Of course I came," Tyler admitted.

He felt Hearn's entire body tense. "What did you say?"

Shit! The last thing Hearn needed was a declaration of love at a time like this. "I said you're important to me. You may not know it, but you're my best friend."

Hearn kissed the top of Tyler's head. "You're my best friend, too."

Chapter Two

Nate was putting the finishing touches on dinner when Ryan came through the door. "Mmm. Something smells good."

Nate spun around and lifted his chin. "It's the new cologne I picked up at Wyn's."

Chuckling, Ryan buried his face in Nate's neck. "Yep, that smells pretty damn good, but I was talking about dinner."

"So was I," Nate quipped, cupping Ryan's cock through his jeans.

Ryan's mouth latched onto the skin just below Nate's ear. While his lover busied himself sucking up a bruise, Nate took the opportunity to unzip Ryan's jeans.

Ryan pulled his mouth from Nate's neck and moaned. "Feels good, baby."

"Damn right it does," Nate agreed, pumping the shaft in his hand. Sinking to his knees, Nate pushed Ryan's jeans down until his lover's erection sprang free. "Mmm. Yummy," he giggled, running his tongue from root to crown. After enjoying the taste of Ryan's pre-cum, Nate's lips slipped over the tip.

A cold breeze stirred the air moments before another cock jabbed his cheek. Nate opened his eyes and looked up to see Rio thrusting his tongue down Ryan's throat. Grinning around the girth in his mouth, he wrapped his fingers around the bouncing cock in front of him.

The cold feel of Rio's length surprised him. Releasing Ryan's cock, he blew hot air on Rio's erection. "Poor baby's almost frozen."

"It's fucking cold outside," Rio defended.

"I know it is," Nate placated. "Thank you for feeding the horses." He leaned in and swallowed Rio's length. He was really getting into it when a finger began tapping the top of his head. "What?" he asked, abandoning his work.

"As hot as that little mouth of yours is, the dinner is hotter." Rio gestured towards the smoking oven.

"Shit!" Nate cried, jumping to his feet. He narrowed his eyes at Ryan as he grabbed a pot holder and pulled his burnt chicken out of the oven. Dropping the roasting pan onto the counter, he propped his hands on his hips. "Well, that sucks."

Ryan wrapped his arms around Nate's waist. "It doesn't look too bad. We'll just scrape off the black stuff."

Nate shrugged. "I guess so."

"Why don't you help Rio set the table, and I'll take care of the chicken," Ryan offered, kissing Nate's neck.

He knew he was a bit of a perfectionist, but he loved giving his men a meal fit for kings at the end of their day. Nate nodded and reached for the dishes. After handing the stack to Rio, he turned to face Ryan. "Do you want me to help you with the side dishes?"

Ryan shook his head. "I'll take care of it, baby. You just suck that pretty little bottom lip back in and let Rio take care of you."

Nate grinned. "Can I make him do anything I want?"

Ryan glanced over at Rio who was setting the plates on the table. "Do you even have to ask?"

Nate clapped his hands. "Well then, I'm off to put my pout on."

Ryan rolled his eyes and gave Nate a swat on the ass as he walked away. Rubbing his butt, Nate stuck his bottom lip out even further and got out the silverware. Strolling towards the table, he began placing the eating utensils on either side of the plates.

Rio pulled out one of the dining room chairs and sat down. "Come over here, little man," Rio said, patting his lap.

Nate was giggling his ass off on the inside, but he didn't dare let his glee show on the outside. It had taken him a long time to learn each man's weak spots, but he'd become an expert at exploiting them for his own sexual gain.

Settling himself in Rio's lap, Nate tilted his chin up for a kiss. Rio wasted no time delving his tongue deep into Nate's mouth. Pulling back, Rio grinned. "Just for the record. I know you're playing me like a violin right now, but you're so damn cute I don't mind."

Nate winced. "The lip too much?"

"Just a tad. Besides, it's not all our fault you were greedily munching on our cocks instead of watching your dinner."

Nate crossed his arms. "Don't hold your breath until the next time I decide to *munch* your cock."

"Like you could stay away," Rio chuckled.

He's got me. Nate threw his arms around Rio's neck and kissed him. "You're right. I'd starve without my daily dose of protein."

"Oh, God," Ryan drawled as he set the platter of chicken on the table. "Get off Papa Bear's lap, Goldislut, and eat your porridge."

Laughing, Rio pinched Nate's ass. "You heard Mama Bear, get up."

Giggling, Nate jumped up and moved to his chair. "Aww, this fits just right," he joked. Although the dinner he'd prepared wasn't perfect, Nate couldn't wait another minute to talk to his men. "Sooo, I was thinking today..."

"Oh no. How much is it gonna cost us?" Ryan interrupted.

"Would you let me finish." He slapped him on the arm. "I want to run for mayor," he stated before bracing himself for the teasing that was sure to come.

Rio and Ryan looked at each other. They seemed to be having some sort of Vulcan mind meld right before his eyes. Finally, Ryan reached out and took Nate's hand. "You'd be a fantastic mayor."

"Really? You think so?" He'd never been so happy to have been wrong in his life. The fact Rio and Ryan supported his decision meant everything to him. "I mean. I know I don't have a lot of experience, but I think I could make a real difference."

"You could. And don't sell yourself short. You're good with people, you have a head for business and you may be the one person in all of Cattle Valley who could endear himself to Carol." Ryan grinned and took a bite of his rosemary potatoes.

* * * *

Hearn handed Tyler a cup of coffee. "I put a little Bailey's in it. I know you like it, and I thought we could both use something to take the edge off."

"Thanks."

The way Tyler was curled up with his feet tucked up under him, made the man appear even smaller. Hearn had never thought of himself as oversized, but compared to Tyler, he felt like a giant. He remembered the first time he'd ever laid eyes on the florist. It was before the floral shop even opened its doors. He'd just picked up another Christmas present for Mitch from Wynfield's Department Store, when he spotted a wood nymph among a sea of realistic evergreen trees. Curious, he'd crossed the street and peered at the small man in the

window of the old flower shop. Tyler had smiled and waved, dropping one of the artificial trees on his foot. He'd gestured for Hearn to come in. Stepping into that store had forever changed his life.

"Hearn? Are you okay?" Tyler asked from his position on the sofa.

"Yeah." Hearn sat next to Tyler and took a sip of his cooling coffee. "I was just remembering the day we met."

Tyler's entire face lit up from within. "I remember that. I was a klutz and dropped one of the display pieces onto my foot."

"A tree. It was one of those artificial trees you put in the window," Hearn added.

Tyler smiled and nodded in remembrance. "I wasn't near ready to open the shop, but I didn't want the windows empty at Christmas time."

The smaller man gazed down into his coffee. "I was working away, and I happened to look up into the deepest brown eyes I'd ever seen." Tyler chuckled. "Anyone would've forgotten what they were doing with a view like that."

Hearn didn't know how to reply to such a statement. He'd never thought of himself as overly gorgeous. He knew he had a few good features, but the overall package had never seemed like something to brag about. Maybe if it had Mitch wouldn't have gone looking. "Why do you think he did it?"

With a deep breath, Tyler set his cup on the table. "Mitch?"

"Yeah."

Tyler reached out and held Hearn's hand. Damn Tyler's skin was soft, his fingers so thin and long.

"It wasn't you," Tyler offered.

Hearn opened his mouth to argue, but Tyler cut him off. "Cheating isn't about the person being cheated on. It's about the person doing the cheating. Evidently, Mitch didn't feel good about himself. He needed to find as many people as possible to reaffirm his self-worth."

As many people as possible? "Wait," he said, shaking his head. "Jax wasn't the only one?"

Tyler's eyes rounded. "I'm sorry. I thought Jax told you."

Hearn didn't know how it was possible, but his chest constricted even more than it had earlier. He'd been able to pass Mitch's infidelity off as falling in love with another man. After all, wasn't he just as guilty of that crime, but to hear there were others... "How many?"

Tyler shrugged. "I don't know. Ezra just told me Jax wasn't the only one Mitch had secret rendezvous' with."

How many, Mitch? Did you at least wear a fucking condom? Why didn't I see it? The answer was sitting right in front of him. Because I was too busy falling in love with my new best friend.

He gazed into Tyler's chocolate brown eyes. Hearn had always been fascinated by the man's lashes, and the way they fanned over his cheeks every time he blinked. No. He couldn't blame anything on Tyler. According to Jax, the affair between him and Mitch had gone on for years. Tyler had only been in town for a little over a year.

Hearn thought about the late nights Mitch often kept. His partner had always had a plausible excuse, a dinner meeting that ran long, car trouble, or the weather, it was always something. Hearn had never dwelt on it because the truth was, he enjoyed the evenings Mitch wasn't home. His lover was constantly bitching at him for something. Some shortfall he felt Hearn needed to change. How many evenings had he secretly wished for something that would give him the strength to leave?

"I wish I'd known. My life with Mitch sucked the last several years we were together, but we'd been partners since college. I tried to ride out the rough patches. I felt I owed him that." He laughed. "Evidently Mitch had a different kind of riding in mind."

Tyler squeezed his hand. "You're a better man than he was."

Sobering, Hearn returned the squeeze. Tyler had been a loyal friend since they'd met. Even after the accident when Hearn had tried his best to push the smaller man away, Tyler never stopped trying. "He meant to do it you know."

Tyler's head tilted to the side in question. "Do what?"

"Run into that tree," Hearn confessed. He'd carried the secret too long. If he did nothing else right in his life, he knew he needed to tell Tyler the truth about that night.

Tyler's entire body seemed to tense up. "I know," Tyler whispered.

"You do?"

Tyler nodded. "He confronted me before we got into the car."

Now it was Hearn's turn to tense. "About the talk he and I had after I danced with you?" Had Tyler really known of his feelings all this time?

Tyler appeared more confused than ever. "I didn't know the two of you had talked."

"What exactly did he say to you?" Hearn asked.

Tyler broke eye contact and studied the flames flickering in the fireplace. "I was trying to find you in the crowd. Mitch found me first. He grabbed my arm and told me he knew."

Hearn swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Knew what?"

"That I'd fallen in love with you. He told me I couldn't have you. That he'd worked too long to gain your trust." Tyler stopped and shook his head. "Actually, what he said was that he'd worked too long to gain your trust fund, but I thought he'd just made a mistake."

My trust fund? While trying to let that bit of information sink in, he realised he'd bypassed the most important part of Tyler's statement. "Are you?"

"Am I what," Tyler mumbled, still refusing to look at Hearn.

Hearn cupped Tyler's cheek and turned the smaller man's attention back to him. "Are you in love with me?"

Tyler's jaw dropped before snapping shut. When it appeared Tyler wasn't going to answer, Hearn continued. "Because the night of the accident, I told Mitch I was planning to move out." Hearn slid his hand to the back of Tyler's neck and pulled him closer. "I confessed that I'd fallen in love with my best friend."

The truth of Hearn's words seemed to dawn in Tyler's eyes moments before Hearn kissed him. He didn't push things, choosing to keep the kiss short and sweet.

When he pulled back, Tyler's eyes were filled with tears. "Why didn't you tell me before?" Tyler asked.

"It was because of what I'd told him that Mitch purposely ran into that tree. I didn't know he'd been fucking around on the side. I thought I'd betrayed him. That the thought of losing me had driven him to do it."

A single tear slid down Tyler's cheek. Hearn swiped the moisture away with his thumb. "Now I'm not sure why he did it. Maybe his goal was to kill one of us, maybe it was to injure himself enough that I wouldn't leave." Hearn shrugged. "We may never know."

"It killed me to watch you mourn for that man as long as you did. He treated you like shit when he was alive. Never giving you enough credit for the intelligent man I know you are."

Hearn gave Tyler's hand a tug until the smaller man was seated on his lap. "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free," he quoted.

Tyler grinned and buried his face against Hearn's neck. "I never thought I'd get the chance to be here, like this."

Despite Tyler's words, Hearn remembered what they'd talked about earlier in the day. "So, who's this new guy you have your eye on?" He wondered if it was someone Tyler had met in the months following Mitch's death.

"Not a new guy," Tyler mumbled. "It's you. It's always been you."

Hearn could almost feel his fractured heart begin to mend. "As much as I'd like to take you into the bedroom and ask you to prove it, I won't. I'd like to ask you out on a proper date first."

"A date?" Tyler asked.

Hearn could feel Tyler smile against his neck moments before soft kisses landed on his heated skin. Hearn's hold on the smaller man tightened. The image of his little wood nymph under him was almost more than he could bear and still maintain control. Tyler deserved more than a hasty fuck. He'd proven worthy of a proper courting first.

When Tyler's kisses became licks, Hearn groaned. "I'm trying to be a gentleman, but you're not making it easy."

"Chivalry is overrated," Tyler answered back. "I've dreamed of this moment for too long to let it slip through my fingers without at least getting a taste of you."

Tyler's hands began working their way under Hearn's T-shirt. If Hearn's cock weren't already painfully hard, the gentle pinch to his nipples would've done the trick. His hands went to Tyler's hips, pushing the little sprite down against the bulging fly of his jeans. The press of that sweet little ass against his throbbing erection, snapped every ounce of his reserve.

Grabbing the bottom of Tyler's long-sleeved sport shirt, Hearn pulled the soft cotton over his soon-to-be lover's head. Just as he'd hoped, Tyler's chest was sleek and hair-free. "Oh, shit," Hearn panted, running his fingers over the smooth skin.

"Sorry," Tyler mumbled. "I've never been accused of having a manly physique."

"You're perfect." Hearn's touch travelled across Tyler's dark brown nipples, to the thin line of hair trailing down below his belly button. He wanted, no, needed, to see more. "May I?" he asked, hands poised on the button of Tyler's jeans.

Tyler licked his lips and grinned. "What? No steak first?" he asked with a chuckle.

Hearn immediately pulled his hands back. "I'm sorry. I guess I just got carried away."

Laughing, Tyler reached down and unfastened his own jeans. "I was kidding."

"Maybe so, but I can't do what I'd like to anyway, no condoms. With everything I've learned about Mitch..." Hearn shook his head. "Guess I need to be tested."

"I get tested every six months whether I'm active or not. The last one was before Thanksgiving. I'm clean," Tyler declared.

Hearn gave a short nod. "Well then we just need to wait for my results. Until then, maybe it would be better if we stuck to necking like a couple of teenagers."

Tyler rolled his eyes. "Kissing's always felt better than fucking anyway."

Surprised, Hearn pulled Tyler in for a kiss, sweeping his tongue through the interior of the smaller man's mouth. Groaning, Tyler began sucking on Hearn's tongue. Hearn answered by opening even wider. The pressure from Tyler's teeth against his stretched mouth split his lip. The metallic taste of blood snapped Hearn out of his lust-haze. Breaking the kiss, he immediately ran his tongue around his lips until he found the small slit in the skin. "Maybe kissing before my results are back isn't such a good idea either."

"Maybe not."

Trying to resist the lure of those pretty pink lips, Hearn hugged Tyler to his chest. "By the way, if kissing feels better to you than fucking, someone should be ashamed of themselves."

"Hmmm, maybe I've just been waiting for you?" Tyler replied around a yawn.

Hearn kissed Tyler's forehead. "Maybe." He gave Tyler a playful squeeze on the ass. "You'd better go home and get some rest."

"I don't want the night to end," Tyler mumbled.

"Neither do I, but I'm trying my damndest to put your safety above my own needs. I have a feeling if you stay much longer, my good intentions will be lost."

Tyler slid off Hearn's lap and refastened his jeans. "Call me when you wake up?"

"I'll do one better. I'll stop in and take ya to lunch, maybe get a little kissing in before we eat."

Tyler lifted his shirt from the couch and pulled it over his head. Sitting on the sofa to put his athletic shoes on, he bumped Hearn with his shoulder. "Can you do me a favour and ask Isaac to put a rush on that test?"

"Definitely."

Chapter Three

"Hello? Anyone here?" Nate called out, standing in the middle of the empty reception area.

George Manning opened the door to Quade's old office. "Hey, Nate. Carol just left to grab us a couple sandwiches from Deb's. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Uh, yeah, I wanted to ask if she had the paperwork I need to fill out to get on the mayoral ballot?"

George's black brows rose. "Really? You thinking about running?"

"Yeah." Nate shrugged. "I talked it over with Rio and Ryan and they told me to go for it."

"Great," George said, going to the shelf beside Carol's desk. "You'd be a good choice for the position." He handed Nate a small stack of papers. "You'll need to fill these out and pay the running fee. It's not much so you shouldn't have any problems. When you're done, just bring 'em back here and Carol will make it official."

"Thanks."

"No problem," George replied with a wave as Nate turned to leave.

Nate climbed into his SUV, laid the forms on the passenger seat and drove to The Gym. Parking in his usual spot, he noticed the place appeared pretty dead. It wasn't unusual for that time of day. He knew the place would be packed within an hour as businessmen and women came in on their lunch hours, all hoping to shed the pounds they'd picked up over the holidays.

He spotted Mario and Rio sitting at the juice counter, playing a friendly game of cards. "Don't the two of you have anything better to do?" he asked, pressing himself against Rio's heavily muscled back.

"Nope," Rio said, laying down a fan of cards. "Gin."

"Shit," Mario spat and threw his cards on the counter.

Chuckling, Rio took the pencil from behind his ear and scratched his score on a pad of paper.

"So what's the damage?" Mario asked.

"Two private kick-boxing classes and one spin class," Rio informed him, turning the pad around so Mario could see for himself.

"Shit." Mario stood and gathered the cards. "Remind me to do sit-ups next time I get bored."

"Hey, if you're nice and don't pout I'll let you have your choice of which lessons to take over for me."

Mario grinned, flashing those perfectly white teeth. "I can choose, really?"

Chuckling, Rio nodded. "Yep. Asa comes on Tuesdays and Thursdays at six. If you impress him, maybe he'll ask for you from now on."

Mario rubbed his hands together. "I'll have to bone-up on my skills."

Nate burst out laughing. "Believe me, if you're working with Asa you'll already be boned up. You've had a thing for that man since the first day he came in here."

Mario's face turned a delightful shade of red. "That noticeable, huh?"

Nate walked over and gave Mario a hug. "Only to the people who love you."

Giving him a hug back, Mario kissed Nate's cheek. "Thanks. You guys are like family to me, too."

After Mario left to get ready for the onslaught of the New Year's resolutioners, he turned back to Rio. "I stopped by City Hall and picked up the papers."

"That's good," Rio said, holding out his arms.

Nate gleefully accepted the invitation. Life always felt better in the comfort of Rio's embrace. The butterflies in his stomach from earlier still hadn't calmed. "I can't believe how nervous I am. I'm never nervous."

Running soothing hands up and down Nate's spine, Rio kissed him. "Makes sense you'd be a little worried. It's an important position."

Nate shook his head. "It's not that. It just reminds me too much of high school. Did I ever tell you I ran for class president?"

"Ran? Does that mean you didn't win?" Rio asked.

"Right. I was creamed in the voting by a jock named Steve Hurley. Hell, the guy didn't even know what a class president did, but they elected him anyway."

Rio began nibbling on Nate's ear. "What kind of fools did you go to school with?"

"Homophobic assholes."

Rio pulled back, an expression of surprise on his face. "You were *out* in high school?"

God, I should've never brought it up. He'd never talked about his past with his partners other than to say he no longer had contact with his parents. He knew Rio and Ryan figured it was due to him being gay, but Nate knew that was only the tip of the iceberg. He'd suffered enough looks of disgust and pity over the years, the last thing he wanted was to see it in his lovers' eyes.

"Yeah," he finally mumbled. "I wouldn't recommend it."

"What, no date for the prom?" Rio chuckled.

Nate tried to control his reaction to the question. If his lover knew how much it hurt, the big soft-hearted man would feel terrible. "I didn't go to the prom."

Rio, bless his heart, still hadn't caught on to the fact it was a sore subject. "I'm surprised that in a city the size of Chicago there wasn't at least one other gay guy in your school to go with."

Nate broke away from Rio's embrace and walked behind the counter. Turning his back to his partner, he dug in the fridge for a bottle of water. He couldn't get the picture of Joseph out of his head. The last time he'd seen his first lover was from across a conference table. They'd made them both sign papers that they would never see each other again. Nate wasn't the only one who'd wept that day. Joseph's bright blue eyes had been clouded with pain and longing. The image of the normally cheerful man, sad and broken, would forever haunt Nate.

"Can we talk about something else?" he asked, rubbing the cold bottle against his forehead.

Strong arms encircled his waist. "Are you okay?" Rio asked.

Nate nodded. "Just a sore subject that I'd rather not discuss." He didn't tell Rio he'd signed legal documents preventing him. He wasn't a child anymore. Nate knew the papers weren't preventing him from disclosing the details to his partners. He simply didn't talk about it out of self-preservation.

Rio's arms tightened. *Damn.* He knew his gentle giant felt guilty. Nope. That would never do. Nate knew he was the *fun* in the relationship. If he allowed himself to slip back into the depression that had plagued him for years, he wouldn't be anything special, just a geeky guy with a fabulous taste in clothes.

Putting his *fun* face on, Nate spun in Rio's arms. "Do we have time for a quickie before the hordes arrive?"

* * * *

Dressed in a yellow paper gown, Hearn patiently waited for Dr. Singer. He still didn't understand why Isaac insisted on giving him an exam. All he'd wanted was a damn blood test, not a physical.

The door opened and the handsome older man stepped into the room. "Good to see you," Isaac greeted, shaking Hearn's hand.

"You, too." Hearn shifted on the exam table, feeling the cold white paper covering the table crinkle under his bare ass. "I have to say I was surprised I needed a physical just to get a blood test."

Isaac sat on the short black stool and linked his fingers. "Normally you don't, but you've been through a hell of a year. I just needed to know you've been taking care of yourself."

"I feel fine," Hearn answered. He thought of Tyler and smiled. "Actually, I'm happier than I have been in years."

Isaac grinned. "Yeah? And does this new-found happiness have anything to do with wanting an HIV test?"

"Maybe."

Isaac's brows rose, but the distinguished doctor said nothing more, obviously waiting for Hearn to spill the beans. With a resigned sigh, Hearn spilled. "I'm finally planning to act on my feelings for Tyler Manning."

Chuckling, Isaac reached out and slapped Hearn's knee. "It's about damn time. And you couldn't have picked a better guy. I worked a lot with him on the AIDS walk we organised last fall. He's incredibly giving, always looking out for the best interest of the community. Tyler's everything a parent could hope for in a son."

"I'm a lucky man," Hearn agreed. He noticed the time on Isaac's watch. "Actually, can we move this along so I can make my lunch date with the man of my dreams?" he asked, smiling.

"Sure. Let's not have it said that I stood in the way of true love," Isaac joked, taking out his stethoscope.

Thirty minutes later, Hearn walked out of the clinic and down the street to the floral shop. One thing continued to stand out from his conversation with Isaac. Tyler was a very

civic-minded individual. Hearn had always known that, but hearing it from someone else only proved to drive the point home.

He'd spent years listening to Mitch degrade him for his lack of drive and intelligence. He loved running the park system in Cattle Valley, but it had never seemed to matter to Mitch. Hearn wondered if it mattered to Tyler. Was it the reason Tyler wanted him to run for mayor?

Before he knew it, he stood in front of the display window. "Wow." Tyler had obviously been busy. The window had been transformed into a sea of red hearts and fresh flowers.

The brass bell signalled his arrival as he stepped into the shop. His gaze immediately zeroed in on the man behind the counter. The red cashmere sweater showed off Tyler's smaller size to perfection.

Tyler paused in his conversation with a customer to acknowledge him. "Give me a few minutes?"

"Sure. I'll just look around," he answered. Hearn wandered over to the display of stuffed animals. Picking up a fluffy little lamb, he thought of Gracie and smiled. He felt bad for not visiting the young girl that morning, but maybe a gift would make it up to her.

Idly rubbing the animal's soft wool against his chin, Hearn continued to browse the gifts and other home accents on display.

"Soft isn't it?" Tyler noted, stepping up behind Hearn.

Hearn realised what he'd been doing and pulled the lamb away from his face. "Yeah. There's a little girl I'm quite taken with that would love it."

"Oh really? You holding out on me?" Tyler teased.

Hearn glanced around the shop before wrapping his arms around Tyler. "I've been spending a lot of time at the Sheridan Home for Children lately. There's an angel who lives there who's stolen my heart."

Tyler grinned. "Should I be jealous?"

Tilting his head, Hearn peered out the window. "Ummm, no. But I guarantee Gracie would steal your heart, too. I think she must be a collector. She has the entire staff wrapped around her little six-year-old finger."

"Would it be callous of me to ask why she's there?" Tyler asked.

"Social Services removed her from her mother's custody. I guess when she first arrived at the centre she was in pretty bad shape. She'd been abused, both mentally and physically. Even though she was four at the time, she was the size of a two and a half year old."

"Why haven't they placed her in a foster home?" Tyler asked, tears in his eyes.

"They tried. Several times actually, but Gracie doesn't trust many people. She seems to have a real problem with women, but who can blame her." Hearn shrugged. "So I go almost every day and give her all the attention I can. She's slowly coming out of her shell, but she has a long way to go."

Tyler stood on his tip-toes and pulled Hearn's head down for a kiss. The sweep of his lover's tongue ignited Hearn's passion. How many times had he come into the shop and longed to kiss the man he'd fallen so hard for? With his hands on Tyler's ass, Hearn lifted the smaller man for a deeper kiss.

Breaking for air, Tyler grinned. "Unless you plan on spending the rest of the day upstairs at my place, I think we'd better go eat."

Hearn reluctantly set Tyler back onto his feet. "Guess we'd better." He pressed another kiss to Tyler's lips. "But I'll be back when you close up."

Tyler bent and picked up the stuffed animal. "I'll get my coat and put this into a bag for you."

Hearn started to get out his wallet, but Tyler stopped him. "No. Let me do this."

"You don't have to," Hearn informed Tyler.

"Of course I don't," Tyler replied, slipping the lamb into a lavender bag. "I want to." Tyler handed the sack to Hearn. "I'll just get my coat."

Once more, Hearn was reminded how good a man he'd fallen for. Tyler never seemed to think of himself first. *I want to be that kind of man.*

"Ready?" Tyler asked, dressed in his winter coat.

"Yep." Hearn led the way out to the sidewalk and waited for Tyler to lock the store. Taking the smaller man's hand, they walked next door to Deb's.

After getting seated, Hearn took a sip of his water. He still couldn't believe he was actually considering this. "I've been thinking about what you mentioned earlier. You know, about me running for mayor. Even though my business skills are a bit rusty, I think I'll do it."

With excitement written all over his face, Tyler clapped his hands together. "Really? I thought you'd decided against it."

Hearn picked up the salt shaker and poured a dab on the napkin under his drink. You couldn't have a serious discussion with a napkin stuck to the sweaty glass you were drinking from. "I know what I said. And I'm still not convinced I'm the best man for the job, but you were right. It's time to put up or shut up. It's really the only way I can guarantee my park proposals will get before the council. I'd miss running the parks, but I'd be in a much better position to improve them."

Tyler reached across the table and squeezed Hearn's hand. "I'm so proud of you."

Gazing into Tyler's eyes, Hearn knew that was the reason he was running in the first place. What would it be like to have a lover proud of him for the first time in his life?

"I'll go by City Hall after I drop you back by the store."

Tyler ran a foot up the inside of Hearn's calf. "Maybe you could run by Asher's Pharmacy after that and pick up a few things."

Grinning, Hearn winked. "Why, Mr. Manning, are you planning to seduce me later?"

"That's exactly what I'm planning. I thought I'd make you a nice home cooked dinner at my place." Tyler stood and leaned over the table to give Hearn a quick kiss. "Pack your vitamins and an overnight bag."

* * * *

Sitting on the floor of his closet, Nate glanced at the birth certificate in his hands. Maybe he should rethink this whole thing? When he'd told his partners he wanted to run for mayor, he had no idea he'd have to produce a copy of his birth certificate.

He'd even called Carol to try and get out of attaching it to the application. He'd argued that a passport should be good enough, but Carol told him they had to follow the guidelines which specifically called for a certified copy of the applicant's birth record.

William Nathaniel Gilloume. How long had it been since someone called him by his real name? He knew the answer immediately. The day he'd graduated from high school, the same day his father had given him a sizeable check, laying out the conditions of accepting the money.

Setting the certificate aside, Nate reached back into the box for the photo he knew was safely tucked in an envelope. It had been a couple of years since he'd last pulled the old picture out of its hiding place.

The tears that ran down his face were normal. Looking at Joseph's picture always brought back too many memories. "I miss you," he whispered to the photograph. How old had his first lover been when this picture was taken, twenty-four, twenty-five?

"Are you in here?" Ryan called out from the bedroom.

I have to tell them the truth. "I'm in here." Nate put the photo back into its envelope and picked up the box. "I'll be out in a second."

Before he could get his emotions under control, Ryan appeared beside him. "What're you doing, baby?"

"Taking a stroll down Memory Lane," he answered. "Is Rio home yet?" He knew he needed to confess his sins before chickening out.

"Yeah. We noticed you hadn't started dinner, so he's whipping up his famous tuna casserole." Ryan turned Nate to face him. "What's going on?"

"If I run for mayor, it might come out who I really am."

Chapter Four

Hearn was surprised to find the door that opened onto the street unlocked. With a shake of his head, he started up the steep staircase towards Tyler's apartment over the floral shop.

In all the time he'd known Tyler, it was hard to believe he'd never been to his place. He was happy to see another door at the top of the steps. He needed to talk to Tyler about keeping the street-level door locked. Even though crime in Cattle Valley was almost non-existent, it never hurt to be cautious.

Switching his overnight bag to his other hand, he knocked on the solid wood door. Before his hand had time to reach his side, the door opened with a whoosh.

"Right on time," Tyler greeted him.

The smell of pizza in the room was a bit of a surprise though. "Pizza? I thought you were making me a home cooked meal?"

Tyler pulled him into the room and kissed him. "I was going to, but I decided to leave that for our second date."

Hearn grinned. "You're just in a hurry to get into my pants."

"That's exactly right," Tyler agreed. The smaller man gestured towards the living room of the loft-style apartment. "Make yourself at home, and I'll get us something to drink. Pizza's on the coffee table so help yourself."

Looking around, Hearn was impressed. The loft was small, but Tyler had done a damn good job making the most of it. "Did you do all this by yourself?" he asked, taking off his coat.

Shutting the refrigerator, Tyler's gaze roamed the room. "I had some help, but yeah."

Hearn glanced at the raised platform in the corner of the room. "Nice bed," he commented, sitting on the cream-colored sectional. He opened the large box on the table and withdrew a slice of pizza. He could hear Tyler moving around behind him so he figured he was expected to just start eating.

A nude Tyler bounded over the back of the sofa and handed Hearn a bottle of beer. "Glad you like it. I thought I'd serve dessert there."

With a big bite of pizza in his mouth, Hearn nearly choked. He'd never known this side of Tyler. The man he'd fallen in love with was usually quiet, thoughtful and rather timid. Using the beer to wash it down, Hearn finally swallowed the mouthful of food. "You trying to kill me?" he joked, taking in every inch of the smaller man's nudity.

Tyler took a drink from his own bottle before setting it on the table. "Nope. I'm trying to revive you." He straddled Hearn's lap. "Is it working?" Tyler asked, hand kneading Hearn's erection through his jeans.

"Oh, it's working." Hearn finished off his beer in one long drink before handing the empty bottle to Tyler.

Tyler leaned backward, stretching his slim body to place the bottle on the table. Hearn took full advantage of the position by running his hands over the smooth torso in his lap.

Instead of straightening, Tyler scooted his ass against Hearn's cock and draped himself over the front of the sofa. *Damn*. Tyler was not only sexy as shit but limber as well. The new position left Tyler fully exposed to Hearn's eyes and hands.

"Am I dreaming?" Hearn asked, following the thin line of hair from Tyler's belly button to his hardening cock.

"If so, do me a favour and don't wake up," Tyler purred as Hearn's hand encircled his erection.

Hearn felt completely wicked as he used his other hand to fondle Tyler's balls. Here he sat, fully dressed, while a smorgasbord lounged on his lap. He spent his time, feeling each ridge and dip of Tyler's body.

By the time the pizza was well and truly cold, the only area he hadn't fondled was the sweet ass pressed against his stomach. Placing his hands under Tyler's back, Hearn easily lifted the man back into a seated position. "Hang on to me," he said, standing.

Tyler did as he was told and wrapped his arms and legs around Hearn. "What about the pizza?" Tyler whispered, licking Hearn's ear.

"I've always been the kind of guy who preferred to indulge in dessert before dinner." On the way to the raised Queen-sized bed, Hearn stopped by the door. "Can ya grab that bag for me?"

Tyler reached down and scooped up the small duffle. "I hope you bought enough condoms."

As Hearn carried his naked lover to bed, he began to worry. It had been quite a few years since he'd topped because Mitch had rarely let him take the lead in their love making. He hoped the few odd times he'd been allowed to penetrate his ex had given him enough experience to satisfy Tyler.

It wasn't that he hadn't enjoyed taking the lead. To the contrary, Hearn had always felt he was more a top than a bottom, but it hadn't really been a choice given to him in the past. He'd loved Mitch enough to do whatever it took to feel close to the man, at least for a while.

After walking up the three steps to the large platform, Hearn gently laid Tyler in the centre of the bed. Starting with his shirt, he quickly removed his clothes before retrieving the large box of condoms from his bag.

Tyler used the time to ogle Hearn and push the covers down to the foot of the bed. "I can't believe how amazingly gorgeous you are," Tyler groaned, reaching for the bottle of lube in the bedside drawer.

Hearn glanced down at himself. He knew his body was in good shape, playing every sport available in Cattle Valley helped with that, but he'd never thought of himself as gorgeous. If he was, wouldn't Mitch have resisted the temptation to wander? Had he been naïve? Had all the years he'd spent with Mitch been about a stupid trust fund that he didn't even have yet? Hell, unless his family forgave him, he may never have it.

The thought went a long way to cooling his desires. Tyler's hand wrapped around Hearn's softening cock. "What's wrong?" Tyler asked.

Still standing beside the bed, Hearn looked into Tyler's eyes. "Do you think Mitch ever really loved me?"

Tyler seemed surprised by the question, but he quickly schooled his features and pulled Hearn down on the bed beside him. "I think he probably loved you as much as he was capable of, at least in the beginning. Later..." Tyler shrugged, "...who knows. I refuse to defend a guy who fucked anything that moved when he had a partner like you waiting at home. But I'd like to think he gave you a little of what you deserved."

"I'm not rich. I don't know why Mitch thought I ever would be," Hearn said, shaking his head. "My family has money, but before Mitch's death they hadn't spoken to me since college." He realised something. "Mitch was constantly on my ass. Trying to get me to call and make up with them." God, it suddenly made sense. The thought of Mitch stringing him along in order to get his hands on the Sutherland millions made him laugh.

"Hearn?" Tyler put a concerned hand to Hearn's face.

"The joke was on him. My family didn't cut me off because I was gay. They cut me off because they hated Mitch. They thought he was a leach who would bleed me dry in no time."

"How do you know that?" Tyler asked.

"Because I finally took his advice and called them after he died." He still hadn't gone to see his folks, but he'd spoken with his mother and sister at least once a week since Mitch's death.

Tyler pushed him down to lie on the bed and curled his body around Hearn. "I hate to sound like a selfish prick, but can we shelve the Mitch talk for a few hours?"

Ashamed of himself for thinking about another man, when he had the one he loved naked in his arms, Hearn nodded. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I want you to know I'm here for you. It's good you're working through these things, but it feels like I've waited a lifetime to get you in bed."

Extracting all thoughts of family and Mitch from his mind, Hearn gave himself over to the moment as Tyler's hands began to wander his body. Tyler kissed his way down Hearn's face and neck as he rolled on top of him.

Hearn closed his eyes and moaned, as Tyler's skilful tongue licked its way down to the crown of his cock. "I love your dick," Tyler mumbled around said dick.

"And it evidently loves you," Hearn replied, feeling his erection return within seconds. Fuck, Tyler knew how to suck cock. Once again Hearn was amazed he'd never known this side of the timid florist.

Hearn reached over and grabbed the box of condoms. "Need to fuck you," he panted, afraid he'd come too early.

Tyler slid his mouth from Hearn's cock and reached for the lube. As Hearn struggled with the foil package, Tyler wasted no time in preparing his own hole. The scene playing out in front of him threatened his control once again. With only one prior lover, Hearn had never witnessed anything like the sight of Tyler stretching himself. "Goddamn!"

He leaned over and bit the small butt cheek that was pushed up in the air, getting a nice view of the three thin fingers thrusting in and out of Tyler's hole. The expression of ecstasy on Tyler's face spoke volumes. "You do this often?" Hearn wondered.

"Have to." Tyler removed his fingers and smiled. "I haven't had a lover since moving here."

Hearn knelt behind Tyler and pressed the head of his cock to the stretched opening. "I won't last long," he warned, before slowly pushing inside.

"Uhhhh," Tyler growled, as Hearn rocked in to the root.

The outer muscles may have been nicely loosened, but Tyler's inner muscles were squeezing Hearn's cock like a vise. *Shit, shit shit.* Hearn tried to calm his breathing. Even the few times he'd been allowed to mount Mitch hadn't prepared him for the feel of Tyler's body.

With his hands on Tyler's hips, Hearn withdrew before plunging in again. His mind wanted to take their first coupling slow, but his cock had other ideas. Before he knew it, he was ramming Tyler's ass to the audible delight of his lover. He was pleasantly surprised when Tyler howled his approaching orgasm.

"I'm coming!" Tyler yelled.

The increased pressure to his cock as Tyler's body shook with contractions sent Hearn hurtling over the edge into pure bliss. He pushed Tyler down on the bed and buried himself as deep as possible. His cock erupted, shooting its seed into the condom, as he attached his mouth to the back of Tyler's neck.

Hearn's body continued to shake with aftershocks as he came down from the most intense orgasm of his life.

"Mitch was a fucking fool," Tyler mumbled, face pressed into the pillow.

* * * *

"What do you mean, you have to tell us the truth about who you are?" Ryan asked, his hold on Nate tightening.

Nate tried to bury his face against Ryan's chest to escape his partner's suspicious eyes. Having none of it, Ryan pulled back and tilted Nate's chin up. "Nate," Ryan warned. "What's going on?"

Nate didn't know what to say. Was he about to make the biggest mistake of his life? What if the men he loved couldn't forgive him?

"Rio! Get up here!" Ryan screamed, leading Nate out of the closet.

Within moments, Rio came rushing through the doorway. "What's wrong?" he asked, looking from Ryan to Nate.

"Nate has something he needs to tell us," Ryan informed.

It was the concern in Rio's eyes that pushed Nate to do the right thing. "Sit down," he told his men.

"Nate?" Rio asked, appearing more frightened than angry.

Nate gestured to the bed. "Just give me a second."

After Rio and Ryan did as they were asked, Nate went back into the closet. He picked up the birth certificate and the envelope containing Joseph's picture.

When he returned to the bedroom, Ryan and Rio had their arms around each other, whispering softly. Taking a deep breath, Nate sat in the centre of the bed, waiting for his men to turn and face him.

"Let me start by telling you both how sorry I am. I never meant to deceive either of you, and what I'm about to explain is something I've never spoken to anyone about. It's a time in my life that I'm not proud of. Something I've spent years trying to forget, but I can't anymore."

"Just tell us for Christ's sake!" Ryan barked.

The first thing Nate did was to hand Ryan his birth certificate. "That's my birth name."

"William Nathaniel Guillome," Ryan read. He glanced from the paper, over to Rio and finally to Nate. "I don't understand."

Nate swallowed around the lump in his throat. "My father made me legally change my name after I graduated from high school. Of course that was also when he gave me a nice fat check and warned me to never darken his doorstep again."

"Why would a father do that?" Rio questioned.

"To protect the family name," Nate admitted. "He was, and still is, afraid of scandal."

"Guillome," Ryan whispered. "As in Senator William Guillome?"

"Yep," Nate confirmed. "So you can see why not only having a gay son, but one who was as open as I was would be a problem. But that's not the real reason he cut me out of his life. I made the mistake of falling in love with a fourth year Catholic seminary student."

"A priest?" Rio asked. "I didn't even know you were Catholic."

"I'm not. At least not anymore. Joseph was the son of one of our parish big wigs. I first met him when he was home for Christmas break from the university. Of course being a horny sixteen-year-old at the time, I was immediately attracted to the piece of forbidden fruit. Joseph didn't seem to return my attraction, but he did welcome my friendship. After he

went back to seminary, we continued to write back and forth for the next year. During the fall of my senior year everything changed. Joseph's letters became more intimate, telling me he often thought of me before he went to sleep at night. That year when he came home for winter break, he allowed me to kiss him for the first time. One thing led to another, and I took his virginity."

"Fuck," Rio gasped.

"Yeah," Nate agreed. "I was seventeen and a half and thought I'd found my soul mate. But unfortunately Joseph obviously hadn't felt the same. He had a mini-breakdown of sorts. The guilt over what he'd done seemed to eat him alive until he finally threw himself on the mercy of his family and his priest. The priest called my father, who couldn't bring himself to look me in the eye afterward. My father told me Joseph had been sent away, and that I was to never again contact him. The afternoon of my graduation, William Guillome presented me with the check I told you about and laid out the conditions. I've not talked to him since. I moved to Chicago, changed my name and entered the police academy."

Now that the truth was finally out, Nate held his breath, waiting for a reaction from the men he loved.

Ryan's first question surprised him. "So what happens if the local press digs this up?"

"Umm, I don't know," Nate stammered. "It would ruin not only my father's career, but Joseph's as well."

"Do you care what it does to your father's career? He hasn't exactly been quiet in the press about his disapproval of 'queer folk'," Rio quipped, pulling Nate onto his lap.

The simple action was what Nate had been waiting for. He knew at least Rio wasn't ready to walk away from him. Nate shrugged. "I took his money. I may do a lot of things I'm not always proud of, but going back on my word isn't one of them."

"And Joseph? Did you ever find out what happened to him?" Ryan asked, placing a hand on Nate's back.

Nate shook his head. "I never tried. I'd already done enough harm." Nate gazed into Ryan's eyes. "I really did love him. Even after all these years, there's a part of me that still does."

Nate reached over and took the picture out of the envelope and handed it to Ryan. "Today was the first time since I met the two of you that I've looked at this."

Ryan studied the photograph for a few moments before passing it to Rio. "Good-looking guy."

"Yeah, he was," Nate agreed.

Ryan next picked up the forgotten birth certificate. "You have to submit this with the application to run, don't you?"

"Yes. That's why I'm thinking maybe it would be a better idea if I didn't. I called Carol, but she said the guidelines were pretty straight forward."

Ryan nodded. He took the photo from Rio and carefully placed both pieces of paper on the bedside table. "I'll do some research. See if I can find a loophole in the guidelines."

"So you forgive me?" Nate asked.

Ryan cupped Nate's face as Rio held him tighter. "It's not up to us to forgive your past. Have you ever lied to us?"

"No," Nate shook his head. "But I didn't tell you everything either."

Ryan leaned in and gave Nate a soft kiss. "We all have skeletons that we keep to ourselves."

"Do you?" Nate asked.

"Of course. But none of them have anything to do with how much I love you or Rio."

Nate realised the big man holding him had spoken very little. Pressing his cheek against Rio's, Nate whispered. "Do you still love me?"

"With everything that I am," Rio whispered back.

Chapter Five

After playing his part in consoling Nate, Rio passed his lover off to Ryan. "I'll go finish getting dinner on the table," he said, excusing himself. The truth was, he needed a few minutes to himself.

The fact that Nate had hid his birth name wasn't the issue for him. It was the simple truth that his lover had felt the need to do it in the first place. What kind of monster put his own political career above the life of his son?

Adding the finishing touches to his tuna casserole, Rio popped the dish into the oven. All he could think about was extracting revenge on the Senator. But how could he do that and not hurt Nate's first lover in the process?

"Shit!" he spat, realising what he needed to do. Finding Joseph wouldn't be the hard part, it was telling Joseph why he'd come that would. He heard the thump of the bed upstairs and grinned. It sounded like Ryan was doing a damn fine job of getting Nate's mind off his troubles.

With Nate taken care of and the casserole in the oven, Rio powered up his laptop. The fact that Nate still professed to love the guy made Rio uneasy. "Right is right," he mumbled to himself. The best thing he could do to help the man he loved, was to find Joseph, talk to him and let the chips fall where they may.

By the time the oven timer sounded, Rio had all the information he needed. What would his men say if he left town for a day? Maybe he should at least tell Ryan? He shut down the laptop, sticking the piece of paper with a hastily scribbled address into his pocket.

"Dinner's ready!" he yelled up the stairs, before setting the table.

He heard Nate's famous giggle seconds before the men walked into the kitchen. "I'm starved," Nate declared.

After setting the casserole in the centre of the table, Rio took his seat. "I don't doubt it with all the noise the two of you were making up there."

Ryan and Nate exchanged heated glances. "You should've joined us," Ryan crooned.

"What, and burn dinner like Nate did?" he joked, knowing it was a sore spot.

"Hardy har har," Nate replied. "I'll take Ryan's cock up my ass over a burned casserole any day."

Rio grinned. He loved the way Nate's mood was able to bounce back so quickly. It was definitely part of the smaller man's charm, a character trait that would definitely win him the mayoral election.

He decided to corner Ryan the following day and discuss his intentions. Hopefully Ryan would understand Rio's need to talk to Joseph. Even without the election, knowing there was a man out there that still held a piece of Nate's heart was reason enough. Now the truth was out in the open, Rio felt all four of them needed closure.

* * * *

Tyler opened his eyes to a greasy pizza box still on the edge of the bed. How the hell had that stayed up here? He remembered very distinctly Hearn making love to him twice after they'd taken a short dinner break.

"Mmmm, you awake?" Hearn whispered, running his hand over Tyler's hip.

"Yep. Just laying here contemplating the mysteries of the universe." Tyler turned over to face his new lover. "How did you sleep?" he asked, scraping his teeth across Hearn's stubbled chin.

"Better than I have in years." Hearn gave Tyler a kiss. "Thanks to you."

Hearn's fingers drifted down the crack of Tyler's ass. *Fuck*. Tyler flinched at the touch. "Sorry. Guess I'm a little sore."

Hearn withdrew his hand. "Don't be sorry. I'm the one who couldn't get enough of this sweet body of yours."

Tyler rolled on top of Hearn. "I think we're both guilty of that." He began peppering kisses to Hearn's face and neck. "I have to go down and open the shop," he said between kisses. "What're your plans?"

"Mmm," Hearn moaned, tilting his chin up. "To enjoy this for as long as I can. Then I'll go to the Centre after dropping the paperwork off at City Hall."

Tyler stopped what he was doing and sat up. "So you're really gonna do it?"

"Run for mayor? Yeah. I thought I'd toss my name in the mix."

"I know a great place that'll do your signs. I'd suggest a quality plastic that'll hold up in the weather." He knew it was a huge step for Hearn. Hopefully, with a little encouragement, Hearn would break free of the shell he'd placed himself in. Tyler couldn't blame him. Hearing the person you love constantly cut you down would lower anyone's self-esteem.

"Hell, I didn't even think of that. To be honest, I'm not sure what's involved in running for office."

Hearing the worry and self-doubt in Hearn's voice, broke Tyler's heart. "Well, we'll put up signs of course, and then you'll probably have to speak at a town meeting. Ya know, talk about what you'll do as mayor and stuff. Everyone in town already knows you, so just try and make a concerted effort to speak to people on the streets and in stores." He leaned down and gave Hearn a deep kiss. "You'll do great."

"Do you think people will whisper about Mitch behind my back? I don't want to put myself out there if it's going to cause you embarrassment."

"It won't," Tyler whispered. "And that's exactly the reason I fell in love with you. No matter what else is going on, you always put other people first. It's the reason you'll make a great mayor. Besides, you've done absolutely nothing wrong. If people want to talk about Mitch, let them, but the only crime you've committed is loving an asshole."

"I hope you're right," Hearn mumbled.

Tyler ran his hand down Hearn's perfect six-pack. "Do you think sometime I could go to the Centre with you?"

"Seriously? You'd go?"

"I love kids," Tyler stated, hurt that Hearn would think otherwise.

"It's just, you know, a lot of the kids have problems. They aren't the perfectly healthy children that people want to adopt. It bugs some people to be around 'em."

Is that what he really thinks of me? Tyler slid off the bed. "I'm gonna grab a quick shower. There's some juice in the fridge if you want some."

Shutting the door to the only contained room in his loft, Tyler studied himself in the mirror. Why had he reacted so strongly to Hearn's words? His father's hateful words drifted back to him.

"Why couldn't I have had a real boy instead of you? Someone I could at least play catch with. But no, I had to get stuck with a pussy boy. No real man would want a son like you."

Tyler closed his eyes and tried to push the image of his dad's enraged face out of his mind. He'd made the mistake of trying to block his dad's fist from connecting with his mom's jaw and had gotten it instead.

The bathroom door suddenly opened, jarring Tyler from his memories. Hearn leaned against the door jam with his arms crossed over his chest. "Mind telling me what just happened in there?"

Tyler turned away and started the shower. "Just need to get on with my day."

Hearn stepped between Tyler and the shower stall. "It's more than that and we both know it. If I said something wrong, I'm sorry." Hearn put his hands on his hips and gazed at the floor. "Mitch gave me a hard time about visiting the Centre. I didn't go much when he was alive for that reason. It just surprised me that you'd be interested. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Knowing he'd made too much of it already, Tyler wrapped his arms around Hearn's waist and squeezed. "No. I'm sorry I acted like a child. It's kind of a sensitive subject."

Hearn's eyes narrowed as his head tilted to the side. "You'll need to tell me why. Otherwise, I'm likely to make the same mistake again."

Tyler wasn't ready to get into his screwed-up childhood just yet. Instead, he leaned in and bit Hearn's dark brown nipple. "We're wasting all the hot water."

Hearn reached behind him and reopened the shower door. He took a step backwards under the spray, bringing Tyler with him. With the hot water raining down on them, Tyler's hands began to roam Hearn's muscular body.

"Are you trying to distract me?" Hearn chuckled.

"Is it working?" Tyler kissed his way down Hearn's body. If it weren't for his sore ass, he'd bend over and let the bigger man fuck him right there.

Hearn put his hands on Tyler's shoulders and guided him to the floor. "As you can see, it's working quite nicely."

Tyler ran his tongue around the twin orbs hanging underneath Hearn's erection, taking first one and then the other into his mouth. Hearn rewarded him with a moan and a slight thrust of his hips.

Feeling much better than he had a few moments earlier, Tyler licked his way up Hearn's length to slip over the rosy crown. He used one hand to wrap around the base of Hearn's cock while his other fisted his own.

Hearn took his hand from Tyler's head to readjust the shower spray. "Look at me," Hearn panted, as Tyler bobbed back and forth on his cock.

With the spray out of his face, Tyler peered up the length of Hearn's body. The heavy-lidded gaze of his lover stared back at him. "Come with me," Hearn groaned.

Moving his hands in tandem, Tyler took as much of Hearn's length as he could and nodded. Surprise registered on Hearn's face as he shot the first volley of seed down Tyler's throat.

"Fuck!" Hearn howled, fisting Tyler's hair.

The taste of Hearn's cum combined with the hand brutally jerking his cock, pushed Tyler over the edge. The orgasm so intense, he was forced to let Hearn's cock slip from his mouth in order to breathe.

After several moments, Hearn reached down and helped Tyler to his feet. "Amazing," Hearn whispered, bending down for a deep kiss.

Tyler opened fully to Hearn's questing tongue, readily sharing the man's own essence with him. How could he ever think this man would look down on him for anything? Hearn was still the kindest man he'd ever known, and one hell of a lover. He grinned.

"So will ya?" Hearn asked, breaking their kiss.

"Will I what?" *Did I miss something?*

"I asked you to come with me," Hearn replied.

Tyler chuckled and began shampooing his hair. "I just did."

Hearn appeared confused for several seconds before laughing. "I meant will you come with me to the Centre, though the other was quite nice, too."

"Better than nice, and I'd love to go with you." Tyler nudged Hearn out of the way and rinsed himself off.

"Great. Just tell me when you can get away." Hearn waited for Tyler to finish before stepping under the spray.

"How about now? Business has been for shit lately anyway. I'll just put a sign up in the window saying I'll be back this afternoon."

Finished, Hearn shut the water off. "I want to stop by City Hall and drop off the papers first. Would you like to go with me or wait here?"

Tyler shrugged, and handed Hearn a towel. "I'll go."

Hearn rubbed himself quickly and hung the towel over the shower stall. "You're gonna fall in love with Gracie. I can't wait for you to meet her."

"Did you bring the lamb with you?" Tyler asked, stepping into his underwear.

"It's in the truck." Hearn rummaged around in his bag and pulled out clean clothes.

Hearn started to say something but stopped. Tyler could tell by his lover's expression something bothered him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Hearn denied. "Feel like grabbing some breakfast to go at Deb's?"

"Why don't I do that while you take care of your paperwork? It'll save us time and the food will still be hot by the time we're on the road to Sheridan." Tyler had a strong feeling he knew what was on Hearn's mind. He resolved to tell his lover everything about his past, just not right now.

* * * *

Rio knocked on the open door. "You got a minute?"

Ryan glanced up from his computer and smiled. "For you? Always."

With a returning grin, Rio stepped into the office and shut the door. Before taking a seat, he stopped to give his partner a kiss. "How's your morning?"

Ryan gave Rio one last swipe of his tongue before pulling back. "Well, I've only been here for an hour, but so far I can't complain. Although we're expecting another storm, so ask me again later."

"Yeah, I heard that on the radio on my way over," Rio commented, taking a seat.

"So...what can I do for you?" Ryan asked.

"I found him," Rio simply stated.

"Where?" Ryan leaned forward with his forearms on the desk.

"DC."

Ryan blew out an exasperated breath and leaned back in his chair. "So, he never left."

Rio shook his head. "I booked a ten o'clock flight," he confessed.

His partner's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"Cuz I need to know and I think you do, too." He crossed his arms, prepared for an argument.

Ryan's attention shifted to the window beside his desk. After several long moments, he nodded. "He either doesn't know Nate's new name or doesn't care. Why dredge it all up again? What if he wants him back?"

Rio stood and went to Ryan's side. "That's exactly the reason I'm going to DC. I can't spend the rest of my life afraid some old love is gonna come out of the woodwork. I've always met trouble head on, and I think this guy may be just that."

"What about the Senator? What if he finds out?" Ryan asked.

"The Senator isn't my problem. I don't give a fuck about him. Although to be honest, I wouldn't mind taking the bigoted prick down a few notches, but that's not up to me. My main concern is Nate, and the fact that there's a man out there that still holds a piece of him. A man with whom our partner has unfinished business."

Ryan stood and pulled Rio into his arms. "What'll you tell Nate?"

"I won't. I can't lie to him, and if I tell him he'll just insist on going with me. Hopefully by the time he realises I'm gone, I'll have already talked to Joseph."

Ryan grinned. "Come on, it's Nate. He'll realise your gone by noon when he's looking for a little action."

Rio ran his hand down Ryan's chest to press against his lover's cock. "I guess you need to be there to distract him then."

A coal black brow shot up. "That could work. As a matter of fact, the idea sounds so good that I may just have to take an early lunch."

Rio could feel Ryan's cock hardening in his hand. "Go get 'em, tiger."

Ryan pulled Rio's head down for a deep kiss. "When'll you be home?"

"Not sure. It depends on Joseph and what he has to say."

"Call me. Let me know what's going on. I'll try to keep Nate...occupied."

Chuckling, Rio squeezed his partner's erection. "I just bet you will."

* * * *

The first flakes of snow were beginning to fall when Hearn pulled up in front of the old brick building. "How many kids live here?" Tyler asked.

Hearn put the truck into park and turned off the engine. "Right now there's fourteen, but they're trying to get a couple of them placed into foster care. They're really only set up to house twelve."

Tyler leaned across the seat and gave Hearn a quick kiss. He could tell his lover was nervous about bringing him.

This was a side of himself that Hearn usually kept private, and Tyler knew what a privilege it was to be invited in. The last thing he would do was embarrass the sweet man in any way. He reached down and picked up the lavender bag containing the stuffed animal. "Ready?"

Hearn took the bag out of Tyler's hand and pulled the lamb out. After placing the toy inside his jacket, he winked. "Don't want the other kids to get jealous. I'll wait and give this to Gracie once we're alone."

"Good idea," Tyler agreed. He hadn't even thought about bringing enough for everyone. "Next time, we'll bring more."

With a dazzling smile firmly in place, Hearn clutched the front of Tyler's coat and kissed him again. "I love you," Hearn whispered against Tyler's lips.

Even though Hearn had spoken much the same thing before, the words still excited him. He rolled his eyes and sat back in his seat. "Great. Now I've got an erection big enough to scare the children."

Hearn chuckled and ran his hand over the fly of Tyler's jeans. "Not helping," Tyler reminded him, trying to arrange a funeral bouquet in his head. "You go ahead. I'll just stand out in the snow for a few minutes."

Still laughing, Hearn got out of the truck. Tyler watched the man's gorgeous ass as it disappeared through the front door. With his cock still painfully hard, Tyler got out of the truck. He had been right. Within a few moments, his erection had softened enough to be presentable.

He stepped inside the front door and spotted Hearn talking to the receptionist. "Everything okay?" Hearn asked, giving him a wink.

"For now," he answered.

Hearn motioned him over. "Beth, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend, Tyler."

Boyfriend? Tyler wanted to giggle. He'd been referred to as a good fuck or a one-night stand kind-of-guy, but never a boyfriend. *I like it.*

Tyler extended his hand to the older woman behind the desk. "Very nice to meet you."

"You, too. Are you the florist I've heard Hearn mention?"

Tyler looked at Hearn. "You've mentioned me?"

Hearn shrugged and pointed towards the clipboard. "You need to sign in."

Seeing the red flush on Hearn's cheeks, Tyler dropped the subject and did as asked. Setting the pen back in its holder, he took his lover's hand. "Ready?"

Hearn dropped a quick kiss on Tyler's forehead. "I'd like to introduce Gracie to Tyler. Is she in her room?" Hearn asked Beth.

"Should be," Beth answered, glancing down at a paper in front of her.

"Thanks," Hearn said. "Come on."

Tyler let Hearn lead him by the hand through a door into a big open room. Though the furniture appeared worn and mismatching, the room had a familial appearance to it. "This the living room?"

"Yep. It's where the kids play and watch television."

Tyler could tell the Centre did their best to give the children a sense of home. "Nice."

Hearn led him through another door and down a short hall. A sudden attack of nerves hit Tyler. He planted his feet and tugged on Hearn's hand until his lover stopped and looked at him. "What if she doesn't like me?"

Hearn wrapped his arms around Tyler. "How could she not? You're everything good in the world rolled into a little ball of sunshine."

Is that how Hearn saw him? Although the sentiment was beautiful, Tyler didn't know that he deserved it. He thought about contradicting his lover, but bit his tongue instead. They were there to see Gracie, not get into Tyler's true psyche. Taking a deep breath, he nodded. "Okay, I'm ready."

Chapter Six

"Looking good, Asa," Nate observed, walking up to the wealthiest man in town.

Asa Montgomery picked up his towel and mopped his face and neck. "I ought to. I've been busting my ass lately."

Nate grinned. He'd noticed Asa had picked up another kick-boxing lesson with Mario. Asa was in his mid-forties, but you'd never know it by the solid muscles visible under the tight navy T-shirt. "Is Mario being too hard on you?"

"Actually, I think he's slowly working me into the best shape of my life. He's a demanding sonofabitch, I'll give him that."

"Good to know." Nate spotted Ryan's SUV pulling up in front of the window. "Sorry, Asa, but my man's here."

Asa chuckled and waved Nate off. "Go have fun while you're still young."

Nate started to turn, but stopped and addressed Asa. "You're only as old as you feel, especially if you can get someone younger to feel ya." He winked and turned to greet his partner.

"This is a nice surprise," Nate said, pouncing on Ryan as soon as he walked through the door.

Ryan shook the snow out of his hair and wrapped his arms around Nate. "Well, I figured it was about that time of day, and I know Rio is off on an errand."

Nate pulled Ryan's head down for a kiss. "You two know me so well. Let's go into the office."

After closing the door behind them, Nate led Ryan to the wide couch. "I made reservations for the two of us at Canoe later."

Nate paused in stripping off his clothes. "The two of us? Why? Where'd Rio go that he won't be back in time for dinner?"

When Ryan didn't say anything and suddenly refused to look at him, Nate knew something was going on. "Ryan? Where's Rio?"

Ryan began unbuttoning his uniform shirt. "On an errand."

Nate put his hands on Ryan's face and forced his lover to make eye contact. "Where's Rio?" he repeated the question. He knew Ryan wouldn't lie to him if he could just get past Ryan's stubborn need to protect their partner.

"DC," Ryan finally mumbled.

Nate released Ryan and took a step back. He felt as though he'd just been punched. "Why would he do that?" All he could think about was Rio going after his father.

Ryan took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "He found Joseph."

Nate felt the burn of impending tears sting his eyes. *Joseph?* Images of his heavily muscled lover confronting the gentle man he'd once known scared him. "Give me the address," Nate demanded, putting his shoes back on.

"I can't," Ryan whispered, studying the floor.

"More like you won't," Nate accused. "If Rio's gone there to hurt Joseph in any way I'll never forgive either of you."

"It's not like that," Ryan spat.

"It's not like what?"

Ryan's gaze moved to Nate's, tears shimmering in his eyes. Having never seen his lover cry, Nate was completely floored. "Ryan?" he prompted.

"He's...we're afraid of losing you. Rio went to see what Joseph's feelings are towards you."

Seeing the obvious worry in his partner's face, Nate couldn't retain his anger. *Dammit.* He should've never told them about Joseph. Taking the few steps that separated them, Nate wrapped his arms around Ryan. "You're not gonna lose me."

"You can't promise that. Up until now, you didn't know where Joseph was."

"Because I didn't try," Nate reminded him. "I was a private detective for Christ's sake. I could've found Joseph if I'd really wanted to, but he'd already made his choice."

"He's not a priest," Ryan admitted. "He runs a non-denominational church in the heart of DC."

Nate's heart skipped a beat at the news. Had Joseph tried to find him? "Will you go with me to DC?"

Ryan hugged him closer. "I can't, not now. With the storm blowing in and Quade no longer at the helm, George is gonna need all the help he can get." Ryan rested his head against Nate's. "I wish I could, believe me."

"I do," Nate consoled. "But I need to go. I need to say goodbye to Joseph."

Ryan nodded. "I know, baby."

* * * *

Holding hands, Tyler followed Hearn into Gracie's room. "Hey there, princess," Hearn greeted the little girl.

A small dark-haired girl peered up from her doll and smiled. "Hearn!" she squealed, jumping up from the floor and running towards the big man.

Her gaze suddenly swung to Tyler and she skidded to a stop two feet away. The expression of fear on her face broke Tyler's heart.

"Don't be afraid," Hearn cajoled, kneeling on the floor to get down to Gracie's level. "This is my boyfriend, Tyler. He wanted to meet the girl who means so much to me."

Gracie stood her ground, eyeing Tyler warily. He couldn't help but notice the thin scar running down the pretty little girl's cheek. *Had her mother done that?* Once again he felt ashamed of himself. Although his dad had hit him, he'd never done anything to permanently scar Tyler. From the looks of it, he'd had a good life compared to Gracie.

Not wanting to frighten the girl further, Tyler took several steps back. "I can wait for you in the reception area," he said.

"No," Hearn said, reaching back for Tyler's hand. Hearn turned his attention back to the frightened girl. "Remember we talked about the difference between good people and bad people?"

Gracie's gaze swung from Tyler back to Hearn. She nodded slowly.

"Well, Tyler's one of the good people. As a matter of fact, I think he's the best person I've ever known, and he means an awful lot to me. Do you understand?" he asked in a gentle fashion.

After several tense moments, Gracie stepped forward and held out her tiny hand. "I'm Gracie."

Swallowing around the newly-formed lump in his throat, Tyler shook the girl's hand. "Nice to meet you, Gracie. Hearn's told me a lot about you."

Gracie smiled at the news before wrapping her arms around Hearn's neck. "I missed you."

"I missed you, too, princess." He leaned back and put his hand inside his jacket. "Look here what we brought for you." Hearn pulled out the white lamb. "It came from Tyler's store. He owns a flower shop in Cattle Valley."

Gracie's entire face lit up as she hugged the animal to her chest. "He's so cute."

Her little body twisted back and forth as she continued to hug the cheap stuffed animal. Suddenly Tyler wanted to fill the room with as many toys as it would hold.

Hearn chuckled, standing to put his arm around Tyler's waist. "I think she likes it."

"I'll say," Tyler agreed.

"Wanna have a tea party?" Gracie asked, gazing up at them.

Tyler noticed the paper cups on the floor beside her now-forgotten doll. "I think we'd love that."

With a nod, Gracie walked over and sat down. "Come on," she giggled. "You can't have tea standing up."

With a wink, Hearn released Tyler. They walked over and sat across from each other on the small thread-bare rug. Tyler marvelled at the way Gracie handled the throw-away cups, as if they were real china. He vowed to buy her a real set as soon as possible.

As Gracie handed a cup to Hearn, Tyler watched the man he loved. Hearn's entire face had taken on an unmistakable glow. *He really does love her.* Tyler wondered if Hearn had ever considered adopting a child. It was obvious the man was good with kids, and from the looks of the centre, there were plenty of children that needed homes.

They spent the next two hours enjoying their tea party and playing games. Tyler admitted defeat on more than one occasion. "I can see I'm going to have to brush up on my skills," he informed Gracie.

The little girl giggled. "Nothing wrong with losing. It's willing to play in the first place that's important."

Tyler reached out and smoothed a wayward black curl off Gracie's forehead. "How'd you get to be so wise?"

Gracie pointed to Hearn. "That's what he always tells me when I lose."

The fact that Gracie didn't pull away from the gentle touch made him feel like a king, until he made the mistake of grazing the scar with his finger.

Gracie's eyes went wide as she covered the area with her hand. "I'm sorry. I know I'm ugly."

Tyler automatically reached out, wanting to take the little girl into his arms. An interrupting cough from Hearn stopped him. Tyler glanced towards the man he loved. Hearn gave a slight shake of his head.

"That scar doesn't make you any less beautiful," Tyler tried to apologise, but the damage had apparently already been done.

Gracie turned away and hugged her lamb to her chest. Tyler glanced at Hearn pleadingly. "What do I do?" he mouthed.

In answer, Hearn stood and scooped Gracie from the floor. "Hey." Hearn bounced the sad little girl in his arms. He walked with Gracie over to the mirror and stood there. "Look at yourself."

Gracie buried her head against Hearn's neck and shook her head. "Mary Grace Cook, do as I asked," he gently reprimanded.

Tyler wiped at the tears running down his cheeks. He couldn't believe he'd just blown any chance he had of getting close to Gracie.

As he watched, Gracie slowly lifted her head and turned to regard her reflection. "What do you see?" Hearn asked.

"A scar," Gracie mumbled, sticking her bottom lip out.

"Really? Because what I see is a little girl with big blue eyes and rosy lips. Why, the only thing I see wrong is that pout on your face. How many times have we talked about this? Hmmm? True beauty comes from within, but so does ugly. Now I happen to know you're beautiful on the inside, so how can you possibly imagine you're ugly on the outside?"

Gracie didn't say anything but ran her finger down the scar from her outer eye to her chin. Hearn shook his head. "Nope. Not buying it." He touched his lips to Gracie's cheek. "If you let people see that inner beauty that I know you possess, they'll never even notice that tiny scar."

Tyler watched in awe as Gracie seemed to absorb every word Hearn said.

"You're the only one who can do that. I can tell you you're pretty every day for the rest of your life, but until you're able to truly see it, you'll never believe it, in here," he whispered, tapping her chest.

Hearn turned to Tyler and held out his hand. "Tyler didn't mean to make you feel bad. Did you, Tyler?"

"No. I wasn't even thinking of the scar when I touched you. What I really wanted was to hold you, but I didn't think you'd let me, so I touched your cheek instead."

"See there?" Hearn asked Gracie. "You've only known my boyfriend for a couple of hours and already you're trying to take him away from me."

Gracie's red lips turned into a smile before finally breaking out into a giggle. "I didn't mean to," she said with her earlier cheer. "It just happens sometimes."

Hearn pulled Tyler against them. Gracie reached out and wrapped one arm around Tyler's neck, still leaving one around Hearn's and hugged them both. Tyler followed suit, as did Hearn.

After feeling the little girl in his arms for the first time, Tyler knew his life would never be the same.

* * * *

Nate stepped out of the airport and called Rio's phone. He was sure Ryan had probably already called to warn him of Nate's arrival, but he'd yet to speak with his wayward lover.

"You here?" Rio answered.

"Yep. Where're you?"

"The Hyatt on H Street."

"Have you seen him?" Nate asked, getting into a cab. "Hyatt on H," he told the driver before returning his attention to Rio.

"No. Ryan called right after I landed, so I got a room instead."

Nate could tell by the sound of his lover's voice that he wasn't happy. *Well too bad.* "It's getting late. We might do better to meet with Joseph in the morning."

"He's already expecting us. I called him earlier. I thought it only fair to warn him you were coming," Rio answered in a clipped fashion.

"What room are you in?"

"Five-fourteen."

Frustrated with their stilted conversation, Nate sighed. "Fine. I'll be there in a few." He hung up the phone and looked out the passenger window. It had been years since he'd stepped foot in DC. He briefly thought about calling his mom. Would she even dare to see him? They'd had a few phone calls over the years, but they were always short and in secret.

The closer he came to the hotel, the tighter his stomach clenched. He wasn't sure what to say to Rio when he saw him. He was still pissed his partner would take off without telling him, but he also knew he'd have done the same thing. The bigger question was why Rio sounded so pissed when they'd spoken?

Nate was known for his ability to charm the bigger man, but would anything he had to say do the trick this time? *Wait a minute. Why am I worried about easing Rio's mood? I'm not the one who ran off to DC half-cocked.*

The cab pulled up outside the Hyatt, and Nate pressed several bills into the driver's hand. He grabbed his overnight bag from the seat beside him and entered the grand hotel. The elevator ride was reasonably short, and before he knew it, Nate stood outside room five-fourteen. He gave the door an even handed knock and waited.

Rio opened immediately, stepping back to let Nate enter.

"Before you start yelling at me, let me explain," Rio said.

Now that Nate was in Rio's presence, he realised it wasn't anger, but hurt that prompted the short answers earlier. Dropping his bag to the floor, Nate launched himself into Rio's arms. He'd somehow managed to hurt the two people he loved most in the world. "Seeing Joseph isn't worth hurting you," Nate told his lover.

Rio seemed surprised by Nate's statement. "What? You'd come all this way and not talk to him?"

Nate didn't even need to consider the question. "Yes, if that's what you want." He framed Rio's face with his hands. "I won't lie and say I'm not curious, but not for the reason you think."

"You told us you loved him," Rio mumbled.

"I told you a part of me still loves him, it's not the same as what I feel for you and Ryan. I'm not in love with Joseph. He was always the loose end of my life left dangling out there. Now that we're here, maybe I can finally close that chapter of my life."

"I saw his picture on the internet. He's even more handsome than that photograph you still have."

Nate grinned. "Excuse me? Have you ever looked in the mirror?" Nate ran his hands over Rio's broad chest. "Does he have pecs to die for? Does he have dimples I love to kiss?" He gave Rio a kiss. "Can he make me feel loved simply by smiling at me?"

Nate shook his head. "I was a boy when I fell in love with Joseph. I hate to admit it, but that was a very long time ago. Believe me, Rio, there's nothing Joseph could ever say or do to make me want him over what I already have. You're stuck with me."

Rio smiled. "In that case, I think we have time for a shower before meeting him downstairs for dinner."

Chapter Seven

Nate tucked the white collar under his camel coloured cashmere sweater and turned to Rio. His partner leaned against the door, arms crossed, dressed to die for. If he'd done nothing else to improve his lovers lives at least he'd taught them to dress well. Of course it helped when they let him buy most of their clothes.

Wearing the black pants and shirt Nate had bought him for Christmas, Rio looked...dangerous. The long-sleeved silk blend shirt moulded to his lover's chest, defining each ridge and dip. The overly-long mop of black curls Nate loved to run his hands through was secured in a leather thong at his nape. "You are one sexy motherfucker."

The corner of Rio's mouth lifted in a boyish grin. "Can't have you getting all tempted by this preacher man," Rio commented.

"Not gonna happen." Nate walked over to stand in front of his partner.

"Sure about that?" Rio asked.

Nate could still see the worry etched around Rio's eyes. After the fuck they'd shared in the shower, he'd hoped Rio would feel a little more confident. "See this ass?" Nate asked, turning around to present his butt. "I don't know where that little spinny-twirly thing you did came from, but I'm gonna be feeling it all through dinner."

Rio reached out and smacked Nate's ass hard. "I bought a book."

Surprised, Nate spun around, rubbing his ass. "You bought a book?"

Rio rolled his eyes. "I can read ya know?"

Nate put his hand to his mouth to cover the smile. "I know, big man. So, what kind of book did you buy?"

"Sex stuff," Rio simply stated.

Nate's brows shot up. "Sex stuff?"

"Ya know...positions. Don't want things to get stale between us," Rio confessed.

With a sigh, he wrapped his arms around his lover. Nate knew what it meant for Rio to admit his insecurities. Although Rio was the quiet one of the threesome, he felt everything twice as deeply, but that didn't mean he always shared those feelings.

Instead of calling him on his admitted fears, Nate pulled Rio down for a kiss. "I love you, and I'll always want that prized dick up my ass, spinny-twirly thing or not."

Rio grinned. "Good to know."

Nate glanced at his watch. "It's time."

Rio nodded and opened the door. "After you."

After a short ride down the elevator, Rio pointed in the restaurant's direction. Nate didn't miss the proprietary hand on the small of his back. "I'm nervous," Nate confessed before entering.

"So am I," Rio admitted.

Stepping up to the host, Nate smiled. "We're meeting Joseph Allenbrand," he told the tall man.

"This way. You're party's expecting you."

The host showed them to a small room off to the side of the main dining room. Nate looked up at Rio. "Did you make the reservation?"

Rio shook his head.

The host bowed, indicating for Nate and Rio to enter the small private dining area. "Your server will be along momentarily."

After a deep breath, Nate stepped into the room. Joseph and another man stood as soon as they entered. Rio had been right. Joseph was even more handsome than he had been all those years ago. The slight hint of grey in his otherwise dark hair set off the blue in his eyes perfectly. "Joseph," Nate greeted, when his old friend stepped around the table.

"Will." Joseph returned the greeting and pulled Nate into an embrace.

Nate stepped back and studied the face he'd longed to see for years. "It's Nate now."

"Yes, of course, I'm sorry. You're partner told me that on the phone. I'm afraid it may take some getting used to."

Nate reached behind him for Rio's hand. "This is one of my partners, Rio Adega."

Rio held out his hand and Joseph took it. "One of your partners?" Joseph asked, brows rising questioningly.

Nate grinned. "Ryan's our other partner, but he couldn't get away to meet you."

Joseph nodded before turning to the man to his left. "This is Phillip, my partner."

After the introductions had been made, Joseph gestured to the table. "Please, sit down."

Nate was pleased when Rio automatically pulled his chair out for him. "Thank you," he said, gazing up at his lover. Rio took the seat next to Nate's and placed his napkin on his lap.

"So," Joseph began. "Rio tells me you're thinking of running for mayor?"

Nate glanced at Rio. His lover's slightly guilty wince almost made him laugh. "Yes," he answered, returning his attention to Joseph. "I've run into a stumbling block however. In order to register my name for consideration, I have to supply my birth certificate with the application."

Joseph nodded his head in understanding. "And you're afraid your new name will cause problems."

"For you mostly," Nate admitted. "At this point in my life I'm not sure I care about what my father thinks of anything. If the press gets wind of it and decides to go after him, so be it."

"I appreciate that," Joseph replied. "But you won't cause any trouble for me. I've found my place in this world, and I've been completely open with my small but devoted congregation."

Nate began to squirm in his chair. Rio must've noticed because his lover reached under the table to hold Nate's hand. "So, you're still a priest?" Nate asked. He felt incredibly uncomfortable asking, especially with Phillip in the room.

"Not a priest, no," Joseph answered, shaking his head. "Shortly after I was sent away, I tried to commit suicide." As Joseph spoke he pushed back his shirt to reveal the truth of his words. The long thin scars were gut wrenching. *What if Joseph had succeeded?* Would Nate have felt guilty for the rest of his life?

"I felt I'd failed not only you, but especially God. The fact that I survived helped me to understand that God had forgiven me. Unfortunately, the church hadn't. I was immediately thrown out of the seminary and sent on my way."

Nate tried unsuccessfully to cover a gasp. "I'm so sorry." He knew how strong Joseph's faith had been. To be rejected...

"Don't be," Joseph was quick to say. "I'm happier now than I could've ever been. When I arrived home, I volunteered at a free health clinic here in downtown DC. That's where I met my Phillip." He reached over and took his lover's hand. "With Phillip's help, I was able to open a small shelter next to the clinic. There are so many under-aged men on the streets whose only crime was coming out to their families. We take them in, clothe them and help

them to find jobs. On Sundays, we hold worship services. So you see, I'm exactly where I need to be."

Nate sat in awe of the man to his left. Joseph had led such a productive and worthwhile life it almost shamed him. He thought of the money in his bank account. Although his father hadn't paid him off with a king's ransom, Nate had been a very savvy investor over the years. His account held more than enough to last him the rest of his life. The thought of helping to fund the shelter made him smile. His father would have a stroke if he knew his money was funding such an organisation. "I want to help."

* * * *

Tyler sat beside Hearn on the drive back to Cattle Valley. He hadn't spoken much since leaving the centre, his thoughts swirling inside his head like a tornado ripping through Kansas. "Have you ever thought of adopting Gracie?"

Hearn, whose own thoughts seemed to be keeping him busy, put a hand on Tyler's thigh. "Huh?"

Tyler chuckled. "I asked if you'd ever considered adopting Gracie."

Hearn seemed surprised at the question. "Ah, no, not really. She deserves a family."

Tyler rolled his eyes and turned sideways in the seat. "What she deserves is love, and that you have for her in spades."

Hearn gave a little shake to his head as if to clear it. "There's more to raising a kid besides loving them."

"Like what?" Tyler was curious about Hearn's views on what a real family should be.

"Well, there's clothing them, feeding them..."

"All of which you have the means to do," Tyler interrupted.

"It just wouldn't be right," Hearn stated.

Tyler knew he'd continue to work on Hearn regarding the issue. His lover had far too much love in his heart to deny the little girl they'd just left. "Will you do me a favour?"

"Sure, if I can."

"I'll drop the discussion for now if you'll promise to think about something for me. How would you feel if someone swooped in and adopted Gracie tomorrow? Would you be able to live with yourself if you never again had the chance to hold her in your arms?"

Tyler watched Hearn closely as he spoke. The pain visible on the man's face said it all. Tyler leaned over and kissed the bigger man's neck. "I'm sorry if it hurts, but it's something you need to think about before it's too late."

They drove the rest of the way to Cattle Valley in silence. With the cold chill sitting beside him, Tyler unbuckled and moved to the other side of the truck cab's bench seat. It came as quite a surprise when Hearn bypassed Tyler's shop and headed towards his house.

Pulling into the garage, Hearn shut down the engine and turned to Tyler. "Thought I'd make you some dinner if you're up for it?"

He could tell by the tone of Hearn's voice he was asking for more than just dinner. Tyler could've kicked himself. Had he unknowingly made Hearn feel like he was criticising him for not adopting Gracie? *Shit.*

Tyler released himself from the seat belt and slid across to Hearn's lap. With the steering wheel against his back, he wrapped his arms around Hearn's neck and kissed him. "I'd love to stay for dinner," he whispered.

Hearn looked like he wanted to say more, but instead simply smiled. "Spaghetti?"

"Sounds good," Tyler agreed, opening Hearn's door. He could tell something between them had shifted, but he wasn't sure if it was good or bad. He sent up a silent prayer as he waited for Hearn to climb out of the truck. *Lord, please don't let me screw this up.*

* * * *

After putting the last of the dishes in the dishwasher, Hearn turned to Tyler. "Stay over and watch a movie with me?"

Tyler nodded enthusiastically. "You do have a DVD player in your bedroom, right?"

Chuckling, Hearn turned off the kitchen light and wrapped his arm around Tyler's shoulders. "I do, as a matter of fact."

As he led Tyler over to the DVD cabinet, he continued to work through things in his mind. Tyler had been right earlier. He hadn't allowed himself to think about Gracie leaving the centre with another family. There was a large part of him that knew it would be best for her to have both a mother and a father, but Gracie was a special case. Hearn seriously doubted she'd ever get over her fear of women, and who could blame her?

The hour drive home had given him a lot of time to think. He'd realised he did want a family, but not without Tyler. Watching his lover with Gracie earlier had cemented Hearn's feelings for the man. It hadn't mattered that the two most important people in his life had hit a few speed bumps. The important thing was the hug Tyler had given Gracie before they had left. As she wrapped her little arms around Tyler's neck, Gracie had looked up at Hearn and smiled. His angel appeared truly happy right there in Tyler's embrace.

"How 'bout this one?" Tyler asked, holding up *Walking Tall*.

Hearn chuckled. "Are you sure? Do you know how many times I've jacked off watching *The Rock* in action?"

Tyler's face screwed up like he'd just sucked a lemon and put the movie back on the shelf. "I may never watch another one of his movies again."

Next, Tyler picked up the new James Bond flick. Yep, Hearn had jacked off to Daniel Craig as well, but he wasn't about to admit that to Tyler, if he did, he'd be reduced to watching nothing but animated cartoons. *Damn. I'm a pathetic horndog.*

"That's good," Hearn agreed with Tyler's choice.

Feeling only slightly guilty, Hearn pulled Tyler towards the bedroom. As Tyler loaded the movie, Hearn undressed and slid under the covers.

Tyler turned around and chuckled. "Wow, you're fast."

"I wanted to watch the pre-movie entertainment." Fluffing his pillows against the headboard, he clasped his hands and set them in his lap. "Okay, I'm ready."

Still laughing, Tyler began to shimmy and sway to unheard music. Hearn couldn't help chuckling as his lover slowly pulled the shirt over his head. He whipped the long-sleeved T-shirt above his head as if it were a lasso or something. Hearn rolled his eyes and shook his head at his partner's silliness.

Dropping the shirt to the floor, Tyler slowly unbuttoned his jeans and slid them down his legs, kicking them to the side. Once completely naked, the sultry dance turned into more of a bodybuilding routine, with Tyler flexing his toned, but small muscles this way and that.

"Hah, *The Rock* ain't got nothin' on me," Tyler boasted, ending the routine with a kiss to each biceps.

Although the entire show was meant to be entertaining, and it was, Hearn pointed to the tented covers at his groin. "You're right, baby, I'll never jack off to anyone but you again."

Seemingly satisfied, Tyler gave Hearn a short nod before bouncing onto the bed. "You're damn right you won't."

Lifting the blankets, Tyler moulded himself to Hearn's side. "Want a pillow?" Hearn asked, stacking another one against the headboard.

"Nope, got all I need right here." Tyler laid his head on Hearn's chest and settled in. "Okay, I'm ready," Tyler informed him.

Hearn hit the play button and tossed the remote onto the bedside table. He doubted they'd get much movie watching in, but he was willing to give it a shot.

About fifteen minutes into the film, Tyler moved his leg up to brush his knee against Hearn's half-hard erection. Hearn bit back the moan, curious as to what his little man would try next.

He didn't have to wait long, before Tyler glanced up at him. "You cold?" Tyler used it as an excuse to put the covers up around his shoulders.

"I'm good," Hearn answered, chest still uncovered.

Tyler made a production of settling back down to watch the movie, but within moments, Hearn felt his lover's warm hand inch its way towards his cock. Grinning, Hearn ran his hand through the silky brown hair lying against his chest. "Not interested in the movie?"

"Huh? Yeah, sure. Just can't find a comfortable position."

"Hmmm." Hearn reached under the blanket and moved Tyler's hand closer to his cock. "That help?"

Tyler began slowly stroking Hearn's shaft. "Yeah, thanks."

"No. Thank you," Hearn groaned, bending one leg out to the side to give Tyler more room to play.

As he stroked his hand up and down the ridges of Tyler's spine, he sighed. He knew this was what he wanted, a simple life with the man he loved. The thought of bringing Gracie into the mix would be icing on the cake, but he needed to do things in the right order. He'd thought of little else since he'd first told Tyler he loved him, but it was too soon. Sure, he'd loved the man for a year, but he'd also been carrying around the guilt of Mitch's death. Somehow he knew he needed to be completely over the ordeal with his ex before asking Tyler to move in.

"You okay?" Tyler asked.

"Yeah."

"You must be doing some heavy duty thinking, because my new toy no longer seems interested in playing."

Hearn chuckled. "Well, maybe you could revive it with a little resuscitation, if you know what I mean?"

Tyler rolled to lie between Hearn's already-spread legs. "I thought you'd never ask," he said, diving under the covers.

Chapter Eight

"Just four left to deliver," Tyler told Hearn, placing the bouquets in a cardboard box for safe travel.

"Five," Hearn informed him. "I need you to make up one for Mitch's grave."

Tyler almost dropped the vase of three dozen roses. "What?" He felt like his heart was being ripped out of his chest. After all that had happened the previous several weeks, Tyler assumed Hearn was over Mitch.

Hearn had the decency to look down at the floor. "It's something I need to do."

All his adult life, Tyler had dreamed of spending a Valentine's Day with the man he loved. Somehow having that man take flowers to someone else didn't quite figure in to that particular dream.

Tyler went from hurt to pissed in seconds. He walked over to the refrigerator and grabbed a handful of daisies. Stepping up to Hearn, he shoved the dripping, dishevelled flowers into his hand. "Don't bother giving Mitch my best."

Spinning on his heel, Tyler lifted the bouquets for delivery and strode out the back door to his car. He secured the box with a seatbelt, and climbed behind the wheel, hoping Hearn would emerge from the building and beg his forgiveness.

Several minutes later, Tyler put the car into gear and headed across town to his first delivery. "Dammit!" he screamed at the top of his lungs.

After dropping off the last of the bouquets, he reached for his cell phone and called Wyn.

"Hello," Palmer Wynfield answered.

"Hey, it's Tyler."

"The flowers Hearn delivered are beautiful. Thank you."

"You're welcome, but you should be thanking Ezra."

Wyn chuckled. "Oh I will. Don't you worry about that."

Despite his mood, Tyler found himself grinning. Wyn had always been able to make him smile. The older man had become a pseudo-surrogate father to him.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" he asked. Wyn had so many irons in the fire lately they hadn't had a chance to get together in over a month.

"Nope. I'm at The Grizzly Bar, having a drink and sitting beside the fire. Care to join me?"

Tyler thought of the drive up the mountain. He normally didn't take his little car on such treacherous roads, but it had been over a week since their last snowfall. "I'll be there in about fifteen minutes."

"Sounds good. Want me to order you something to eat?" Wyn asked.

With his stomach in knots, Tyler knew there was no way he could eat. "No thanks."

"Okay, drive careful."

"Always." Tyler disconnected the phone and turned it off. He thought of turning it back on in case Hearn called, before deciding against it. *Fuck him*. If Hearn needed something he could ask his ex-partner for it, oh yeah, right, he couldn't. Mitch was fucking dead!

* * * *

With the dripping bouquet in his hand, Hearn watched as Tyler stormed out of the store. "Shit."

He tossed the flowers onto the counter and buried his face in his hands. The brass bell over the door rang, signalling someone's arrival. "Tyler stepped out," he barked, trying to get his emotions under control.

"Will he be back?" a deep voice asked.

Turning around, Hearn saw Gill standing there with a big box in his hands. "I'm not sure. He's pissed at me," Hearn offered with a shrug.

Gill walked over and set the box on the counter. "Kyle sent over some leftover pastries." The huge man started to leave, but stopped with his hand on the doorknob. "You okay?"

Hearn shook his head. "I fucked up," he admitted.

Gill chuckled, the sound so deep it rattled Hearn's chest. "Well of course you did. You're a man. We all fuck up from time to time."

Hearn shook his head. "No, I think this was a really bad fuck up."

After glancing at his watch, Gill motioned for Hearn. "Come on. I'll buy you a beer at O'Brien's."

Hearn took one last glance at the flowers on the counter and nodded. He used the spare key to lock the door before following Gill down the street to what used to be Brewster's.

Instead of sitting at the bar, Gill led him to a booth. "Two of the dark brew," Gill called to Sean, before turning back to Hearn. "Okay. It's Valentine's Day. Don't tell me you forgot to give Tyler something."

Hearn shook his head. "I actually had a pretty romantic night set up."

"So what's the problem?" Gill thanked Sean with a nod, as the pub owner set down their drinks.

How did Hearn even begin to explain the way his mind worked? "I planned to ask Tyler to move in with me."

"Sounds good so far."

Hearn took a drink of his beer, licking the foam from his upper lip. "I got this crazy idea that I needed to say goodbye to Mitch before starting my life with Tyler, so I made the mistake of telling the man I love to fix me up a bouquet for Mitch's grave."

"Are you fucking nuts?" Gill asked, nostrils flaring and voice getting loud.

Remembering the hurt expression on Tyler's face, Hearn nodded. "Yeah. I guess I am. It was gonna be my last trip to Mitch's grave."

Gill shook his head and finished off his beer. "I'm no Romeo, and Lord knows I've made stupid mistakes, but damn." Gill shook his head. He pulled out his phone and handed it to Hearn. "Call him."

Squirming in his seat, Hearn studied the phone in his hand. "But what do I say?"

"Tell him you're an asshole. Tell him you can't live without him." Gill threw up his hands. "Fuck if I know. Whatever it takes."

When his call went straight to voice mail he rolled his eyes and left a short message for Tyler to call him. He pressed the end key and tried to give the phone back to Gill.

The big man crossed his arms and refused to take it. "Don't wimp out now."

What the hell? "It's turned off. What else am I supposed to do?"

Gill uncrossed his arms and leaned across the table. "You know him better than almost anyone. Where would he go to lick his wounds?"

Wyn. He knew how close Tyler was to the older man. Before Wyn had gotten together with Ezra, Hearn had actually been jealous of the men's close relationship. "Wyn, but I don't know his number."

Gill grabbed the phone out of his hand and punched in Wyn's number before handing it back.

It rang three times before Wyn's smooth voice answered. "Hello?"

"It's Hearn."

"I've been expecting your call." Hearn could hear the smile in the older man's voice.

Hearn's throat suddenly felt dry. "You have?"

"Yes."

"Is he with you?" Hearn heard several voices shouting in the background. It was obvious Wyn was either having a party or at his bar.

"Yes."

"Is he still mad?" He held his breath, waiting for the answer.

"You could say that," Wyn replied.

Hearn heard Tyler's voice in the background. "Who's that?" Tyler asked. "If it's Hearn tell him to go fuck himself."

Hearn didn't miss the slurred speech. "Is he drunk?" he asked Wyn.

"You could say that," Wyn repeated.

"I'm on my way. Don't let him drive down the mountain." Hearn hung up before Wyn had a chance to answer. "He's at The Grizzly Bar," he told Gill.

"Well, what're you waiting for? Go kiss his ass."

Hearn grinned at the former professional football player. "You may talk tough, but you're a true romantic underneath all the muscles."

Gill smiled and put his fingers to his lips. "Don't tell anyone. I'll deny it all in a heartbeat."

Within minutes, Hearn was in his truck heading out of town. A huge sign in front of The Gym caught his attention. Slowing the truck to a crawl, he read the bright red letters. "Nate Gills for Mayor."

"Fuck!" He didn't stand a chance.

As Nate applied the finishing touches to his present, he thought of DC. Not the meeting with Joseph, though that had gone well, no, he remembered what happened afterward. He'd barely gotten back to the room when Rio had pounced.

For the next four hours, Rio fucked and sucked him in every position imaginable. At one point they'd even called Ryan to include him in on the fun. Hearing his lover's heavy breathing over the speaker phone as Rio rode his ass had been hotter than hell. With a final swish of his brush, Nate also remembered the long plane ride home on an ass so sore he could barely sit.

Setting his supplies aside, he lay down and waited for his men to finish their chores.

By the time Rio and Ryan walked through the back door, Nate had started getting sleepy. "I'm in here," he shouted.

He grinned as his lovers came stumbling into the room, wrestling like a couple of kids. One glance at Nate and they stopped. Rio's jaw was the first to drop, quickly followed by Ryan's.

"Instead of just buying you both a box of chocolates, I decided to do something a little different," Nate explained, glancing down at his nude body covered in painted-on chocolate. "Anyone want a sample before dinner?"

With their tongues hanging out, his men quickly shed their clothing. Lying on a blanket in front of the big stone fireplace, Nate perused his partners. Rio won for speediest erection, but Ryan had him beat in the drool category.

Nate laughed as a drop of saliva actually dripped onto Ryan's tattooed chest. "You gonna waste all that or put it to good use?" To further excite Ryan and Rio, Nate spread his legs in invitation. Damn, he was glad he'd gotten that full wax job while in DC. He couldn't imagine how much scraping the chocolate out of pubes would hurt.

Ryan fell to his knees between Nate's spread thighs. He gently ran a finger over one of Nate's balls. "They look like two big chocolate-covered cherries," Ryan said to Rio.

Rio licked his lips and knelt beside Nate's torso. "Save one for me," he told Ryan, licking a path up the centre of Nate's chest. Sitting back on his heels, he pointed towards Nate. "That's the dividing line. Everything on that half is yours," he informed Ryan, who was busy licking his way around the 'chocolate-covered cherry'.

Nate giggled and shook his head. "How're you gonna divide my hole? I've only got one of 'em."

Rio's eyes rounded as his black brows rose. "Fuck." Rio tapped Ryan on the shoulder. "First one to finish gets his ass."

Ryan waved Rio off without even coming up for air. As Rio hurriedly licked away the chocolate on Nate's stomach and chest, Ryan continued his slow assault below Nate's waist. Ryan appeared more concerned with taking his time than racing towards the finish. The dual sensations were more than enough to keep Nate on edge. He briefly wondered what his men would say if he let go and added a little cream to their dessert.

Rio finished with everything on Nate's upper body, slowing a bit when he licked the confection from Nate's nipple, bucking when his lover sank his teeth into the sensitive flesh.

For the first time since he'd begun, Ryan lifted his head from Nate's groin. "If you want a piece of this cock you'd better get the hell down here."

Rio pulled his mouth from Nate's nipple with a pop. "You tasty motherfucker," Rio growled, thrusting his tongue down Nate's throat.

Nate sighed as Rio broke the kiss and joined Ryan. He was concentrating so hard on not coming, he almost missed the little scuffle between his legs. Opening his eyes, Nate peered down the length of his body to the two men trying to elbow the other out of the way. "Is there a problem?" Nate asked.

"Yeah. We've licked the sides, but Ryan claims it's only fair that he get the head."

"Seriously?" Nate rolled his eyes. "And you call me a baby," he mumbled. He hooked his arms under his knee and rolled to his side, presenting his chocolate-slathered hole. "Better?"

Rio looked at Nate's ass like a starving man. "You got lube? Cuz once I eat it I'm gonna fuck it," Rio growled in his best caveman imitation.

Laughing around the ache in his balls, Nate tossed the lube to Rio. "Have at it," he squeaked, as Ryan's hot mouth engulfed his cock. Nate leaned up on his elbow to watch the carnal scene. "Ohhhh," he moaned as the first lick swept across his ass.

Ryan pumped away at Nate's cock like he was expecting a chocolate fountain to shoot out the end. "Gonna come," he warned, as Rio's tongue dug its way inside his hole.

"Mmmhmm," Ryan moaned, Nate's cock buried in his throat.

Nate's hips bucked towards Ryan's face as he emptied his balls. Ryan started to gag at the force of Nate's stream, but was able to pull off enough to swallow every drop. Nate's head dropped back to the pillow as his eyes rolled to the back of his head. "Fuck." He panted, trying to get his breathing under control, as Rio fucked into him with three fingers.

He managed to open his eyes, when a tongue stroked across his lips. Nate smiled at Ryan. "Thank you," he managed to get out, as Rio drove his cock in deep.

Reaching down, he encircled Ryan's cock in his hand. Ryan moaned and thrust his cum-covered tongue into Nate's willing mouth. As Rio continued to rut in and out of Nate's body, Ryan consumed him with a kiss.

Plastered against Nate's back, Rio's hand joined in pleasuring Ryan's cock. It didn't take long for Rio's roar of pleasure to set Ryan off. Groaning into the kiss, Ryan covered Nate's hand with jets of sticky warmth, as Rio filled Nate's ass.

With both his men panting on either side of him, Nate grinned. *Damn, I give the best gifts.*

* * * *

By the time Hearn entered the bar, it appeared Tyler was on his way to getting majorly shitfaced. He walked over and knelt beside his lover's chair. "Can I talk to you?"

Tyler scowled and gave Wyn the stink eye. "You call him?"

Wyn shook his head. "Hearn was worried about you." Wyn leaned close to Tyler's ear but whispered loud enough for Hearn to hear. "He loves you."

Tyler's gaze shot to Hearn. "I know, dammit. Why do you think I'm sitting here getting drunk off my ass," Tyler pouted.

Hearn held out his hand. "I was able to get a room. Would you at least talk to me?"

He watched as Tyler shifted in his seat before finally standing. Tyler turned to Wyn and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thank you. I hope Ezra doesn't get too sore that you had to baby-sit?"

Wyn smiled. "For me, every day is Valentine's Day. Play your cards right and it'll be the same for you."

Hearn shook Wyn's hand before leading a swaying Tyler out of the bar. "Second floor," Hearn said. "Do we need to take the elevator, or can you handle the stairs?"

Tyler rolled his eyes. "I'm not that drunk."

Yeah, you are, Hearn told himself but let it go. With their height difference, he couldn't get a good grip on Tyler's waist. Instead, he hooked his thumb through Tyler's belt loop and helped to hold his lover up.

Tyler stumbled halfway up the grand staircase, but Hearn's hold kept him from toppling down. Tyler regained his balance and slapped at Hearn's hand. "You're givin' me a wedgie."

Chuckling, Hearn relaxed his hold. Digging into his back pocket, he pulled out the key-card and motioned to the right. "Two-fourteen."

Once inside the room, Hearn adjusted the heat as Tyler dropped onto the king-sized bed. As much as Hearn wanted to join his lover, he knew he had a great deal of making up for first.

Sitting on the edge of the mattress, he turned to face Tyler. "I need to explain myself."

"You bet you do," Tyler mumbled.

Hearn reached out and ran his hand over Tyler's shin. "I don't think you have any idea just how much I love you."

Tyler rolled his head to look at Hearn. "You have an odd way of showing it."

"Maybe." Hearn ran his free hand through his hair. "This isn't the way I hoped this night would turn out."

Tyler leaned up on his elbows. "Kinda hard for it to turn out any other way when you decide to take your ex-lover flowers on Valentine's Day," Tyler quipped.

"It was supposed to be the last. I was gonna ask you to move in, but I knew I had to purge myself of any guilt before moving onto the next chapter in my life." Hearn stood and started pacing back and forth over the new carpet. "I fucked up. I know that now."

Before he could say anything more, Tyler bounded off the bed and threw himself into Hearn's arms. "What did you say?" Tyler asked, climbing up Hearn's body to wrap his legs around Hearn's stomach.

With his hands on Tyler's ass to hold him up, Hearn started to repeat what he'd just said. A brief kiss from Tyler stopped him. "Not that part. I couldn't give a fuck about Mitch. Ask me to move in. Please, ask me?"

The clamp surrounding his heart loosened. "Will you make me the happiest man alive and move in?"

Tyler buried his fingers in Hearn's hair and kissed him, pushing his tongue in deep. The kiss was all the confirmation Hearn needed, as he fell onto the bed with Tyler still in his arms.

Coming up for air, Tyler shook his head. "See? Was that so hard?"

Chuckling, Hearn pulled Tyler's shirt off over his head. "I'll take that as a yes."

Tyler sat up, straddling Hearn's waist. "I've loved you since the day I met you. I know it sounds corny but it's true, and I would like nothing more than to shack up with you."

Hearn reached up and ran his fingertips over Tyler's chest, paying particular attention to the brown pebbled nipples. "There's something else I want to talk to you about." He hoped he already knew Tyler's answer, but as the day had already shown him, he didn't always get things right. "I want us to petition for guardianship of Gracie."

Tyler's brows shot to his dishevelled bangs. "You mean adopt her?"

Hearn nodded. "If they'll let us."

Tyler's face seemed to take on a faraway expression. "It's a big responsibility raising a child. We haven't even talked about the important issues involved."

"Like?"

Crossing his arms, Tyler's entire body seemed to tense. "I won't spank her. Ever."

"Discipline is an important part of parenting. We may not always like it, but we can't allow Gracie to run the house either."

Tyler shook his head. "I'm not talking about discipline. I get she'll probably need to be grounded or whatever else we come up with, but I need your word that you'll never touch her in anger."

Noticing the rigid set of Tyler's jaw, a light suddenly went off in Hearn's head. Tyler's inability earlier to stand and confront Hearn when he'd hurt him. The vomiting at Hearn's anger the first night they declared their love...it all made sense. Pulling Tyler down against him, Hearn buried his face in his lover's hair. "Who hurt you, baby? Was it your parents?"

Tyler's breath hitched as the muscles under Hearn's hands relaxed. Tyler pressed himself even closer to Hearn. "Just Dad. Not all the time. Only when I tried to get him to stop beating on Mom."

Hearing the pain in his lover's voice, Hearn began peppering kisses to Tyler's temple, slowly moving to his lips. "I'm not your dad." As he gave in to Tyler's need for a deeper kiss,

he tried to imagine what it must have been like for Tyler as a child. He wondered if Tyler had ever sought treatment.

Breaking the kiss, he looked into Tyler's sad brown eyes. "I'll never raise a hand to you. You know that, right?"

Tyler nodded.

"But you have to deal with the fact that there'll be arguments. We won't always see eye to eye."

"I know."

Rolling them over, so he was on top, Hearn met Tyler's gaze once again. "Don't be afraid to argue back. Sometimes I need a swift kick in the ass to make me see reason."

Tyler grinned. "Like earlier?"

"Yeah, like earlier." Hearn reached between them and unfastened Tyler's jeans. "Can we get to the makeup sex now? That's the best part of arguing."

Chapter Nine

Hearn threw his pencil onto the coffee table and rubbed his eyes. "I need to just pull out of the race. No way in hell I can win against Nate anyway."

Tyler set down his glass of wine and crawled into Hearn's lap. "You only have three weeks left."

Hearn readjusted Tyler so he was straddling his lap. "Do you honestly think I can win?"

Gazing into Hearn's deep brown eyes, he knew he couldn't lie. "No. I don't." Before Hearn could say anything more, Tyler put his finger to his lover's lips, silencing him. "But this is about more than winning. It's about getting your ideas for the park system out to the townspeople."

Hearn nodded. "I know, but I can't help thinking I'm spending too much time giving speeches and interviews. I should be focussing on you and Gracie." Hearn pointed to the opposite side of the house. "Helping you get her room ready. Not sitting here trying to figure out how to fix the town's budget concerns."

Tyler leaned forward and nipped Hearn's lower lip. "We still have four days until the temporary guardianship goes before the judge. That should be plenty of time for you to help me put the finishing touches on the princess's castle."

Hearn smiled, pulling Tyler in for a kiss. "Have I told you how spectacular that room is, by the way? Gracie's gonna flip when she sees it."

Feeling good about what he'd managed to accomplish, Tyler preened under the compliment. "Scary how much I want to move myself into that room," he laughed.

Hearn laughed along with him. "Maybe someday we can sneak one of the pretty little boas out for you to play with."

Tyler slapped Hearn's chest. "Don't be ridiculous." He purposely waited a beat before adding. "I've already got one in red."

Laughing so hard he had to hold his side, Hearn shook his head. "See? This is a lot more fun than looking at boring numbers."

"I agree, but come summer you're gonna want these programmes in place. If you truly want to present the plan, you'll have to figure out how to pay for it. Otherwise they won't take you seriously." Tyler gave Hearn one more kiss before climbing off. "Now, I'm gonna watch my TV show and you're gonna get back to work."

He started to settle back in against his corner of the couch, but a heavy-lidded look from Hearn changed his mind. "I'll just sit over here," he excused himself, sitting in the chair beside the fireplace.

* * * *

Nate watched Hearn put a stack of papers back into an envelope. The town meeting had gone well, and Hearn had impressed the hell out of him.

"You ready?" Ryan asked, interrupting his train of thought.

"In a minute. I wanna talk to Hearn first." Nate turned to give Ryan a kiss before walking over to Hearn.

"Very well done," he congratulated, shaking Hearn's hand.

"Thanks," Hearn replied, gazing down at the floor. "I'm not much on public speaking, but you probably figured that out."

Nate smiled. Despite what Hearn said, Nate had witnessed a change in the man over the previous month and a half. The Hearn Sutherland he knew a year ago would have never had the self-confidence to run for mayor. "I liked what you had to say." He slapped Hearn on the shoulder. "Delivery and all."

"I know I can't beat you, but I'd already entered the race before I found out you were running as well." Hearn glanced up and out to the milling crowd.

Nate could tell the moment Hearn spotted Tyler. Hearn's love was almost as palpable as he stared at his lover. "I wanted to quit, ya know, but Tyler reminded me of something I taught our soon-to-be daughter."

"And what's that?" Nate asked.

"Nothing wrong with losing. It's willing to play in the first place that's important," Hearn recited, as Tyler walked up to wrap his arms around him.

"That's right," Tyler agreed, giving Hearn a kiss.

"I hear congratulations are in order," Nate said, shaking Tyler's hand.

At Tyler's questioning expression, Nate continued. "Hearn told me you're adopting?"

Tyler's entire face lit up. "Yep. A six-year-old little girl named Gracie." Tyler became animated when he began bragging about the girl. "Wait 'til you meet her. She's the cutest kid I've ever seen and will have you wrapped around her finger in no time."

Nate smiled, Tyler's happiness was infectious. "You'll have to be sure and bring her by the house. I'd love to see her with Rio and Ryan."

"What woman are you trying to push on us now?" Ryan asked, stepping up beside Nate.

"Gracie," Nate informed him. "She's the little girl Hearn and Tyler are adopting."

"Fantastic." Ryan reached out to shake the new parents' hands.

"You guys ever think about it? There are plenty of kids at the centre in need of a good home," Hearn offered.

Ryan chuckled and shook his head. He wrapped his arm around Nate's head and rubbed his scalp with his knuckles. "It's all Rio and I can do to keep up with the kid we've got."

Nate slapped Ryan's hands away. "Ryan, the hair." Nate ran his fingers through his hair, repairing the damage his lover had done.

"See what I mean?" Ryan asked, grinning.

"Yo," Rio's voice called across the room. "You guys about ready?"

Nate waved to his gorgeous hunk beside the door. "Sorry, Rio's hot to get home before he misses his show." He leaned forward. "Desperate Housewives," he said in a loud stage-whisper.

Hearn and Tyler started laughing. "Come on lover, take me home," Nate chuckled, taking Ryan's hand. "Make sure you come by after Gracie gets settled in."

"We will," Hearn replied.

Ryan put his arm around Nate as they neared Rio. "Have you ever seen Hearn so happy?"

"No," Ryan agreed, pulling Nate closer to his side. "It looks good on him."

"Sure as hell does."

"Come on," Rio whined. "I've already pulled the truck up."

Nate chuckled and rolled his eyes. "We're coming."

He let his men lead him outside. Like usual, Nate sat in the centre between Ryan and Rio. "I liked Hearn's ideas for the after-school and summer kids' programmes."

Ryan nodded his agreement. "He's definitely done his homework as far as finding the money in the town's budget. And I think he's right about making community service hours mandatory for high school graduates. They'll not only learn to become more civic minded, but it'll look good on their college resumes."

Nate went quiet. Maybe Hearn would be better at the job as mayor. He'd definitely shown the town his superior business skills earlier in the evening. Nate didn't want to admit it, but he knew he'd win the election. Hearn was a nice guy, but he rarely talked with people outside of the park.

He felt a hand slide up his thigh to rub against his cock. Nate glanced sideways at Ryan. "Yes?"

"What's got you thinking so hard?"

Nate shrugged. "If Hearn would make a better mayor."

Ryan's arm dipped from the back of his seat to Nate's shoulders, pulling him closer. "I think Hearn is a wonderful man. Lord knows he's a hell of a lot smarter than that jackass Mitch ever gave him credit for, but no. I don't think he'd make a better town leader."

"But you just said..."

"I know what I said, but you have to possess a certain amount of finesse to do the job justice. You, my dear, have that in spades. People listen to you because they want to, not because they have to. Do you see the difference?"

Nate grinned. "Because I'm the cutest guy in school I might get to wear the homecoming crown?"

Both Rio and Ryan burst out laughing. "Yeah, something like that," Ryan chuckled, with a shake to his head.

* * * *

Tyler ran his hand down Hearn's bare chest. "I'm so proud of you."

Hearn reached down and covered Tyler's hand, bringing it up to his mouth for a kiss. "Thanks. I was actually quite pleased with the presentation. I may not win the election, but at least I got people thinking."

"Exactly," Tyler agreed. Tyler sat up on his knees and studied Hearn. "You don't really want to be Mayor Sutherland anyway, do you?"

"No, not really," Hearn admitted. He still hadn't divulged to Tyler the real reason he'd decided to run. Maybe it was time he laid his cards out on the table. "I did it to make you proud of me."

Tyler leaned over, putting a hand on either side of Hearn's head. With his face two inches from Hearn's, Tyler's eyes narrowed. "What're you talking about?"

With Tyler in his face, Hearn couldn't back away enough to avoid eye contact. "I know it was a stupid thing to do, but at the time I didn't think I was worthy of someone like you."

Tyler stuck his tongue out and rimmed Hearn's lips. "Does this go back to the way Mitch made you feel?"

"Yeah. Everyone in town likes you, and you do a hell of a lot for them in return. I thought if I showed you I cared about Cattle Valley as much as you seem to...well, that you'd think I was good enough."

"Good enough for what? I'd already told you I loved you."

"That's not always enough," Hearn confessed. *It sure as hell wasn't for Mitch.* That is, if Mitch ever loved him in the first place. *No.* Hearn had to believe his ex felt something.

Tyler sat up and crossed his arms. "I have a feeling this insecurity goes beyond Mitch." Tyler reached down and cupped Hearn's face. "Did you get along with your parents before they found out you were gay?"

What? Hearn felt like he'd been slapped. *Where was this coming from?* "They were adults."

"So?"

Hearn shrugged. "So? They weren't around much. They were wealthy. They had better things to do."

Tyler bent down and kissed him. "Did they love you?"

"I don't know, I guess. Hell, they were my parents. I had the best of everything growing up, the best schools, the best nannies, the biggest toys." Hearn didn't want to talk about his past. He ran his hands down Tyler's back to his ass. Spreading his lover's cheeks, he circled the puckered hole with his middle finger.

Tyler moaned, before shaking his head. "Stop trying to distract me," he scolded.

"I don't wanna talk about my parents."

“Why?”

Exasperated, Hearn sighed. “Because they don’t mean anything to me! Surely, you of all people can understand that. I’ve talked to my mother a few times on the phone, but it’s not like she’d ever ask me to visit.”

“Why wouldn’t she ask you to visit? Goddammit, Hearn, she’s your mother.”

Hearn shook his head. “Just forget it. I don’t need someone with a fucked-up childhood trying to psychoanalyse mine.”

Tyler stared at him for a few moments before jumping off the bed. Hearn watched his partner’s back visibly stiffen as he walked towards the bathroom. The door slammed and Hearn groaned. “Fuck!”

He was just about to go after Tyler, when the door swung open with such force it made a small dent in the wall behind it. With fire in his eyes, Tyler marched back over to the bed.

“Let me tell you something,” Tyler began, finger pointing at Hearn in anger. “My ‘childhood’ may have been fucked up, but at least my mom told me that she loved me, every goddamned day. Which is more than I think you can say. I think you clung to that piece of shit, Mitch, because he was the first person to show you an ounce of caring.”

Hearn rose from his position until he was eye level with the man having a tantrum right in front of him. He held up a hand in warning. “Put the finger away,” he growled.

Tyler froze. Hearn watched as his lover’s gaze went to his outstretched hand and the finger in question. He saw the reaction in Tyler’s eyes first. The outstretched hand came in to cover Tyler’s mouth as he turned to retreat to the bathroom.

Jumping out of bed, Hearn quickly followed. “Breathe, baby,” he instructed from the doorway. “Just relax and concentrate.”

Tyler shook his head, falling onto his knees in front of the toilet. “I’m sorry,” Tyler stuttered, lifting the lid.

“Don’t be,” Hearn warned. “It’s the first time you’ve probably ever stood up for yourself.”

Tyler closed his eyes and rested his forehead on the arms braced across the cold porcelain. Hearn watched as Tyler took several deep breaths. “Easy,” Hearn soothed, sliding in to sit behind the man he loved.

“I shouldn’t have said those things to you,” Tyler choked around a sob.

Hearn rested his cheek against Tyler's back, needing the connection. "I'm glad you did." He teased the hair at the nape of Tyler's neck. "You were probably right. When I found Mitch, I thought...at last."

It hurt to admit it, even to himself, but he'd needed Mitch's love so much he'd turned a blind eye to everything. "I think he probably fucked around our entire relationship. Maybe that's why I didn't notice a difference once we moved to Cattle Valley." Hearn shrugged. "I didn't want to see it. I finally had someone who, at least on the surface, seemed to put me first."

Tyler pressed back. "Hold me?"

Hearn sat up and gathered Tyler into his lap, and wiped his lover's tears.

"I love you," Tyler declared, chin wobbling.

Tilting Tyler's face up, Hearn kissed him. As he tasted the interior of Tyler's mouth he thanked God he'd been given such a special gift. He knew the addition of Gracie would be a welcome one, but he also knew he'd have felt complete even if it were just him and Tyler for the rest of their lives. "I love you, too."

"Take me to bed."

Getting his feet under him, Hearn scooped Tyler up from the floor and carried him out of the bathroom, laying him gently on the mattress. He tossed the lube they'd used earlier onto the bed before coming down on top of his lover. He truly was proud of Tyler for standing up for himself. Although arguing wasn't something he looked forward to, it was important for Tyler to understand he could speak his mind.

He began kissing his way up Tyler's neck, taking the time to cherish what he had. Reaching Tyler's mouth, he brushed his lips over Tyler's. With a moan, Tyler opened for him, begging with unspoken words.

As he finally kissed his lover, he reached for the tube beside the pillow. He slicked his cock and guided it to Tyler's already stretched hole.

"Make love to me," Tyler whispered against Hearn's lips.

"Every day in every way," Hearn answered, slowly pushing his way inside Tyler's heat.

Even as his hips began to move, Hearn knew this was more than making love. It was a cementing of their bond. Tyler's body moulded to Hearn's, moving with him on every thrust.

Riding the edge of his climax, Hearn realised he'd never truly made love. Even though he'd been sexually active for quite a few years, he'd always equated a slow fuck as making

love. How wrong he'd been. Gazing into Tyler's eyes, Hearn felt as much with his heart as he did his dick. The pleasure wasn't simply physical, but spiritual as well. *Yeah. That's the difference*, he concluded as he spilled his seed deep inside the man he loved.

Chapter Ten

"The Gym," Rio answered the phone.

"Hi, Rio. It's Joseph. Is Will there by chance?"

"Nate's making last minute preparations for the party later. Did something happen?" They'd managed to keep Nate's birth name out of the papers, but that didn't mean the Senator hadn't found out.

"Nate, yes, I'm sorry. I forgot it was Election Day for you guys. Tell me, how're his chances?"

"Good. As a matter of fact, we're combining parties with the other candidate."

"Really?"

Rio chuckled. "Yeah, you gotta know Cattle Valley. When the guy you're running against is a friend, it's all pretty civilised."

"I've got to get out there someday and see this Utopia first hand."

"You should. We'd love to have you, provided you bring Phillip along," Rio teased.

Joseph chuckled. "I promise to never try and poach Nate."

"Good to know."

"Listen, I had something I wanted to run past Nate, but since I have you on the phone, do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Okay, shoot." Rio peered around the room, making sure no one needed his assistance.

"I was wondering what the job situation is like in Cattle Valley? You see, I've got a kid who just turned eighteen and is no longer eligible for the programme. Problem is, he really has nowhere else to go."

"Is he trained in any certain vocation?" Rio asked.

"Formally? No. But he's worked in the kitchen here at the shelter since he first wandered through our doors three years ago. He's a damn fine cook, I can vouch for that."

Rio rubbed his chin. "Let me talk to a few people and get back to you. I mean, he's more than welcome to come here without a job, but it might make the transition easier on him if he knows he's moving towards something."

Joseph was silent for a moment. "Yes. He's become quite attached to us over the years. But recently he's been having problems with an ex. Phillip and I think it would be best to get him out of the city before the ex does something more serious than slapping him around."

Rio gripped the phone. There was nothing he hated more than to hear about abuse of any kind. "Put him on the next plane. If I can't find him something, I'll give him a job here at the gym."

"Thanks," Joseph sighed. "You don't know what a relief that is."

"Do you want me to wire you some money for a plane ticket?"

"No. We'll dip into some of the money Nate sent if you think that would be okay with him?"

"It'll be fine. Nate donated that money for you and Phillip to use as you see fit. It sounds like keeping this kid safe is a good enough reason. By the way, what's his name?"

"Jay De Luca. And, Rio, there's something else I should warn you about."

By the tone of Joseph's voice, Rio wasn't sure he was going to like what his new friend had to say. "What?"

"Jay's...delicate."

The first thing that popped into his head was china. "You mean breakable, or feminine?"

"Both, actually." Joseph paused once again before continuing. "You did tell me Cattle Valley was tolerant, right?"

"Yes. I don't think you need to worry about Jay being flamboyant here. Hell, look at Nate."

Joseph cleared his throat. "Jay isn't flamboyant in the least. He's quite shy, but his mannerisms...well, let's just say they make a lot of people uncomfortable. It's the reason we've let him stay here so long. He wouldn't be safe on the streets, if you know what I mean."

"Don't worry. I'll keep an eye out for him, but I honestly don't foresee any trouble." Rio wondered what he'd gotten himself into. Still, it sounded like Jay needed a safe place to live, and Rio couldn't think of a safer place than Cattle Valley. "Make the arrangements, and give me a call back. I'll make sure he gets picked up from the airport, either by me or someone I trust."

"I can't thank you enough," Joseph replied.

"No need. This is exactly what this town was founded for."

After hanging up, Rio went to find Mario. He had a spare room and job to find.

* * * *

"You two about ready?" Hearn asked, walking into Gracie's room. Tyler was putting the finishing touches on Gracie's hair. "Ready?" he asked again.

Tyler fastened the bow holding Gracie's black curls out of her face. "I think so." Tyler stood and turned their daughter around to face him. "What do you think?"

"Pretty as a picture," Hearn complimented.

Tyler had insisted they buy Gracie a new dress for the election party. Hearn had tried to argue that she already had a closet full of new clothes, but Tyler rolled his eyes and bought one anyway.

"You're going to spoil her," Hearn had admonished.

"Yep," Tyler had agreed. "And she deserves every bit of it."

Leaning against the wall, Hearn looked at the two people he loved most in the world. *They both deserve to be spoiled.* He watched as Tyler lifted Gracie off her bed.

"We're ready," Tyler said, leading Gracie by the hand.

Hearn reached down and picked his daughter up. "You'll steal everyone's heart." He placed a kiss on Gracie's nose, before turning to give Tyler a kiss. "Let's get this over with so we can come home and watch television."

Shaking his head, Tyler led them out to their new SUV. Hearn set Gracie in her booster seat and buckled her up. "All ready, princess?"

"Yes, Daddy."

Shutting the car door, Hearn needed a moment to get his emotions under control. After the judge had granted him Temporary-Guardianship, Gracie had started calling him Daddy and Tyler, Dad. Hearn doubted he'd ever take it for granted. They still had some red tape to wade through before Gracie was officially theirs, but at least they were able to bring the precious little girl home with them.

Opening the driver's door, Hearn climbed behind the wheel. "Let's go do the concession thing and then get the hel...heck out of there."

In a town the size of Cattle Valley it hadn't taken long to count the votes. Hearn had received his call before he'd begun to dress for the party. The election had ended as he knew it would, but he was still rather shocked by how many votes he'd actually received.

Tyler's hand landed on his thigh. "Doesn't matter that you lost. I have a strong feeling you accomplished what you set out to do."

With a nod, Hearn backed out of the drive and headed for the reception hall connected to the church. When he pulled into the parking lot, the party appeared to be in full swing. "Nate does know how to throw a party," Hearn commented.

Tyler chuckled. "That's because Nate *is* the party."

They had barely walked into the hall when Rio came up to them. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" he asked Tyler.

"Sure." He held up a finger and pointed towards Nate. "Gracie, why don't you go give Mayor Gills a big hug and tell him congratulations."

Hearn was actually shocked when Gracie squealed in delight and ran towards Nate. He gave Tyler a questioning expression.

Tyler grinned. "She spent all day with the man decorating for a party, what did you expect?"

Chuckling, Hearn wrapped his arm around Tyler's waist as his partner spoke. "Okay, I'm sorry about that."

Rio smiled. "No big deal. Nate's crazy about her."

"Well he can't have her," Hearn added.

Rio shifted a little and glanced over towards the back wall. "I was wondering if you'd rented your loft out yet?"

Tyler's head tilted to the side. "No. Why?"

"I thought maybe you'd lease it to me. I just picked Cattle Valley's newest resident up from the airport." Rio gestured to the young woman standing in the corner.

"You mean that girl over there?" Tyler asked.

Rio rubbed the back of his neck. "*His* name's Jay De Luca. It's a long story which I'll be more than happy to fill you in on later, but for now, he needs a place to stay. I've also promised to help him find a job."

Hearn gazed at the tiniest, thinnest, *hell*, prettiest man he'd ever set eyes on. No way was that a man. "Really? That's a guy?" he couldn't keep from asking.

Rio nodded. "He's barely spoken two words since I picked him up. Don't know that I've ever met anyone so quiet. You shouldn't have a bit of trouble from him if you decide to let him live above the store," Rio told Tyler.

Tyler waved away Rio's concerns. "He looks so sad and lonely," Tyler whispered.

Hearn bent and kissed Tyler's temple. "Go on. I know you want to."

Tyler gazed up at Hearn. "You're sure you don't mind if I go over and introduce myself?"

"You wouldn't be you if you didn't try and take care of the world." Hearn gave his lover a kiss. "Go. I'll catch up with you in a bit."

As Tyler made his way through the crowd, Hearn looked for Gracie. "It appears as though Gracie's weaving her magic," he chuckled.

Rio followed Hearn's gaze and shook his head. "Damn," he huffed. "No matter what they say, we are not adopting a child. One princess in the house is enough." Rio started across the hall with Hearn on his heels.

Gracie did indeed look like a princess sitting on the throne of Ryan's arm. Hearn couldn't hear what she was talking about, but her gestures were dramatic. Nate and Ryan were in stitches by the time Hearn and Rio approached.

"What're you telling these men, Gracie?"

Gracie immediately reached for Hearn. He easily took his princess in his arms and hugged her. At six, Gracie might be too old to hold like this, but with her small body-size, she fit Hearn's arms perfectly.

"I was telling Sheriff Blackfeather and Mayor Gills about my tea set. They said they'd come over sometime."

Rio made a sound in his throat and rolled his eyes. "I'll be sure and drop them off before I go play pool or something."

Hearn laughed. As tough as Rio wanted everyone to think he was, Hearn knew the man was a marshmallow underneath. Gracie would be having tea for four before he knew it.

Balancing Gracie on one arm, Hearn stuck his hand out to Nate. "Congratulations, Mayor."

Nate smiled and returned the handshake. "Thanks. I've got a few things I'd like to discuss with you when you get a moment."

"Oh?"

Nate nodded, but before he could say anything more, George Manning stepped up to shake his hand. Hearn politely excused himself and carried Gracie over to the food table. "You hungry?"

Gracie studied the table of food. "Do I gotta eat veggies?" she asked, scrunching up her nose.

"Nope, not this time." He set her down on the floor and picked up two plates. "You point to what you want," he told her, as he moved down the buffet.

After setting their plates on an empty table, Hearn went back for two glasses of punch. "Now don't spill it on your pretty dress," he warned.

"I'm not a baby," she informed him.

Hearn leaned over and kissed her. "Yes you are. You're *my* baby."

"Ooh, yummy, dinner," Tyler joked, kissing Gracie's neck.

Giggling, Gracie pushed Tyler away. "My neck is not your snack. Get your own."

Instead of going to the food table, Tyler took a seat on Hearn's lap and stole one of his chicken wings. "Hearn'll share with me."

Hearn's hand landed squarely on Tyler's hip. "Get your own, moocher."

In a mock pout, Tyler stood and headed for the buffet. Hearn leaned over towards Gracie. "I would've given him more if he would've asked nicely."

Gracie was still giggling when Tyler returned to the table, plate loaded. "So what did you think of your new tenant?" Hearn asked, biting into a stuffed mushroom.

Tyler paused with a carrot stick half-way to his mouth. "There's something about his voice. I can't describe it. He doesn't talk much, but when he does, it's...hypnotic."

Hearn finished off his mushroom. "How so?"

Tyler shook his head. "I don't know, soft, serene. The kind of voice you'd expect an angel to have." Tyler shook his head. "I told you I wouldn't be able to describe it."

Tyler gazed across the room at where Jay was sitting. "I tried to get him to join us, but he said he felt better staying out of the way." Tyler put his hand to his chest. "If he were a few years younger I think I'd adopt him myself."

Hearn glanced at the young man. Telling himself he had nothing to be jealous of, he glanced back at Tyler. "I don't need to worry about the two of you, do I?"

Tyler lobbed the carrot stick at him. "Don't be a dork. I guess he just brings out my maternal instincts or something. Anyway, don't judge me until after you've met him."

"Whatever," Hearn quipped, throwing the carrot back at Tyler.

Hearn took a bite of his brownie when a chicken wing hit him in the face. Startled, he swallowed the bite before he could get it chewed. The large piece of food started to get stuck in his throat, he gasped for a breath and grabbed his glass of punch, trying like hell to soften the brownie. After a bit of coughing, he was finally able to get a breath. He glanced down at the wing on the table and turned to Gracie. "Did you just throw that at me?"

Gracie clapped her hands and giggled. "I wanted to play like you and Dad," she informed him.

Hearn scowled at Tyler who was cracking up. "Nice. Teaching your daughter to throw food."

* * * *

Cleaning up the last of the mess, Rio put the broom away. "You guys about ready to hit it?"

"Yeah," Nate yawned. "Just let me finish wrapping these leftovers. I'll take 'em home for now. Thought maybe I'd give them to Jay in the morning. I doubt Tyler left anything in his kitchen to eat."

"Want me to start loading them up?"

"Sure," Nate yawned again.

Rio grabbed a big box full of food. He peered over his shoulder at Ryan. "You gonna just stand there? Can't you see your boss needs to get to bed?" Rio chuckled on his way out to Nate's SUV. He knew Ryan hadn't given the small detail much thought, but officially, as soon as Nate was sworn in, he'd become Ryan's boss. "God, is this a great country or what?"

He put the box in the back of the vehicle and went back in for the next load. He wasn't sure how many people Nate had expected to feed, but they had a ton of leftovers. Jay would be eating high on the hog for days. Not that the skinny fella couldn't use it. Damn, he'd never seen anyone as tiny as Jay. Although the guy was probably five-foot-six or seven, Rio bet Jay didn't weigh more than a hundred and five or ten pounds.

Ryan stumbled out as Rio was going in. "Is your boss about ready?" Rio asked, twisting the knife.

"Shut up," Ryan snarled.

"Or what?" Rio taunted.

"Or I'll sell my third of The Gym to Nate and he'll become your boss, too."

"Damn. You fight dirty," Rio said, pretending to lock his lips and throw away the key.

Nate met Rio at the door and handed him another box. "That's the last one. I'll lock up."

Rio loaded the food into the SUV and got behind the wheel. Thankfully, he'd taken Jay over to the loft earlier, because all he wanted was to get home and crawl into bed. It had been a big day for all of them, especially their new mayor.

Instead of fighting over who would ride shotgun, Nate opened the back door and climbed in. "Wake me when we get home," he mumbled.

Ryan got in the passenger seat and buckled up. "I'm damn proud of you, Nate," He reached over the back of the seat to swat Nate's ass.

Nate was already so out of it, he didn't even protest, simply grunted a reply neither of them could understand. Chuckling, Rio pulled out of the parking lot. "I wonder how big his head'll get once all this sinks in?" he mused.

"Shit, if I know Nate, the only thing that'll change is we'll have to go to City Hall to satisfy his mid-day hungers," Ryan joked.

"I heard that," Nate piped up from the backseat.

"You denying it?" Rio chimed in.

"Nope."

"Didn't think so," Rio said with a grin.

Epilogue

"It's Sunday, where're you going?" Hearn asked, from his position on the couch.

"To the shop, but I won't be long," Tyler answered. He hated not telling Hearn the entire truth. He'd gone over it a hundred times, and there was something he needed to do.

"Can you stop by and pick up something for dessert? Nate and the guys are coming over for lunch."

Slipping on his light jacket, Tyler gave Hearn a quick kiss. "If you promise not to wake Gracie from her nap, I'll pick up a pie. Although it's Sunday, so Kyle's is closed. You'll have to make do with one from the grocery store."

"Mmm, sounds good. Cherry if you can find one," Hearn's attention returned to the movie.

Tyler drove to the shop and parked in back. He turned up the stereo as he worked, putting together the bouquet. After gathering a rather large bunch of daisies, he started to automatically reach for the roses, but stopped himself. Nope. Roses were too good for this particular arrangement.

With the stems tied with ribbon, Tyler switched off the stereo and locked up. The drive to the cemetery wasn't long, just outside of town. He parked the car, happy to see he was the only person there. What he had to say to Mitch was private.

Flowers in hand, he easily found Mitch's grave. He smiled at the remnants of the last bouquet Hearn had delivered. Picking up the faded and torn ribbon, he stuffed it in his pocket.

Tyler propped the fresh flowers against the headstone and stepped back. "This is it, Mitch. The last bouquet you'll ever get from me or Hearn. He's mine now, mine and Gracie's. You were a fool for not holding on to what you had, but your stupidity gave me a family, and for that I'd like to say thank you."

Tears burned his eyes at the thought of living a life without the man he loved. "He's everything to me, and I make damn sure I let him know that on a daily basis."

Chuckling, he had to do a bit of bragging. "You gave up on him too soon. Even you would've been proud of the man he's become. Although I doubt he'd have had the

confidence to take chances if he were still under your constant criticisms. Hearn's now the Parks and Recreation Department Director. He's already started programmes that have made a big difference."

Tyler kicked at a clump of greening grass. "Well, that's about all I have to say to you. Thanks for giving me the best lover and partner a man could ask for, and thanks for giving Gracie the best daddy in the world."

Turning away, Tyler walked back to his car, feeling better than he had in a long time. He'd been meaning to have that little talk with Mitch for a while, but in his life, the living took precedence.

After stopping off at the grocery store, he pulled into the drive, happy to see Rio's pickup already parked there. He lifted the two cherry pies from the passenger seat and went inside. He was a little surprised to see the living room empty, but heard voices coming from Gracie's room. Damn. He wondered which one of her new 'uncles' had woken her from her nap.

Tyler set the dessert boxes on the kitchen island before going to investigate. The door to Gracie's room was open enough for Tyler to peek inside without being noticed. He covered a laugh, as he observed Rio sitting in one of the tiny chairs with a red feather boa around his neck. Gracie was pouring pretend tea and telling her new playmate all about school.

He never thought he'd see the day. Nate had been over several times for Gracie's now-famous tea parties, but Rio had always been adamant about not joining in. Tyler didn't know whether to tease the big guy or not. Rio looked like he was having the time of his life. He thought about running to get his camera to capture the moment.

In the end, he decided it wouldn't be fair. Tyler walked back and quietly opened the door before slamming it. "I'm home. Where is everyone?"

He barely suppressed a laugh when Rio came sauntering out of the bedroom, minus the boa. "Nate, Ryan and Hearn needed to run to City Hall for a minute, so I told 'em I'd keep an eye on Gracie."

"Oh? Is she awake?" Tyler had to turn away when he noticed a red feather caught in Rio's black curls.

"Yep, just now," Rio said, acting more manly than usual.

"Well, if you don't mind watching her a little longer, I'll get lunch started."

"Okay. Just holler if you need me," Rio said, going back into the bedroom.

As Tyler fixed the marinade for the steaks, he finally let out the laugh he'd suppressed for so long. Life was good.

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

Email: carollynne@carollynne.info

Carol loves to hear from readers. You can find her contact information, website and author biography at <http://www.total-e-bound.com>.

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