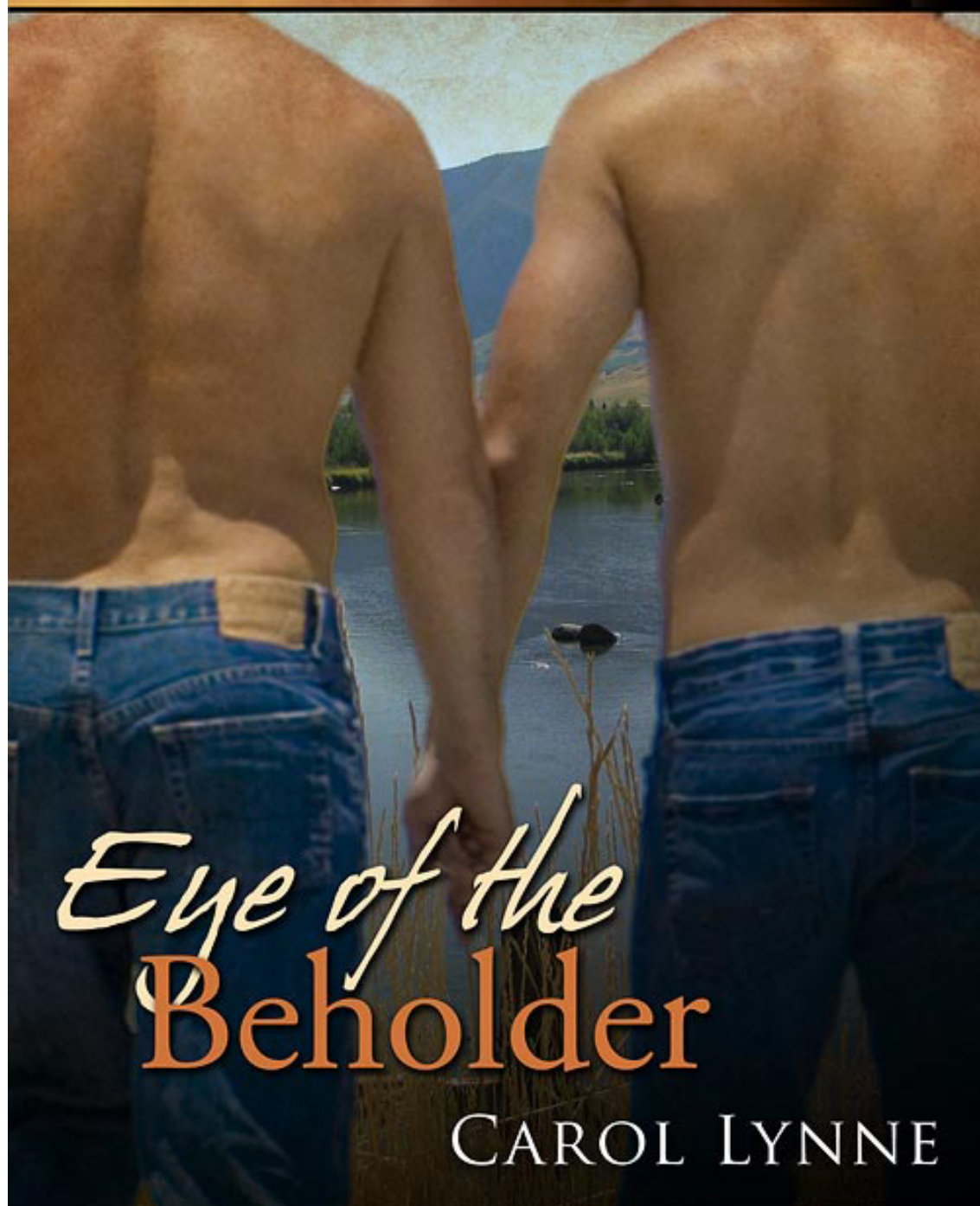




CATTLE VALLEY



Eye of the **Beholder**

CAROL LYNNE

A Total-E-Bound Publication



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Eye of the Beholder

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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

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Carol Lynne

Dedication

For my newest friend Jambrea Jones. I hope you like this one.

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Chapter One

"Watch out!" a familiar voice screamed.

Working on the hay rake, Bo barely had time to turn around before the bull was on him. In a split second decision, he tried to wedge himself between the tines of the rake before the bull had a chance to plough into him and impale him on the steel rods.

Bo screamed as one of the yellow tines plunged into his side, preventing him from hiding further. He covered his head and braced himself for impact. The charging bull didn't stop until he slammed into the machine, mere inches from where Bo stood. The resulting impact not only drove the tine further into Bo's body, but impaled the bull's face as well. The one ton bull pulled back, releasing the tine from his face and tossed his head from side to side, splattering blood all over Bo.

Rance and two of the cowboys finally managed to get lassos around Zero Tolerance's head, but even with three men, they were no match for the strength of the bull.

Trying to remove himself from the rake, Bo felt his flesh begin to rip. "Fuck!" he screamed, his hand immediately going to his side.

Knowing he couldn't go anywhere without injuring himself further, he had no choice but to stand by and watch the three cowboys try to get the prize rodeo bull under control. One thing he could do was call for backup. Moving as little as possible, Bo extracted his cell phone from its holster on his belt and called the main house. Even the slightest movement seemed to drive the tine in deeper. By the time Shep came on the line, Bo was panting through the pain.

"Shep."

"It's Bo. We're gonna need some help out in the east pasture. Zero Tolerance is injured and going nuts. Rance, Buddy and Steve are trying to control him, but they seem to be losing the fight. And call Jeb. If he's in the area, we may be able to save the damned bull."

"We'll be right there."

"Oh, and you might want to bring some rubber gloves from the box in the barn. I'm bleeding like a stuck pig, and I'm gonna need some help getting loose from the hay rake."

"Shit. Should I call an ambulance?"

Bo took a deep breath. His lungs seemed to be fine, but no telling what other internal injuries he may have sustained. Being HIV positive, infections of any kind were always a worry. The blood he could feel running down his side couldn't be good either. "Yeah, I think you'd better. Make sure you give 'em the heads-up on my condition though."

"Will do, hang in there, buddy."

Bo let the phone fall from his bloody hand onto the pasture below. *Goddammit*. He'd been doing so well, not even a single sniffle in the fifteen months he'd been employed.

Reaching down, Bo ripped his T-shirt down the side to get a better look at his injury. Trying to bend down enough to look at the wound, he nearly lost an eye on another of the tines. Sighing, he came to the conclusion he'd be better off just standing as still as possible. He took the tail of the ruined T-shirt and held it against the wound.

Shep, Jeremy and Jim pulled up in the pickup. Shep was the first to jump out, tranquilizer gun in his hand. "Stand back," he ordered.

"Wait," Rance yelled. "He's lost a lot of blood. You could kill him."

Shep looked from Rance to Bo. "Better him than Bo and from the looks of it, if we don't get Bo some help that's exactly what's going to happen."

As soon as Shep fired the tranquilizer dart into the bull, Rance passed his rope off to Jimmy and rushed over to Bo.

"Don't touch me," Bo warned. "I think Shep brought gloves."

Before Rance could turn around, Shep was there, handing out latex gloves to everyone. Gloves on, Shep and Rance approached. Bo knew he looked worse than he was.

"A lot of this belongs to the bull," he explained, gesturing to his blood-splattered face. "My problem's down here on my side. One of the tines seems to be caught on something."

Rance moved to the back of the hay rake and tried to get a better view of what they were dealing with. "I think we're gonna have to disconnect the tine from the machine, then let the doctors remove it from you."

Bo gulped in air, trying his best to overcome the sudden wave of nausea. With his blood continuing to flow at a steady pace from the wound, he knew he wasn't going to remain conscious for much longer. If he were to pass out before Rance worked the tine loose, there

was no telling what kind of damage his internal organs would suffer. "Hurry, I don't think I'm gonna last."

"That's enough of that," Rance yelled as he grabbed the tool box and dug around until he found what he needed.

Motioning Shep over, Bo leaned against him. Whispering so Rance wouldn't hear, he spoke in Shep's ear. "I hate to ask you this, but I need you to make sure I stay up on my feet. My vision's starting to get pretty spotty."

Shep wrapped both arms around Bo's chest as Rance worked furiously to free the tine while trying not to move it. Bo laid his head on Shep's shoulder. "I'm sorry, Boss."

"Not your fault. But you owe it to Rance to make it out of this alive, so fight like hell."

"If I don't, tell him..."

"Got it!" Rance yelled. "Get him the hell out of there."

Shep carefully helped Bo move far enough away from the rake to lay him in the soft grass. As Bo struggled to hold onto consciousness, he heard the ambulance's siren. Realising the paramedics would know what to do, Bo allowed himself to close his eyes.

* * * *

Putting on a fresh pair of gloves, Rance knelt beside Bo. "Bo? Wake-up. Come on, open your eyes."

"Let the ambulance through the gate," he yelled at Buddy.

Gently removing the blood-soaked shirt from around the tine, Rance reached down and took off his own western-style shirt. Not wanting to disturb the piece of metal, he held his shirt against the ripped portion of Bo's stomach until Zac Alben tapped him on the shoulder.

Reluctantly, Rance moved out of the way. As Zac and Fire Chief George Manning worked to stabilise and load Bo onto a gurney, Rance was taken back to the previous week.

* * * *

Bo walked into the bunkhouse kitchen in a fantastic mood. "Good morning, all."

Rance glanced up from his plate of bacon and eggs before quickly looking back down. Just the site of the man was enough to drive him crazy, but the cheerful mood and movie star smile were too much.

With his shoulder-length black hair still wet from the shower, and water droplets still clinging to the sculpted chest on display, Rance almost groaned at the picture Bo made this early in the morning. He wanted to yell at Bo to button his shirt, but couldn't quite bring himself to do. He must be a sadist.

"What's got you in such a cheery disposition on this fine spring day?" Buddy asked.

"My, my, aren't we using big words today. If you must know, it's one of my favourite days of the year, planting day. The day when all things are possible, and I am a god among mortals. I alone have the power to turn the barren soil into food for man and beasts," Bo explained with his nose in the air.

The entire kitchen erupted in laughter as Rance spotted a wadded napkin sailing through the air, hitting Bo in the face. He attempted to cover his laughter. Despite trying his best to stay away from the walking temptation, Bo was funny as hell and kept them all entertained.

"Watch out for Zero Tolerance. As far as he's concerned you've got a target on your back," Rance mumbled, eating the last of his bacon.

Bo plopped down in the chair beside Rance and shook his head. "What is it with that mean sonofabitch? I've never done a damn thing to that bull, but he seems to go nuts whenever I'm around."

"Maybe he overheard one of your jokes," Rance answered.

Bo leaned over and made exaggerated kissing noises. "You looove my jokes, admit it?"

Pushing his chair back, Rance carried his plate to the sink washing it in the hot soapy water. "I don't know what Zero's beef is with you, but do yourself a favour and give him a wide birth."

"Oh, I get it. Zero. Beef. You're a real funny man."

Shaking his head, Rance lifted his hat off the peg by the door and settled it low on his forehead. "Well, Father Corn, have a wonderful day planting your seed. I'll be up to my shoulders inserting bull sperm into receptive cows. We'll see which one of us feels more like a god by the end of the day."

** * * **

After helping Jeb Garza get Zero Tolerance stitched up and put into one of the holding pens, Rance headed for the hospital in Sheridan. It had been decided soon after Zac assessed Bo's condition that the clinic in Cattle Valley may not be equipped to handle the farmer's injuries.

Despite driving over eighty-five miles an hour the entire way, Rance tried to look casual as he strolled into the emergency room. He spoke to the nurse behind the desk, who told him

Bo was in surgery. Armed with the knowledge that at least Bo was still alive, he took the elevator up to the waiting room.

Rance spotted Shep and Jeremy right away and walked towards them. "How is he?"

"He just came out of surgery. They had to remove his spleen and part of his left kidney, but the doctor is optimistic about his recovery."

Rance nodded, trying to absorb the information. "What about his HIV status? Will any of this affect that?"

Shep rubbed the back of his neck. "Not directly, but renal failure is always a concern with HIV patients. With the loss of part of his left kidney, he'll be at higher risk. They'll need to do some adjusting to his current medication regime until he heals, but the doctors think as long as he continues to take care of himself, he should recover nicely."

"I called the guy on his emergency contact card," Jeremy added. "He's flying in from Idaho."

Though he had no right to say anything, Rance didn't like the thought of another man sitting at Bo's bedside. "Who's this guy?"

Jeremy grinned. "Lark's an old friend of Bo's from his days in the commune up north. He and his *partner*, Kade, are the ones who brought Bo to Cattle Valley in the first place."

Rance remembered the first time he'd laid eyes on Bo. It had been in the bakery. He'd been standing in line, when three gorgeous men had entered. He knew immediately they were from out of town. Police work was still in his blood, and he briefly stepped out of line to assess the men.

The small one didn't pose a threat, he knew that right away by the guy's broad smile, but the other two looked almost...dangerous.

What had bothered Rance more than anything was he couldn't keep his eyes off Bo. There was something almost feral about the man's looks that spoke to Rance's cock, instead of his brain. He hated the feeling and left the bakery soon after.

He gathered the two men coming into town were the same two who had been with Bo that day. Rance didn't know a lot about Bo's life before hiring on at the Back Breaker, but he'd heard plenty of rumours about the free-love-type commune he'd lived on in Canada. What if the three of them had been lovers?

"So when will these friends get here?" he asked.

Jeremy looked at his watch. "In about an hour. Why? You volunteering to pick them up from the airport?"

He hadn't been, but he knew if he declined, he'd look like an ass. "Sure."

* * * *

With his arms crossed over his chest, Rance waited for Lark and Kade by the arrivals exit. It was going on nine o'clock and his stomach was reminding him that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He thought about stopping someplace to eat on the way back to the hospital, but Rance wasn't sure if he could be in the company of Bo's friends that long without asking questions he had no business asking.

He spotted the big biker-looking guy first and held up his hand to signal him. The smaller one, Lark, by the description he'd been given, stepped out of the biker's shadow and headed towards Rance. He'd heard Bo talk about the two men coming towards him for a year, so why did he suddenly feel nervous?

"How is he?" Lark asked, adjusting the big backpack on his shoulder.

"Out of surgery and stable when I left the hospital. I'll fill you both in on the drive over." He held out his hand. "Name's Rance, by the way."

Lark shook his hand before gesturing to the big guy. "I'm Lark and this is my partner, Kade. It's nice to finally put a face with a name."

Rance was surprised to hear Bo had talked about him by name to Lark. He wondered what he'd said.

He noticed Kade was more standoffish than Lark, not even bothering to shake Rance's hand. Well that was fine with him. He didn't need to play nice with these two guys, he was simply doing Bo a favour by picking them up.

"Is that all the luggage you have?" Rance gestured towards the large duffle slung over Kade's broad shoulder.

"That's it. Lark has to fly back on Sunday. He's got final exams next week. And I don't need more than a change of jeans and a couple T-shirts."

Rance turned towards the door and rolled his eyes. He hadn't asked the man for an inventory of his luggage. He'd learned one thing, though. Kade would evidently be staying on at least through the following week. *Shit.*

After digging his keys out of his pocket, Rance pointed towards the ranch pickup. He didn't say a word as Kade threw the duffel and Lark's backpack into the bed and climbed in beside him. At least Lark sat in the middle. Rance didn't know that he'd survive the cold chill coming from Kade on the drive over.

As soon as he pulled out of the parking lot, the questions began. Rance tried his best to explain everything he'd learned from talking to Shep.

"I haven't talked directly to the doctor, so don't quote me on any of this," Rance added.

"How long do they think it'll take him to recover?" Kade asked.

"He should feel a lot better in three to four weeks, but he won't be completely healed for at least eight."

"How will it affect his job? This Shep guy doesn't plan on hiring someone to take his place, does he?" Kade asked.

"We haven't really talked about it. Bo's the only farmer we have on payroll and he'd only just begun to plant the crops, so I'm not sure what Shep will want to do."

"I can do it," Lark piped up. "I spent the first eighteen years of my life around farming."

"You've got a week left of school," Kade reminded him.

"Yeah, but I can do as much as possible until I have to leave Sunday night, and then finish up once finals are over." Lark started kissing Kade's neck. "Come on, it'll be a fun way to spend the summer. We'd planned on moving to Cattle Valley anyway, we'll just move the date up a few months."

"And what am I supposed to do while you're off playing farmer-boy?" Kade asked, tickling Lark's ribs.

Laughing, Lark swatted Kade's hands. "You can build me that cabin you're always going on and on about."

Rance saw his opening and took it. "I'm afraid you won't have much luck in that department. Available land around Cattle Valley is pretty scarce."

"We'll figure something out," Kade added, kissing the top of Lark's blond head.

Crap.

It was almost three days before they allowed Bo to have regular visitors. Of course Lark got to see him right away, but evidently Rance didn't rate as high. Yeah, he was bitter, and took it out on everyone around him, especially his cowhands.

After taking a shower to clean off the stink, Rance dressed in his new jeans and black western snap-front shirt. He placed his black Stetson low on his forehead, as usual, and grabbed the keys from the desk beside the front door.

"You going to see Bo?" Steve hollered from the barn.

"Yep."

"Give him our best. And tell him things are boring around here without him," Steve chuckled.

"Will do," Rance answered, getting into his big black four-wheel drive truck.

Before driving into Sheridan, he stopped at Brynn's Bakery and picked up one of Bo's favourite cinnamon rolls. He wasn't sure if he could eat it yet, but if he knew Bo, he'd sure as hell try to get away with it.

He hated to admit it to himself, but he was really looking forward to seeing the farmer again. How many times had he wished Bo had never stepped foot in Cattle Valley?

Rance shook his head. He knew it had nothing to do with the man himself and everything to do with the way Bo made him feel. Once upon a time he would've jumped on Bo right there in the bakery that first day and staked his claim, but he wasn't the same man as back then, and never would be.

He chuckled to himself. No matter what he said to the man, Bo never seemed to give up trying to get into Rance's jeans. If Bo only knew how much Rance would enjoy just that, but his pride wouldn't allow it. Better to give Bo the fantasy of the way things could be instead of the reality Rance would give him.

Before he knew it, he was boarding the elevator up to Bo's room, the bag containing the cinnamon roll clutched in his hand. The floor seemed pretty quiet until he neared Bo's room. He heard Bo's customary laugh and his chest tightened. Yeah, he'd missed the silly sonofabitch.

Knocking on the door frame, he took his hat off and tried his best to smooth his black hair. Bo was surrounded by people. From the looks of it, Kade had taken up residence in the

big chair beside Bo's bed. Shep, Jeremy and a couple of the hands from the EZ Does It were also there.

No one in the room seemed to be aware of Rance's entrance. He almost set the bag on the counter and left, but then loud-mouth Logan Miller spotted him.

"Hey, look what the cat drug in!"

The small crowd around Bo parted, and Rance got his first look at the man since his accident. His heart sunk as he took in the large piece of homemade pie Bo was devouring. *So much for a store-bought cinnamon roll.*

"Hey, you," Bo said around a mouthful of food. "'Bout time you got in here to see me."

Rance stepped forward and set the white sack on Bo's bedside table. "They wouldn't let me in before now."

He thought he detected some unspoken emotion in Bo's face at the statement. Bo's gaze slid to Kade before returning to Rance. "What'd ya bring me?"

Rance shrugged. "Nothing much. I happened to stop in at Brynn's, so I brought you a roll."

Bo licked his lips. "Thanks. Sorry, but I've just eaten two pieces of Jax's homemade apple pie. I'm sure I'll get to it before the day is through, though."

"No big deal," Rance said.

"Well, we'd better take off." Shep reached out to lay a hand on Bo's shoulder.

"Yeah, we need to get going, too," Jax added. "Logan's working on a bike that's giving him fits, and the guy isn't known for his patience."

Shep chuckled. "Nate's bike again, I guess?"

Logan shook his head. "Every time I turn around the man wants something else added to it. I told him he should just have himself a custom job made, but he said he doesn't like to wait long enough to have one built for him."

Everyone in the room who knew Nate laughed. Their new mayor was a fantastic guy, but a bit spoiled when it came to waiting for anything.

Bo said goodbye to his friends, and they filtered out into the hall, one by one. Rance hoped Kade would also leave, but no such luck.

"Get over here and have a seat," Bo beckoned, patting the bed beside him.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Kade cut in, staring daggers at Rance.

Bo glanced at Kade and shook his head. "Do me a favour and go ask the nurse when I can have another pain pill."

"You still have over an hour," Kade replied.

"Well. Go. Ask. Anyway." Bo's voice left no room for misunderstanding. He wanted Kade gone.

With a disgusted sound erupting from his throat, Kade stood and left the room. Rance watched the big guy go and turned back to Bo.

"Geeze, why does that guy hate me so much?"

Studying Rance, Bo sighed. "Because I like you so much."

"And what, he has his own designs on you?" Rance asked, sitting at the foot of Bo's bed with his hat beside him.

Bo chuckled, holding his side. "You know it hurts when I laugh, right?"

"Sorry. I wasn't trying to be funny."

"Well it was funny. Kade doesn't have eyes for anyone but Lark. Nope, Kade's problem is that he thinks you don't want me because of my positive status. See, he's got HIV, too."

"You being positive has nothing to do with the reason I won't hop into your bed," Rance informed Bo.

"Really? Then what's the reason you won't let me at that nice package you're carrying? Especially since you've gone to all the trouble of looking absolutely drool-worthy today?"

Rance's gaze swung to the window. "Personal reasons."

No way would he unload his story on the man beside him. Shep knew about his past, but that was only because he'd gotten drunk one night and confessed. Nope, it wouldn't do either of them any good to travel down memory lane. Bo was the kind of man that would claim it was no big deal, but Rance knew first hand how big a deal it really was.

A warm hand covered his, snapping Rance out of his thoughts. He glanced down at Bo's hand, IV still connected. Pity was one thing he couldn't stand.

"Don't feel sorry for me," Rance bristled, pulling his hand out from under Bo's.

"I don't. At least not for whatever reason you think. I do feel sorry that you don't believe in me enough to give me a chance."

"I told you, it has nothing to do with you." Rance stood, placing his hat back on his head. "When're you gettin' out of here?"

"Two more days," Bo mumbled, refusing to make eye contact.

"I can move you into my house if you think you'd be more comfortable during your recovery. Lord knows it's a hell of a lot quieter than the bunkhouse."

"I'll let you know. Lark and Kade have offered to let me stay with them. They rented Casey's old house next door to the church until they can find their own place."

The news caused a pain in Rance's chest. "Whatever. Just let me know so I can change the sheets in the spare bedroom."

Rance left the room without a backward glance. It was probably better that Bo's friends took care of him.

So why did the idea hurt so much?

Chapter Two

By the third week in the tiny rental house, Bo was going nuts. He'd done so many crossword puzzles he thought he might be ready for Jeopardy. As he watched Lark get ready for another day of farming, his jealousy boiled over.

"Just take me out to the ranch for the day," he begged.

"And then what?" Lark asked. "I know you. You won't be able to sit by and watch everyone else work, without feeling the need to get your hands dirty."

"Come on, even if I do nothing but sit on the porch, it'll be better than staring at these same old walls all day."

Lark put a hand on his hip and narrowed his eyes. "You'll wear sandals. I know you wouldn't dare do any work without proper shoes."

Bo readily agreed. It didn't take boots to roam around and shoot the shit with the other guys. Mostly he wanted to see Rance. He hadn't spoken to him since the day the foreman had visited him in the hospital. Even if it was self-torture, Bo needed a fix of those dark-brown eyes, that heavenly ass and broadly muscled chest. And if he got a peek of those lickable dimples, well then, more's the better.

Wearing an old pair of cargo shorts, and an even older red Genesis concert T-shirt, Bo stuffed his feet into a pair of flip-flops and packed his lunch. He was down to one pain pill a day, so thought he would be fine away from the house. If he got tired, he could always lay down on his bed in the bunkhouse.

Bo was also hoping to talk to Shep about coming back to work several hours a day to enter planting data into the computer. He may not be up to the physical work of a farmer, but he could sure as hell sit his ass in a chair and type.

"Ready?" Lark asked, coming out of the bedroom where Kade was still asleep.

"Hell yeah, been ready."

Lark laughed and grabbed the lunch he'd made himself earlier. "Kade said he'd be around town later, so if you want to come home before I'm finished for the day, just give him a call."

"Is he going to work at Logan's shop again?" Kade and Logan had become fast friends, and lately Kade had been spending most of his day working alongside his new friend on motorcycles.

"Probably, but he's also got a meeting with someone about some land. He heard of a couple of older guys who were considering moving further south. I guess one of them has been having some breathing trouble."

Bo tried to think of anyone in Cattle Valley who fit that description. "You're not talking about Ben Zook, are you?"

Lark shrugged. "I don't know the guy's name."

They got into the small hybrid SUV that Lark called a car, and headed towards the Back Breaker. As they passed the bakery, Bo thought of the gift Rance had brought him that day he'd visited. Even though Rance made it seem like the gesture was no big deal, Bo knew better. Despite all his huffing and puffing, Rance liked him.

"I think it's time I moved back out to the ranch," he informed Lark.

"Why? Am I getting on your nerves that bad?" Lark chuckled.

"No, but the noises coming from your bedroom at night are enough to make a guy feel like a voyeur. Especially when that guy hasn't had sex in over a year." It was hard for Bo to believe he'd gone an entire year without fuckin' or being fucked. Up until he moved to Cattle Valley his whole life had seemed to revolve around his dick.

Lark's face went red. "Shit. Why didn't you say something before?"

"Would you have invited me in?" he asked smoothly, sliding his hand to Lark's thigh.

"Stop that," Lark laughed and slapped Bo's hand.

"It was worth a shot." Bo knew very well what Lark looked like while getting fucked. Hell, he'd done it enough times he knew every freckle on Lark's body intimately, but that had been several years ago. Lark had turned eighteen and left the commune for the university in Idaho where he'd met Kade.

Bo didn't hold any grudges. Life on the commune was a hell of a lot different than anywhere else he'd ever lived. Oh, that reminded him.

"Have you talked to your folks lately?"

Lark squirmed in his seat. "Not for a couple weeks. They're not happy I'm working on the farm down here instead of taking my turn at Sunrise Gardens. Why?"

"I think something's going on with Jan, but I can't get anyone to give me a straight answer. Every time I call up there, she's either busy or not there."

"That's weird. What do you need to talk to her about?" Lark asked.

"I want her to sign the damn divorce papers I sent up there almost a year ago."

"No shit? I thought for sure you were a free man by now."

"I wish. It hasn't really mattered because it's not like I'm dating anyway. But if Rance ever does give me a chance, I'd like to be free and clear. Start things between us off on the right foot, ya know?"

"You want me to give Mom a call later, see if I can weasel anything out of her?"

"If you wouldn't mind." Bo took an apple out of his lunch cooler and bit into it, juice running down his chin. "Damn these are good. I'm gonna have to get me some more of 'em."

"We'll swing by the store on the way home. The way you and Kade go through fruit, you'd think the two of you were vegetarians."

"Nope, just two guys who know the importance of staying healthy." It didn't matter what he did during any given day, his HIV status was never far from his thoughts, especially now. If eating his weight in fresh fruits and vegetables allowed him to live another year or so, it was worth it.

They pulled into the Back Breaker and Lark parked next to the row of pickups. "Ever feel this car is out of place here?"

Lark laughed. "Yep, but every time I get gas I thank my lucky stars I don't drive one of these guzzlers. The first thing I'm gonna do once I get a real job is buy a Prius."

Bo held his side as he climbed out of the small car. "That sounds like a perfect car for you, but I can't really see Kade driving it."

"Probably not, but he'll either learn to adapt or freeze his nuts off in the winter trying to ride that damn Harley."

As they neared the barn, Lark waved. "I'll see ya later. Should be finished around five."

"Sound's good." Bo continued on to the barn, anxious to see Rance.

Buddy was the first guy he ran in to. They stood and talked shit for a few minutes before Rance appeared. Clad in his customary well-fitting jeans and black T-shirt.

"Don't you have work to do, Buddy?" Rance asked.

"Sure thing, Boss." Steve tipped his hat to Rance and shot Bo a wink. "Nice to see ya again."

"Same here." Bo turned to Rance after Buddy walked out of the barn. "You got a burr in your britches?"

Rance turned back towards the ranch office. "The only pain in my ass around here is you."

Bo rolled his eyes and followed the foreman. It seemed Rance was back to his old self. Without an invitation, Bo sat in one of the old chairs in the office and put his bare feet up on Rance's desk. If he doubted the beauty of any part of his body, it certainly wasn't his feet.

Rance tossed his hat onto the file cabinet and stared at Bo's position. "What the hell're you doing?"

"Waiting for you to be civil," Bo answered, resting his hands on his chest.

"Get your feet off the desk."

Bo flexed his perfectly shaped toes. "Why, don't you like feet?"

Rance picked up a pen and jabbed the soft arch of Bo's foot.

"Ouch." Bo jerked his feet back, hurting his side with the sudden movement.

"Fuck!" he yelled, hand going to his healing scar.

"Shit, I'm sorry," Rance said, jumping up from his chair to kneel beside Bo. "You okay? Do I need to call someone?"

Bo gazed into Rance's black eyes. The lips he'd been waiting over a year to kiss were right there. Unable to stop himself, Bo leaned forward, sealing his mouth over Rance's. When Rance didn't move, Bo prodded the soft lips with his tongue.

With a soft groan, Rance opened and suddenly Bo's tongue was exploring the foreman's mouth. Reaching out, Bo clasped a hand to the back of Rance's neck and pulled him closer as Rance began to kiss him back.

Fuck. Bo was in heaven. He slid off the chair and knelt in front of Rance, pulling the man into his arms. God this felt right.

Rance moaned again and began fucking Bo's mouth with his tongue. It was hotter than the Fourth of July. Bo felt the bulge behind Rance's fly press against him. Not one to waste an opportunity, Bo reached down and blatantly groped the erection trapped in Rance's jeans.

Like a light switch being turned off, Rance pulled back and shot to his feet. He grabbed his hat, settled it on his head and left the office without a single word being said.

Bo was left on his knees with a bull-sized hard-on. What the fuck had just happened?

* * * *

As soon as he was safely shut in his house, Rance let loose. Tossing his beloved hat onto the hardwood floor he kicked the sofa.

"Sonofabitch!" he cursed himself, falling to his knees.

He'd fought his attraction to Bo too goddamn long to end up making such a stupid mistake.

In a fit of anger, he raised his fist over his head and slammed it against his crotch. In the split second his hand connected with his still semi-hard cock, the air whooshed out of Rance's lungs.

Falling to his side, he cupped his hands over his groin and drew up his legs. *Jesus!* It felt like his stomach was trying to force its way out of his mouth as the pain continued to reverberate up from his dick.

He spit several times on the floor before the bile finally made an appearance. All he could think about as he emptied the contents of his stomach onto the hardwood was thank god he didn't have carpeting.

Once the nausea had passed, Rance managed to roll far enough in the opposite direction so that he was away from the stench. As he laid there crying like a baby, memories of Oren Reynolds rushed him from all sides.

Their first meeting in the diner down the street from the station, the subsequent dates where he tried his best to woo the small blond man into his bed. The first night they'd made love, oh god, what a night that had been. The man had been like no lover he'd ever had. Though small in stature, he'd been an absolute animal in the sack. Whoever said accountants were boring, hadn't known Oren.

With his balls swollen and bruised, thoughts of Oren made Rance hard. Even if it weren't for his extra baggage, the fact that he was still being haunted by a ghost made a relationship with Bo impossible.

No, that wasn't exactly the truth. Oren wasn't a real ghost, hell, the man wasn't even dead. The last time he'd seen him had been in the courtroom, perched on the witness stand, confessing every detail of his love life with Rance to a jury and a roomful of people.

It had been impossible for Rance to stay in Boston after that. His face had been plastered on the front page of every newspaper in the state, and a few national papers as well.

Packing up and coming out to Cattle Valley had been the best decision he'd ever made, away from Oren, away from the public speculation. Here he was just Rance and that's the way he needed it to stay.

Exposing his shame to Bo wasn't an option, so his dick had better well cooperate.

* * * *

After the shock of Rance's sudden departure had worn off, Bo went in search of Shep. He didn't see him in or around the pens, so he made his way to the main house. He held a hand to his side as he slowly climbed the porch steps. It wouldn't do for his boss to see him in any kind of discomfort.

He rang the bell and waited. When no one came to the door right away, Bo took a seat on the porch swing in the shade. He figured if Shep was inside, most likely he was busy doing morning stuff with Jeremy, and who the hell could blame him?

Maybe he should forget Rance and find himself a young stud in town. Perhaps a couple of meaningless tumbles would cure him of the ache in his shorts. Too bad he loved the sonofabitch. Bo knew it served him right. After fucking anything, male or female that walked, maybe it was karma's way of biting him in the ass.

He was still pondering karma and her bitchy attitude when Shep poked his head out the door. "Thought I heard someone out here earlier."

Bo grinned. "Quite alright, I figured you must be...busy and decided to make myself comfortable."

Shep sat in a chair opposite the swing. "How're you feeling?"

"Better. Bored mostly. The doctor said I can't do anything strenuous for another four weeks, but I was hoping I could talk you into letting me do some of the computer work."

Shep looked at him like he was crazy. "Hasn't Rance been paying ya every week? I gave him specific instructions..."

"Yeah, he has," Bo cut Shep off before he got Rance in trouble. "It's just that I'm not very good at sittin' around."

"So take a vacation. I swear I'm not trying to get rid of you, but there isn't enough non-physical work to keep you busy and I know you. If you're around work that needs doin' you'll step in and try to do it. My insurance company would go ape shit if they found out."

Bo ran his hands through his shoulder-length dark brown hair. "I guess I could take a trip to Sunrise Gardens and get my damn divorce papers from my ex-wife."

"See? Perfect. Take a nice trip and then come home ready to work."

The screen door opened and Jeremy came out, feet and torso bare. "Oh, hey, Bo."

"Hey," he returned, trying not to stare at the leanly muscled chest on display.

"Just hanging out?" Jeremy asked, taking a seat on Shep's lap.

"Had to get out of the cracker box Lark and Kade are renting. You hear anything about Ben Zook moving down south?"

"No, but it doesn't surprise me. Living at the base of the mountain like they do, they really get dumped on in the winter. I imagine it's a lot for two older guys to keep up with."

Bo nodded his head. "Lark said Kade was going to look at their place. He said the guys were moving south because of asthma problems."

Shep nodded. "Yeah, it sounds like them alright. I'll be sorry to see old Ben leave town, but at least it's good news for your friends."

"Kade's drawn up some dream cabin he's promised to build Lark. I guess at least if there's already a house on the land they won't be living in a tent while Kade builds it."

"Make sure he talks to Hal."

"Oh, they've already been talking. Kade's hot to get the project started."

"I still don't know much about Kade, but Lark's been a damn fine worker while you've been laid up."

For some reason, Bo felt an ounce of pride at the compliment. "Lark's a hell of a farmer. He taught me damn near everything I know, been doing it since he was old enough to walk."

Out of the corner of his eye, Bo watched Rance enter the barn. He must not have been as nonchalant as he'd hoped.

"Still no progress?" Shep asked.

"Huh?"

Shep tipped his head towards the barn. "I figured with the accident and all, the two of you would've finally come to terms with stuff."

Bo grunted and shook his head. "I can't figure him out. I kissed him earlier and at first everything seemed fine. He was in fact, very receptive until I guess I went a little too far. Then it was like being dumped over the head with a bucket of cold water." Bo sighed. "I don't know what to do anymore."

The telephone inside the house began to ring and Shep gave Jeremy's butt a playful slap. "Let me up, love. I'm expecting a call from the PBR."

Jeremy stood and Shep raced inside to catch the phone. After staring at the barn for several moments, Jeremy headed towards the door. "I don't exactly know what happened to Rance in Boston, but it was enough to drive him here."

Bo nodded, as Jeremy opened the door.

"Seems to me the internet might be a good place to go for answers," Jeremy mumbled before closing the screen door.

Chapter Three

Bo was kicked back in the overstuffed easy chair watching a baseball game. Kade was cuddled on the couch with Lark, who had his nose buried in a TA Chase novel on his e-reader. The boner pushing against the front of Lark's sweats told Bo it must be a good one.

He'd been battling back and forth with himself all afternoon. As much as he wanted to know what Rance's problem was, it felt like an invasion of the man's privacy. "Can I ask you a question?"

Neither man looked up from what they were doing. "Helloooo."

Lark eventually looked up from his e-reader. "What?"

"I wanted to ask you guys your opinion on something."

Lark nudged Kade until he took his eyes away from the television screen. "Bo needs to ask us something," Lark told him.

When he had both their attention, he suddenly didn't know where to start. "Uh...let's say you wanted to find something out about someone. Would it be wrong to search for answers about them on the internet?"

"Yes," Lark quickly said.

"No," Kade answered at the same time.

The two men looked at each other. Lark's eyes narrowed. "I can't believe you just said that."

"Why? If it's on the internet it's like free information. What's wrong with looking it up?" Kade attempted to defend himself.

"Because, we both know he's talking about Rance. And I happen to think it would be wrong to go behind his back. I'm sure if Rance wanted Bo to know his past, he'd tell him."

"But he hasn't." Kade's voice started to rise.

Bo had been around the two men enough to know to get out of the way if they were about to argue. First there was screaming, then came the fucking, neither of which he felt like listening to.

"Maybe there's a reason he hasn't," Lark continued, hands on his hips.

Even though the two of them were staring daggers at each other, Bo noticed the front of Lark's sweats were more tented than ever. *Oh, boy.*

Standing, he pointed towards the door. "I'm just gonna grab a few things and spend the night at the ranch. Give you two time alone."

He doubted either of the men even heard him as they continued the argument. Bo quickly threw a change of clothes into his duffle and picked up Lark's keys on the way out. "You'll have to have Kade give you a lift out to the ranch in the morning. Sorry."

Throwing the duffle into the passenger seat, he headed out.

If such a simple question could elicit such a strong reaction from the pair of love birds currently pulling each other's feathers out back at the house, it pretty much gave him his answer. Nope. Despite the temptation, he would not dig into Rance's personal life. At least not on the internet, but that didn't mean he wouldn't try and get something out of the man himself.

He pulled into the ranch yard and parked beside Rance's truck. Noticing the foreman's lights were still on, he decided there was no time like the present. He may end up making an enemy after all was said and done, but at least he'd be able to move on.

Climbing the porch steps he knocked on the screen door. It took a few moments, but he thought he heard Rance call out. Opening the door, he took a step inside. "Rance?"

"Back here."

Bo followed the voice to the bedroom. Covered only by a sheet, Rance was lying in bed with a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and an ice bag held to his nuts in the other.

"What happened?" Bo asked.

Rance looked his way and groaned. "Go away."

"Are you hurt?" Bo asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Dammit, I said go away," Rance slurred, obviously drunk.

Taking the near empty bottle of whisky out of Rance's hand, Bo set it on the table. Gesturing towards the ice pack he asked. "Get kicked?"

"No," Rance answered, slinging his arm over his eyes. "Go back to your friends, Bo."

The command hurt. "Funny, I thought you were my friend."

"Well you thought wrong. Now give me back my whisky, and leave me the hell alone," Rance slurred.

Bo studied Rance for a few moments. Was this the result of that single kiss? "What the fuck happened to you to make you into such a cold bastard?" he wondered aloud.

Rance uncovered his eyes and stared at Bo. "You came to town."

"What's that supposed to mean? All I ever wanted from you was love and affection. The same goddamn thing everyone wants. You want it too. I see it in your eyes when you look at me, so why all the drama?"

Rance's voice turned sarcastic. "I don't need those things and I don't need you. Go find someone else to fuck."

Bo stood and handed Rance back the bottle of Jack. "Yeah, maybe you're right. Maybe I have wasted my time falling for you. I just thought...hell, forget it."

Bo walked out of Rance's bedroom without a backward glance. He grabbed his duffle from the car and went in to the bunkhouse. Steve, Buddy and Jim had on the same baseball game Kade had been watching.

"Who's winning?" he asked, making himself comfortable on one end of the couch.

"Mariners," Steve answered. Noticing the duffle he'd dropped on his way in the door, Steve gestured. "That mean you're back?"

"Guess so. I need to make a run up to Canada to take care of some personal business, but it seems you guys are stuck with me again."

Buddy stretched out his leg and nudged Bo's thigh. "Good to have you back, man."

"Thanks."

* * * *

Bo pulled into the small parking lot outside the gates of Sunrise Gardens and turned off the ignition. He hoped he was doing the right thing. Unannounced visitors were frowned upon, but Bo hoped the years he'd spent working the farm would smooth his way.

Getting out of the rental car, he grabbed his bag out of the backseat and walked to the guard shack.

"Well I'll be a two-headed toad. Bo Lawson, what brings you here?" Randy asked, slapping Bo on the back.

"Came to see everyone and pick up the divorce papers from Jan."

Randy's face paled. "Uh, does Jan know you're coming?"

What the fuck? "No, Jan doesn't know I'm coming. Why? Is there a problem?"

Bo could tell by the way his old friend was behaving that there was indeed a problem. His resolve to see his estranged wife rose to new heights.

"I'm not sure. Hold on while I call Jim."

Randy disappeared into the small guard building and picked up the phone. The fact that Randy was calling Jim wasn't anything out of the ordinary. As co-owner of Sunrise Gardens, nothing happened without Jim's say so. He held his breath, waiting for Randy to finish the call.

"Jim'll be down to pick you up in a minute," Randy told him.

"Thanks."

Instead of opening the big gates, Randy unlocked the walk-in gate and allowed Bo to pass. It didn't escape Bo's notice that Randy had cut-off the small talk between them. He wasn't sure what Jim had told Randy, but it appeared he was following the boss's orders.

Bo tossed his bag to the ground and waited. Within ten minutes he spotted the golf cart buzzing his way. Jim pulled up along side of Bo and hopped out of the cart. Bo was customarily wrapped in Jim's loving embrace.

"How're you feeling?" Jim asked, stepping back to look Bo up and down.

Bo knew Lark had told his father about the farm accident. He rested his hand against the healing scar and nodded. "A hell of a lot better. I should be able to return to work in a few weeks."

"Good, glad to hear it." Jim pulled Bo back into his arms once again and kissed him.

It wasn't the kind of kiss you gave a friend, no, this was a kiss for a past lover. Hell, Bo had been a lover to most of the men and women who lived in Sunrise Gardens. Accepting Jim's playful tongue came naturally to Bo and he felt himself getting hard.

Jim obviously noticed it too. Pulling back, Jim ran a hand over the front of Bo's jeans. "Been a while."

"That it has," Bo agreed.

A large part of him wanted to bend Jim over the golf cart and fuck his brains out. He knew from past experience that Jim would welcome his entrance, but Bo needed answers first.

Staring Jim in the eyes, he asked the question he'd come to ask. "What's going on with Jan?"

Jim didn't look surprised by the question, just uncomfortable. "Let's get you up to the house and get you settled. We can talk there."

Giving his old friend the courtesy he deserved, Bo nodded and tossed his duffle in the back of the cart.

As they made their way to the small town Jim and his wife Lynda had established, Bo breathed in. He could smell the rich soil in the air. After years spent planting crops on the commercial-grade organic farm, Bo knew most of the fields had already been seeded.

Though Jim and Lynda hadn't set out to establish one of the country's most prosperous farms, it had definitely been an added benefit. Now their compound of free-loving residents could live the life they chose, while making enough money to live quite comfortably.

As he rode through town, Bo waved to several old friends. Monogamy wasn't a word used in Sunrise Gardens. Here, sex was sex, and everyone enjoyed the pleasant pastime with whoever they chose, regardless of their marital status.

Instead of driving to the house, Jim pulled up in front of the micro-brewery. "Care for a drink first?"

Bo nodded. "Yeah, I get the feeling I'm going to need it."

Entering the bar was like stepping back into his old life. How many evenings had he spent groping some random lover in that very room?

Shaking his head, Bo chuckled at himself. He'd only been in town for five minutes and sex was already forefront in his mind. Although it had been over a year since he'd fucked or been fucked, Bo didn't think he missed the place. The reason he'd left in the first place was because he yearned for something more than a daily dose of sex. Even his marriage to Jan hadn't been one of true love, which was how Lark and Kade had convinced him to move to Cattle Valley.

"You okay?" Jim asked, passing him a beer.

"Yeah. Just a lot of old memories in this place."

"Some of them good, I hope," Jim winked.

"Depends on your definition of good, I guess."

Jim, Lynda and their third partner, Neil were the exception to the norm in Sunrise Gardens. Although they enjoyed sex with others, there was actually a true and lasting love between them. That's what Bo had been after the most. He wanted to make love with a partner, not just fuck him.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Jim asked, covering Bo's hand with his own.

Turning his hand over, Bo threaded his fingers through Jim's. "Karma, I guess. Here I had all the sex a man could ask for, but none of the true love I craved. Now I have the love I craved, but none of the sex."

Jim squeezed Bo's hand. "Yeah, that Karma's a bitch. Lark told me about Rance. Sorry to hear he still hasn't come around."

Bo should've known Lark would spill the beans to his dad. "Maybe I want too much. I mean, I'm not exactly the catch of the century. Maybe sex is all I'm destined to have."

"Bullshit. I don't believe that and neither do you."

Bo leaned in and thrust his tongue into Jim's mouth. He knew, even as he sucked on Jim's tongue, that he was doing it more for comfort than anything else, but he was so tired of feeling alone.

Jim fisted Bo's shoulder-length hair in his hands and straddled his lap without ever breaking the kiss. It was easy to feel Jim's passion as it ground against Bo's torso. Bo almost threw caution to the wind and let the man on his lap have exactly what he was after, but he'd come to Sunrise Gardens for a bigger purpose.

Breaking the kiss, he put his hands on Jim's gyrating hips to still him. "We need to talk."

A look passed over Jim's face and Bo knew the man had been trying to distract him. "What are you so afraid to tell me that you'd let me fuck you right here in a public place?"

Jim slowly rose and settled himself back in his chair. After a few drinks of his beer, he stared Bo straight in the eyes. "Jan's dying."

Bo didn't know what he expected to hear, but it definitely wasn't that. He felt momentarily paralysed by the news. Jan had been a young, healthy woman when he'd left, or at least he thought so. He remembered the phone calls they'd shared after he'd moved to Cattle Valley. Something had been off, even then, but he chalked it up to the way he'd left. A thought occurred to him as his gut clenched. "I didn't make her sick...did I?"

"No!" Jim was quick to say. Finishing his beer in one gulp, he signalled for another. "I don't know how to even begin to tell you this..."

"Tell me."

"She had a baby six months ago...a boy."

What? That would mean she was pregnant when Bo left her. "Is he mine?"

Jim shook his head. "No, but the birth taxed her already malformed heart. She's at the hospital in Regina."

"Excuse me," Bo said, getting up from the table and walking towards the restroom.

Turning the faucet on, Bo splashed water on his face. Staring at himself in the mirror, he tried to comprehend what he'd learned. He wondered why Jan hadn't told him about the baby. Had she known having the child would kill her?

One of the reasons Bo had agreed to marry Jan in the first place was because she had made it perfectly clear she didn't want children. With his HIV status, fathering a child wasn't an option he could live with, so it had seemed like the ideal marriage for both of them.

Bowing his head, he braced his arms on the sides of the sink and allowed the tears to come. Whether the boy was his or not, he would've never left her had he known. Maybe that's why she hadn't told him? Did she get together with the baby's father after he left?

The door opened and Jim stepped into the small room. "You okay?"

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Jan begged us not to."

"Why?"

Jim crossed his arms and leaned back against the sink beside Bo. "I'm not sure, but I have my theories."

"And they are?"

"You're still technically married. When she dies, you not only get custody of Joey, but her life insurance as well. Maybe she was trying to make things easier for you?"

Bo exploded. "Easier? What? I was supposed to get a phone call saying my wife was dead, and oh, by the way, you have a child to take care of?"

Jim put his hands on Bo's shoulders. "It's an ugly situation all around, but the important thing is that child. He'll need you."

Bo chuckled. "Yeah, right. I've never been needed in my entire life. I wouldn't know how to deal with it."

Shaking his head, he gazed pleadingly at Jim. "Isn't there someone else? Who's the biological father?"

"He's not in the picture, never has been. Some guy Jan took a shine to when she went into Winnepeg for that concert."

Bo remembered. He'd sent her off with her girlfriends with a smile on his face, glad she was getting out of Sunrise Gardens for a few days. Shit. "What about someone else here in town? Surely there's someone who's grown attached to the boy."

"Sure, Lynda's fallen completely in love with the little guy, but I think you need to think long and hard about it. You're still in shock. Give yourself some time to get used to the idea."

Taking hold of Bo's hand, Jim gave him a little tug towards the door. "Would you like to meet him?"

Bo wiped the drying tears from his cheeks. Did he dare? He thought of his life in Cattle Valley. He didn't even own a house. He supposed the life insurance would take care of that, but was he even equipped to raise a child? What if he got sick?

"Come on. Don't think too much right now. Meet Joey and take things from there."

Bo nodded and allowed Jim to lead him out of the restroom.

The ride to Jim's house was one of the longest of Bo's life. How long had it been since he'd even held a baby? *Fuck. Have I ever?* He'd practically grown up on the streets of St. Louis after his whore of a mother had brought one too many tricks home.

Bo shoved thoughts of his mother away. He'd learned long ago questioning a mother's love never got him anywhere but depressed.

Jim pulled up in front of the house. "You ready for this?"

"No, but I'm not sure that I'll ever be ready."

Bo climbed the steps and followed Jim into the house. He was enveloped immediately in a bear hug. Neil, the third member of Jim and Lynda's ménage family gave him the customary welcome kiss. Bo returned the kiss politely, but didn't take it any further. Pulling back, he glanced around the living room, expecting...what?

A comforting hand landed on his lower back. "I'll tell Lynda you're here."

Bo nodded and watched Jim head out of the room. He turned to Neil. "How's it been, having a baby in the house?"

Neil grinned. "I've actually enjoyed it. I wasn't around to watch Meadowlark grow up, so it's all pretty new for me."

Bo took the offered seat on the couch. "I don't know how to take care of a baby."

"No one really does until they're in the situation. It's a lot of gut feelings and even more patience. But the rewards are indescribable."

Bo could tell by the ex-Colonel's goofy grin he was telling the truth. Maybe Neil was right. He heard footsteps coming down the hall and turned to see Lynda holding a sleeping infant in her arms.

Rooted to the spot, Bo could do nothing but hold his breath and stare as she brought Joey closer.

"Would you like to hold him?" she asked.

Bo gazed down at the sleeping baby. "Isn't he a little small?"

Lynda smiled and ran her finger over Joey's cheek. "A little maybe, but not much."

She glanced up from the sweet child. "He's healthy, Bo."

Bo felt some of the tension slide from his shoulders. He eventually sat back down on the sofa and held out his arms. Lynda smiled and carefully handed the baby over. Joey's long black eyelashes fluttered before he drifted back to sleep. Despite the hair colour, it was easy to see Bo wasn't the father. The baby's dark bronze complexion was a sure sign.

Now that Joey was in his arms, Bo couldn't take his eyes off of him. So perfect. He grinned as Joey started dreaming, those red plump lips pursed and sucking an imaginary bottle.

His eyes began to burn with unshed tears. He didn't deserve something so innocent and clean. Shaking his head, he tried to hand Joey back to Lynda. "I can't."

"Yes, you can. We're going for lunch. You're in charge of Joey until we get back."

Before Bo could voice opposition, Lynda, Neil and Jim filed out the front door. He was left holding an infant he didn't know how to care for. Seeing no other choice, Bo sat back against the corner of the couch and propped his arm on one of the throw pillows.

"Looks like it's just you and me for an hour or so."

Twenty minutes after the threesome left, Joey woke. It started with a few grunts and fluttered eye movements. Bo tensed, not knowing what to expect. Those big black eyes opened and stared right at him.

The two of them studied each other for about five minutes before the crying started. Bo transferred Joey to his shoulder and tried to soothe the child that way, but it wasn't working. *Shit. Food, maybe he's hungry.*

Bo wasn't so clueless he didn't know to look for a bottle. He stood with Joey securely against his chest and went into the kitchen. The bottles were easy enough to find along with the formula, but the big question was how did he make one while holding a screaming, wiggling baby?

He knew setting Joey on the table or counter wasn't an option, so he dug out a couple of dishtowels and carefully laid Joey on top of them.

Reading the instructions on the can of formula, he worked as quickly as he could. "I'm trying, Joey. Give your old man a break."

He stopped mid-shake realising what he'd just said. *Well fuck.*

Bo finished the bottle and carried Joey out to the porch glider. He couldn't help but chuckle at the way the boy seemed to attack the bottle. "Damn, I guess you were hungry."

Berating himself for cussing in front of the boy, he made a mental note to clean up his language. As he watched Joey drain the bottle, he thought about Jan. He knew he needed to go see her, but there were a few things he needed to work out for himself first. It wouldn't do Jan's condition any good if he went in pissed.

A list. He needed to make a list of everything he'd need to do if he took Joey back to Cattle Valley with him. Of course there was the issue of where they'd live, but there was also childcare to think about as well as a host of other things. He knew one thing, he wouldn't feel right taking Joey until his mother had passed. What if she wanted to see her son's beautiful face once more before she took her last breath?

Joey finished the bottle and Bo lifted him to his shoulder like he'd seen mom's do on TV. He began patting the boy's back until he heard a belch and what sounded and felt like a good amount of upchuck. *Great.*

Rance spotted Lark heading for his hybrid. Jogging after him, he called out. "Heard from Bo?"

Lark turned, wiping his sweaty face on the bottom of his T-shirt. "Yeah, he'll be home next week. Why?"

Rance kicked at the dirt under his boots. "Just wondering."

Lark cocked his hip to lean against the SUV. "Can I ask you something?"

Rance was afraid where this might go. "Maybe."

Taking several steps, Lark stared up into Rance's face. "Do you feel anything for him?"

Though he was expecting the question, it still set him off kilter. "He's a good guy, I guess. Good worker."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it."

Gazing down into the face of Bo's best friend, he knew he needed to try and explain what he couldn't seem to get across to Bo. "It doesn't matter whether I feel anything for him or not. I can't let it go anywhere, so he'd be better off setting his sights on someone else."

Lark nodded. "Normally I'd agree with you, but for whatever reason, he's fallen in love for the first time in his life. With everything else he's trying to deal with right now, he needs you."

Rance decided against addressing the love comment. "I thought he was getting better?"

"He is." Lark sighed and looked down at the ground. "He might kill me if he knew I told you this, but his wife died yesterday of heart failure."

Rance spun around, feeling like he'd been punched in the stomach. "He's married? Are you fucking kidding me?"

Oh, God, he was afraid he'd throw up. "That sonofabitch," he spat.

Rance stormed off towards his house, with Lark chasing after him.

"Wait. It's not what you think. He served Jan divorce papers over a year ago," Lark tried to explain.

"Save it, kid. You just told me everything I needed to know." He took the steps two at a time and shut the door in Lark's still protesting face.

* * * *

"You're sure you don't mind keeping Joey until I can get things set up back home?" Bo asked, bouncing Joey in his arms.

After their initial meeting, Bo had learned a lot about caring for the little guy. It helped that both Lynda and Joey were so patient with him. He looked at his son and grinned. "Are you daddy's boy?"

It no longer mattered to Bo that he wasn't Joey's biological father. The sweet baby had imbedded himself deep into Bo's heart. For the first time in his life he loved someone who seemed to love him back. He knew it was going to kill him to get on the plane back to Cattle Valley, but his time was up and he had a job he needed to return to.

"Daddy will be back to get you before you know it."

With one last kiss, Bo handed Joey over to Lynda. "I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for us."

Lynda leaned in and gave Bo a kiss on the cheek. "It's been my pleasure. And you know you're welcome anytime."

He gave a quick kiss goodbye to Jim and Neil, before smoothing his hand over the top of Joey's black hair. "I'll miss you."

Climbing into his rental car, he watched his son in the rear view mirror until he was a spec in the distance. Turning his eyes to the road, Bo concentrated on everything he needed to do to bring his son home.

Talking to Shep would be first on his list. He doubted his boss would mind if he lived off the ranch, but there was more to it than that. He'd need to make sure Shep understood that occasionally he'd need to leave work to take Joey to the doctor or whatever. His present plans were to try and keep Joey with him as much as possible during the day.

The women at Sunrise Gardens always toted their babies around with them in a pack on their back. Bo didn't see any reason why he couldn't do the same thing. He never messed with the livestock, and except for the incident with Zero breaking through the pen, he doubted he'd be putting Joey in any danger.

For days he'd worried about telling Rance, but then he'd looked into Joey's dark eyes and realised he couldn't expend time and energy loving someone who didn't want to be

loved. He may never get over his feelings for Rance, but he couldn't afford to let them hold him back from living his life.

He dug the picture of Joey out of his front shirt pocket and kissed it. "Looks like it may just be you and me, kiddo."

Chapter Four

It wasn't until his second day back that Bo gathered the courage to speak to Shep. Knocking on the main house door, he took his customary seat on the porch swing and waited for Shep to join him.

It felt good to get his hands dirty again. He'd hated to put Lark out of a job, but he knew the boy was meant for better things anyway.

Shep stepped outside with Jeremy on his arm. "It's about time you came by."

"Sorry. I got in pretty late and I was eager to get started this morning."

"Lark told us about your wife. I'm sorry."

Bo nodded. It was still hard to imagine Jan was gone, but from the sound of it, she was in a better place. "I appreciate that. I guess she was in a lot of pain there towards the end. Did Lark happen to tell you anything else?"

Shep glanced at Jeremy, they both shook their heads. "Nope," Shep answered.

"Jan had a baby going on seven months ago. She left him for me to raise. And before ya ask, no, he's not mine by blood, but that don't make a spit of difference to me. I love Joey like he was my own."

Shep's eyes lit up and Jeremy's jaw dropped. "Hot damn. We're gonna have us a little mascot running around the ranch."

Jeremy elbowed Shep. "He's a baby, not a puppy."

Shep looked insulted. "I know that." He grinned at Bo. "I'm happy for you. I'm even happier for myself. I've always wanted a nephew to spoil."

Bo couldn't believe his boss was taking it so well. "Just so you know. I'll be looking for a house for the two of us in town. I hope that's okay."

"No. It certainly is not okay. What's wrong with the bunkhouse? Now that Jeremy's not sharing your room there should be plenty of space for a crib."

Bo scratched his head. "I'm not so sure the other cowboys will be as excited about Joey as you are."

"Well, why don't you ask 'em before you run out and buy a house? It should work for a couple years at least."

He'd never get over the kindness of the folks in Cattle Valley. Bo went on to tell Shep and Jeremy all about the baby, even bringing out the few pictures he'd brought along. By the end of their visit, he reckoned Jeremy was almost as taken with the idea of having a baby around as Shep.

"It's Tuesday, which means Taco Night in town. Care to join us?"

Bo rubbed his stomach. It had been over two months since he'd sat down to eat greasy tacos with his friends. "I'd love to. Sunrise Garden's is great if you want fresh produce, but it sucks if you're hankering for junk food. Just let me run to the house and get cleaned up, ten minutes max."

Shep nodded. "We'll be here."

Bo jogged towards the bunkhouse. Flying through the door, he almost ran over Rance. "Sorry," he said and kept going.

Stripping off his clothes, he jumped into a warm shower, and quickly scrubbed up. For the first time in recent memory, the sight of Rance hadn't made him hard. Bo thought that was pretty good progress.

He was out of the shower and dressed in comfortable shorts and a white muscle shirt within eight minutes, leaving two to spare. After slipping on his flip-flops, he ran a brush through his hair and was out the door.

"Made it," he panted, running up the porch steps.

It was then he noticed Shep and Jeremy enjoying an evening make-out session. Damn. I guess there had been no need for him to rush after all. One thing the cowboys on the ranch had learned pretty damn quick, was not to interrupt the boss when he was gettin' some sugar.

Resigned to waiting, he climbed back down the steps and took a seat. He was surprised when Rance's big black truck pulled up in front of him.

"Need a ride? Looks like they may be awhile."

Bo didn't even need to look over his shoulder. The slurping kissing and moaning sounds were enough to let him know Rance was right. With a deep breath and a renewed pledge to himself, Bo climbed into the truck. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

As they drove towards town, the only words Rance said to him had to do with work. "The hay should be about ready, won't it?"

"Yeah. I'll probably start cuttin' and bailing next week. I'm gonna need some help loading the small bales though. The doc released me to come back to work, but I've got a weight restriction of thirty pounds until he clears me."

"No problem."

They rode the rest of the way in complete silence. Bo eventually reached over and turned the radio on low. He couldn't help but to wonder if things between him and Rance would always be strained.

One thing he knew for sure was he needed to tell Rance about Joey. Bo decided to wait until the ride home for that. No sense ruining both their dinners, because there was no doubt they'd probably fight about it. That just seemed to be Rance's way lately.

Bo wasn't even surprised when Rance chose to sit at the opposite end of the long table reserved for the cowhands from EZ Does It and Back Breaker. They'd all been eating together for years he'd heard.

He ordered a pitcher of beer, earning a dirty look from Rance. *Fuck you.* By the time he'd finished his first glass, Jax, Logan, Kade and Lark strolled through the door. Finally, someone for him to talk to.

Lark greeted Bo with a big hug. "I've missed you."

"I missed you, too. How's the job hunt?"

Lark chuckled and rolled his eyes. "I've only been out of a job for one day. I think I deserve at least a couple weeks off before I become a full-fledged adult."

Bo reached over and mussed Lark's blond hair. "I reckon you're right."

Lark practically bounced in his chair. "So tell me about Joey. I want to hear everything."

Bo leaned back and crossed his arms. Now this was a topic he'd gladly talk about. "He's beautiful. I swear I've never seen anyone more perfect. He's got jet black hair and the prettiest bronze skin you ever laid eyes on. Oh, speaking of eyes. His will absolutely mesmerise you, long thick lashes that kind of fan over his cheeks when he blinks. I tell ya, Lark, I knew I was in love the first time I held him in my arms."

A disturbance at the other end of the table caught his attention. Rance had up-ended the beer he'd been drinking and it was spilling all over Ezra.

"Oh, shit," Bo chuckled. Spilling beer on a man the size of Ezra James was like poking a stick at a grizzly.

He winked at Lark. "If Ezra decides to kill Rance, will you give me a lift home?"

* * * *

After apologising profusely to Ezra, Rance decided he'd had enough beer. His gaze slid to Bo at the opposite end of the table. The man was drinking like a fish. Didn't he understand how bad beer was for him?

Hell, he was probably too busy pining for that guy, Joey, he'd been talking about earlier. Rance didn't know if Bo had done it on purpose, but the man was talking loud enough for Rance to hear every word.

Maybe he should be happy Bo had found someone while in Canada, but dammit, it proved to him once again that he was easily forgotten. Bo was the second person to claim he was in love with him, only to brush him aside when something better came along. Well, fine. It would definitely make his life easier. He'd been really starting to rethink things when Bo had stayed away for so long.

"You ready?" Bo asked.

Rance looked up and was surprised most of the people at the table had already paid their bills and left. "Yeah."

Throwing a couple bills onto the table, he walked out to his truck. He regretted ever offering Bo a ride in the first place. But, just as he'd suspected, Shep and Jeremy never actually made it into O'Brien's for Taco Tuesday.

* * * *

"Don't puke in my truck," Rance growled as he fastened his seat belt.

"What? Why would I puke? I only had three beers."

"Three too many as far as I'm concerned," Rance grumbled.

"What's your problem, man?" Bo asked.

"It's not good for you, and you know it. I thought you were supposed to be some kind of expert at taking care of yourself."

Bo's eyes slid to study Rance's profile. It almost sounded like the man was concerned. Bo tried to push the idea away, but he wondered the rest of the drive home.

Once they pulled up in the ranch yard, Bo realised he hadn't told Rance about Joey. Oh well, he didn't seem in the mood anyway. Maybe he'd catch him in the morning. Of course that meant he should hold off talking to Steve, Buddy and Jim.

Bo got out of the truck and headed for the bunkhouse. He wondered if it was too late to call Lynda and check on Joey? *Oh crap*. That reminded him. He'd left his cell phone on the tractor.

Veering off from his original destination, Bo walked towards the pasture. The tractor was beyond the second gate, and he'd have to cross the bull pen, but it was late and usually the big guys were calm at night.

He heard footsteps behind him and glanced over his shoulder. Rance was closing in. What the hell did he want?

"Where do you think you're going?" Rance asked.

Bo never broke stride. He climbed over the first gate, but made the mistake of jumping down. A stitch of pain had him reaching for his previous injury.

"I asked you a question."

Bo exhaled. He'd been trying to get through the pen as quiet as possible which wasn't going to happen if Rance kept up the interrogation. "I left my phone in the tractor, so I'm going to get it, is that okay with you?"

He was almost to the second gate when Rance put a hand on his shoulder. "You're a damn fool, you know that?"

Bo shrugged the hand off and unlocked the gate. After the first idiot move, he didn't plan on making another. He slipped in through the open fence and went to close it, but once again Rance was there.

Bo tried his best to keep his cool, but Rance just kept on. "What the hell you need your phone bad enough for that you'd risk your neck walking through a pen of bulls?"

Spinning to face Rance, Bo pushed him. "What the fuck is your problem? For a year you act like you can't stand to be around me, now all of a sudden you're my keeper. Bullshit! I want to call and see if Joey's still awake. Is that okay with you, Boss?"

Rance started chuckling. "Oh, I should've guessed. One day away from your new fuck buddy and you'd..."

That's as far as Rance got before Bo ploughed his fist into his boss's pretty face. Caught off guard, Rance landed on the ground. Before he could get up, Bo towered over him, pointing a finger directly in Rance's face.

"You ever say something like that about my son again and I'll kill ya."

Rance looked surprised. He rubbed his jaw where Bo's fist had connected. "Joey's your son? Since when do you have a kid?"

"Yeah he's my son, who the hell did you think he was?" Bo was surprised Rance even knew Joey's name.

"Hell, I didn't know. I heard you telling Lark at dinner how gorgeous he was and how you were so in love with him. What was I supposed to think?"

Before Bo could explain any further, a noise behind them caught his attention.

"Fuck! Run!" he screamed, taking off towards the tractor as Zero Tolerance charged through the open gate and straight for them.

Both barely managed to jump on the tractor before the one ton bull reached them. "Why didn't you shut the goddamn gate?"

"I thought I did," Rance yelled back.

Without getting down, Bo climbed from the back tire to the cab. He held out his hand to Rance. "Best come on over here. Doesn't look like old Zero's going anywhere, anytime soon."

After a several second staring contest between the two men, Rance eventually let Bo help him to the open cab. Zero continued to snot and snort his way around the tractor. Bo could tell the mean sonofabitch was just waiting for his chance to get them.

Bo retrieved his cell phone from under the seat. "Should we call somebody?"

Rance chuckled. "Seriously? Do you know how bad we'll get dogged for this?"

Although the cab was bigger than the width of the tire, it was still too small for two people to stand or sit for the hours it may take for Zero to get tired of the game.

"Go ahead and take a seat. I'll climb up on the hood."

"No, you take the seat. You're the one who's still on the mend."

Bo wasn't about to get into a pissing contest with Rance over who sat where, so he took the offered seat. "Thanks."

Rance climbed over the steering wheel and straddled the hood as much as he could while still keeping his legs higher than Zero could reach. The two of them sat in silence for about fifteen minutes before Rance finally cleared his throat.

"So tell me about your boy."

"Well, I guess there's no time like the present." Bo went on to explain to Rance about Jan, her pregnancy and subsequent illness. He waxed poetic about his son and how smart he was.

"You've tested his IQ already?" Rance chuckled.

"Of course not. You can tell by the way he looks at you though that he's thinking of all kinds of things. I wouldn't be surprised if he started talking any day.

Rance laughed again. "Been around a lot of talking babies, have ya?"

"Never been around babies, period. Joey's the first, so cut me some slack."

"I'll think about it. So when are you bringing him down here?"

"Soon. I need to talk to the guys and make sure they don't mind a baby in the bunkhouse. I offered to buy a place in town, but Shep wouldn't hear of it. I think he's looking forward to playing uncle."

"I can't wait to see that."

They'd been so involved they hadn't even noticed Zero had gone. "Shit. Where'd he go?"

"I don't know," Rance said. "But I doubt he went back in the pen."

"What're we gonna do?" Bo asked. All he could think about was Shep hitting the roof when he found out his number one rodeo bull was AWOL.

"I guess we get up in the morning and go find him. Might take more than a day depending on how motivated he is to get the fuck outa Dodge."

Bo groaned. "Perfect. I guess there's no way around telling Shep now, is there?"

"It's my fault. I'll tell Shep I left the gate open."

"I can't let you take the fall by yourself. We'll go to him together at first light."

Rance looked around once more. "You ready to make a break for it?"

"Might as well. I'm sure if the big bastard is anywhere in the area, he'll come running. I still don't know why he hates me so much."

Rance chuckled as he slid to the ground. "Don't take it personally. Zero hates everyone."

"Some it seems more than others."

* * * *

Rance didn't dare look at Bo. Shep had given them both an ass-chewin' they'd not soon forget. He'd ordered them out with the stock trailer, telling them not to come back without the bull.

"At least we don't have to worry about Zero going up into the high country," he mumbled. Bulls as big and heavy as Zero tended to take the easiest route to reach a destination.

"There is that," Bo agreed.

They could also be thankful they had the pickup, and not the horses. Riding for days on horseback wasn't as fun as it sounded. He still couldn't believe he'd left the damn gate open. What a sophomoric thing to do. If he'd been paying more attention to the livestock, instead of his jealous streak, he'd have never made the mistake.

There, he'd admitted it. He'd been jealous when he'd overheard Bo talking about Joey. The really stupid part was that even after finding out that Joey was a baby, he was still jealous. Evidently he'd gotten so used to Bo always there, trying to kiss him, or brushing a hand over Rance's butt when he passed by, there seemed to be a void without it.

Bo must be a hell of a guy to agree to raise another man's child. That's what got him most of all. Now that he knew the truth, he was questioning everything he'd ever thought about Bo. He'd heard Bo talking about the sex-commune or whatever they called it on many occasions, and from that he'd formed an opinion about the man that was turning out to be very wrong.

"How long were you married?" he found himself asking.

"Three years legal. Two years together."

"Did you love her?"

Bo shifted in the seat to lean against the passenger door. "I cared for her. But love, no, I can't say that I did."

"This may be a dumb question, but why'd you marry her if you didn't love her?"

Bo didn't answer for several moments. Finally, he cleared his throat. "I guess I just wanted to belong to somebody."

The pain in the simple answer tore at Rance's heart. "What about family?"

Bo shrugged. "My friends are my family. I ran away from home, if you could even call it that, when I was thirteen."

"Damn. You were just a kid."

"Yeah."

"How'd you survive?"

Bo readjusted himself and rolled down the window. "Any way I could."

Rance knew by the way he'd said it that Bo had traded his body for survival. "Is that how you contracted the virus?"

"You're awfully nosy for someone who won't tell me a flying fig about his own past."

"You're right. I'm sorry for buttin' in."

They drove miles trying to cover every inch of the east pasture before finding a broken spot in the fencing. "Shit."

Rance parked the truck and got out to inspect the fence. A tuft of black hair stuck to one of the barbs on the broken wire. "Well at least he made it through and didn't kill himself."

"Yeah, but where does this go?"

Rance sighed. "Beauregard Game Preserve."

"Shit."

"Yep."

* * * *

After spending over an hour on the phone with Shep and Nate, Rance was finally given the go ahead to take the truck and trailer onto the game preserve's land. The only stipulation was he needed to put a temporary fix on the fence after Bo drove through with the trailer.

Without proper tools, and protective gloves, the danger of Bo cutting himself was too great for them to take the chance. Rance did his best to rig a solution out of the already stretched and broken wire.

By the time he hopped into the truck, another ninety minutes had passed. "Cross your fingers that thing holds until I can get back to the ranch."

"Where to?" Bo asked.

Rance looked over at Bo. He knew the guy felt bad about not being able to help with the fence, but they didn't have any other option. "Go ahead and head straight east. Zero's not the smartest bull in the pen, so I doubt he's trying to trick us."

Bo nodded and slowly drove the pickup and trailer over the rocks and brush. "Yeah," Bo said out of the blue.

"Huh?"

"When I was seventeen, a man named Edward made me his boy toy. I travelled the world, wore expensive clothes and contracted the virus, while sailing the Mediterranean. You see, there was a rare vintage of wine Edward had his eye on, but the only thing the owner would take in exchange was a night with me."

Bo slowed the truck to a stop and leaned his head against the steering wheel. "The bastard knew he had the virus, that's why he made the deal. Edward wouldn't sleep with him, so he infected Edward through me."

Rance closed his eyes and put a hand on Bo's back. "I'm sorry."

Bo wiped his eyes and turned his head to look at Rance. "Ya know, I've done a lot of things in my life and I've met some very interesting people. One thing that I've learned is that everyone has a story, and everyone thinks theirs is the worst."

Bo chuckled. "That's why I don't dwell on mine. It sucks that I've lived over thirteen years with a virus that makes a lot of people fear me, but I can't change it. All I can do is wake up each morning, and thank God I was granted another day."

Rance had to turn away from the honesty in Bo's eyes. Was it shame he was feeling? Had he shut himself off from people and intimacy for sixteen years because he simply felt sorry for himself?

Bo started the truck and continued driving east as Rance attempted to keep his focus on the task at hand. He knew he had a lot to think about. Who would've thought the guy who joked with everyone, would be the one to make him see the truth behind his actions?

Because they weren't allowed to build a fire on the preserve's land, Rance decided it would be best to sleep in the stock trailer, at least it would afford them protection from the animals.

As Bo disrobed to his underwear and crawled inside his sleeping bag, he couldn't get the afternoon's morose conversation out of his mind. Why had he spilled his guts to a man who didn't seem to care? The answer came to Bo almost immediately, *because Rance does care*. Bo had seen it in Rance's eyes when he'd finished his story.

Rance being tight-lipped the rest of the day threw him a bit, but he knew it wasn't anger driving the silence. He wondered if Rance was looking for an opening. It was harder for men to admit they'd made a mistake, Bo knew that as well as anyone.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Maybe." Rance replied, cautiously.

"There are two stories about you floating around Cattle Valley and I'd sure as hell like to know which one is correct. Were you on the pro rodeo circuit before you moved here, or did you come from Boston?"

He'd purposely asked that question because he already knew the answer. Everyone in town thought Rance was a rodeo retiree, but only a few knew Rance's true history. Bo needed to test Rance for whatever reason to see if he'd open up and tell him the truth.

"Never rode in a real rodeo in my life. I spent summers with my grandparents in Oklahoma. There wasn't much else for a kid to do there besides learn to ride. After summer break, I'd return to my parent's upscale brownstone in Boston."

Bo felt like pumping his arms into the air at the small victory. He rolled to his side and readjusted the inflatable pillow under his head. "Never been to Oklahoma. Weird since I grew up in Missouri. Guess there was just never a reason to go there."

Rance turned to face Bo and grinned. "You didn't miss much."

"So why'd you go?"

"Probably the same reason you got married. My parents were very busy people with important and time consuming careers. I went to Oklahoma to get treated like I mattered."

Bo reached out and cupped the side of Rance's face. Leaning further in, he whispered against Rance's lips. "I think the two of us have more in common than we want to admit."

Rance closed the distance and sealed his lips with Bo's. The kiss started soft, with playful nips thrown in for fun.

Bo moaned and scooted his bed closer to Rance. He felt like a butterfly trapped in a cocoon. Laying half on top of Rance, Bo took the kiss deeper, tasting, sucking. Kissing Rance was everything good in the world rolled into one package.

With his cock stone hard, Bo's body automatically started grinding against Rance. At first Rance seemed to welcome the increased sexual activity, but just like previously, he panicked and called a halt to it.

"Stop. Bo, please, stop," he cried, pushing Bo away.

Bo rolled over on his back and flung his arm over his eyes. "Jesus you're a hard guy to figure out."

With an audible sigh, Rance moved over and put his head on Bo's chest. "You know how you said earlier that everyone has a story? Well I have one too, and I think it's finally time I shared it with you."

Chapter Five

Bo wrapped his arm around Rance. It hadn't escaped him that the man didn't take off anything but his hat and boots before climbing into his sleeping bag. As he tried to put Rance at ease by running a comforting hand up and down his arm, the feel of material was out of place.

"Before you start, will you do me a favour and at least take your shirt off? Snuggling's much better skin to skin."

"Ummm, maybe you should hear my story first."

Bo kissed the top of Rance's head. "Doesn't matter what kind of story you tell me, I'll still want your shirt off."

Rance's muscles tensed under Bo's hands. The more Bo thought about it, the more he realised he'd never seen Rance without a shirt. Even on the hottest days of the year, the furthest Rance went was a muscle shirt.

Leaning back, Rance sat up and pulled his T-shirt over his head and laid it to the side. With only the moonlight streaming in through the top of the stock trailer, Bo couldn't make out anything unusual about Rance's chest. As he'd expect of a hard working man like Rance, the muscles were sculpted. Other than being pale in contrast to the cowboys face, neck and arms, Rance's chest looked as perfect as Bo knew it would.

With a deep breath, Rance reached down and brought Bo's hand to his lower stomach. "Feel this?"

Bo's fingers encountered a mass of small scars pebbled across Rance's stomach. "Can I ask?"

"Let me give you the Reader's Digest version."

"Okay," Bo agreed, pulling Rance back down into his arms.

"I started dating this guy, Oren, when I worked for the Boston PD. With my crazy schedule, we didn't see a lot of each other, but we tried to make time for a couple dates a week. I always thought it was strange that he'd refused to stay the night, but his excuses were always believable."

"Oh, shit," Bo mumbled. He had a feeling he knew where this was going.

"Yeah, oh, shit. About seven months into the relationship, a woman walked up to me as I was getting off-shift. It was raining, so I didn't think anything by the long trench coat she was wearing. She asked me if I was Rance Benning."

Bo swallowed around the lump in his throat. He didn't like the direction this story was heading. He held Rance closer.

"When I said yes, she pulled out a shotgun loaded with a round of buckshot and fired, almost point blank. She aimed for my dick, but like buckshot's known to do, the spray covered a pretty large area."

Bo gasped as his balls immediately tried to hide inside his body. So many things came back to him at that point, like the kiss in Rance's office. They'd been going at it hot and heavy until Bo had reached for Rance's erection.

Bo tried to speak, but found he couldn't. He cleared his throat and tried again. "What happened?"

"My fellow officers heard the shot and came pouring out of the building. Oren's *wife*, Anita, didn't even try to run. They called an ambulance and managed to get me to the hospital before I bled to death. I ended up having four separate procedures to try and reconstruct the damage that one shotgun blast caused. They did everything they could, but my body was too badly damaged. I lost a nut, and my cock was basically split in two. They sewed me back together. Even after all these years I can't stand to look at myself."

"What happened to Oren and his wife?"

"Anita stood trial. She's still in prison, will be for another few years. Oren, now that's the saddest part of all. After the shooting, an ex-lover of his came forward. The guy told the police that Oren's wife had caught the two of them in bed. She told Oren the next time he decided to fuck around, she'd blow the balls off the guy. Needless to say, the guy he was having a fling with took to the hills."

"So he knew he was putting you in danger?"

"Yeah, and the prosecutor and I thought he did it on purpose. You see, Anita was a wealthy woman. Oren knew he'd get shafted if he tried to divorce her. The next best thing was sending her to prison. And who better to have your wife shoot than a cop. Yeah, Oren knew exactly what he was doing."

"So is he in jail, too?"

"No. In the end, the prosecutor didn't feel she had enough proof to take the case to trial."

"He's a free man?"

"Yep. Something I think about every time I use the john."

Bo finally understood. Not only was Rance betrayed in the worst way, but he was left with a constant reminder. The size and shape of a man's penis was a huge part of his self-esteem. No wonder Rance refused to let anyone get close to him.

Pulling Rance up until he was eye level, Bo kissed him. Keeping his lips gentle, he tried to convey the depths of his sorrow for what Rance had gone through. It must have worked, because Rance's body began to shake as his emotions got the better of him.

Bo broke the kiss and Rance laid his head on Bo's outstretched arm. Gazing into each other's eyes, Bo brushed his lips over Rance's forehead. "If this right here is the most you're ever able to give, I'll be content for the rest of my life. My love for you has nothing to do with sex, which I know sounds strange coming from a guy like me, but it's the truth. Just to feel you in my arms every night will be more than I've ever hoped for."

Rance began peppering kisses on Bo's naked chest. "Hmmm, that doesn't sound like much fun. The equipment still works. It's just not something I'm comfortable with you seeing, at least not yet anyway."

"I can live with that. I guess this is the part of the conversation where we should talk about my positive status, huh?"

Rance ducked his head, rimming his tongue around Bo's pebbled nipple before answering. "I already know quite a bit. To be perfectly honest, shortly after you came to Cattle Valley I looked HIV up on the internet. So the way I see it, as long as we lay in a large supply of condoms, I think we should be okay in that respect. Although you know I'll probably continue to nag you about your diet."

Bo laughed for the first time in what felt like days. "I'm actually a very healthy eater. Sure I like to indulge from time to time, but I know what my body needs to remain in good shape."

Rance ran his hand over Bo's chest. "Yeah, you must, because no one looking at you would even know you're positive."

"And that's the way I intend to keep it."

Joey's face popped into his head. *Shit*. They hadn't even discussed his son. "Can I ask you a question?"

Rance chuckled. "I think it's safe to say I'm pretty much an open book to you at this point."

"Well...damn, I feel like a girl."

Rance's hand brushed over the erection trapped in Bo's underwear. "Hmm, you don't feel like one."

"Smart ass. The thing is, I have my son to think about now. And I guess...I just need to know if you see this thing between us lasting."

Rance leaned up on his elbow and looked down at Bo. "Do you have any idea what it meant for me to tell you that story?"

Before Bo could answer, Rance leaned down and kissed him. "I love you, you stupid ass."

Bo grinned from ear to ear. "What about Joey? Is there room in your life for him?"

"I've not been around many babies. Delivered one once, but that's the extent of my knowledge."

"Hell, you know more than I did when I went to Canada. Lynda, that's Lark's mom, she taught me quite a bit. I could teach you if you want me to."

Rolling over on top of Bo, Rance began to grind their hips together. "And what sort of treat will I get if I pass a lesson?"

Bo's hands squeezed between them, and went to the snaps on Rance's jeans. "Is this okay?"

After a short pause, Rance nodded. "I'll get them."

He rolled off Bo and began to strip. Bo took off his own underwear and waited for Rance to finish. It didn't escape his notice that Rance turned the slightest bit away from Bo when he pulled his underwear off.

Reaching for his jeans, Bo dug out his wallet and withdrew two condom packets. Before Rance could question Bo's reason for carrying them, Bo decided to put his soon-to-be lover's mind at ease. "When I found out I was positive, I vowed to never leave home without a

supply. Don't worry though. I've not needed them since moving to Cattle Valley, at least not until now."

Kneeling on his sleeping bag, Rance used his T-shirt to cover himself while he began unzipping the bag. "Why don't we put our bags together?"

Although he doubted they'd need any covers, Bo nodded and rose off his makeshift mattress. He grinned several times as he caught Rance's gaze zeroing in on his bouncing cock.

"All for you," he teased, waving his erection from side to side with a shake of his hips.

Before he even had their bed made, Rance was busy tearing open one of the foil packets. "Is two all you have?"

Bo chuckled. "Yep. Sorry."

Rance scratched his jaw for a few seconds, apparently deep in thought. "My cum holds no danger to you, right?"

"Yeah, but I won't suck you off without a condom. Although the risk to you is minimal, it's just not worth it."

"Okay, so, if I suit you up, suck you off, and then rub off on you, we'd only use one condom, right?"

Bo's cock began producing copious amounts of pre-cum at the idea. "Yeah."

"Perfect. Then that would leave another one for morning."

Laughing, Bo thrust his cock towards Rance. "Sounds like a plan."

Rance held out the condom and slowly rolled it down Bo's length, giving the reservoir at the tip plenty of space for Bo's seed. "That enough room?"

Bo was so lost in the hand-job Rance was giving him, he found it hard to answer. "Good."

As he struggled to get into the sleeping bag, Rance refused to remove his hand from Bo's erection. Damn. Bo didn't know if he'd ever felt so much pleasure from a simple hand-job.

Unzipping the bag far enough to expose Bo's cock to the air, Rance leaned down. The first brush of Rance's tongue nearly sent Bo over the edge. "Fuck, babe."

"Goddamn you're big," Rance observed, teasing Bo's length with his tongue.

"All yours," he mumbled, as Rance's mouth covered the crown.

Bless Rance for not commenting on the nasty taste of the latex. Instead, he seemed to be enthralled with Bo's cock, taking as much of the length as he could into his throat. Bo knew it had been years for Rance, so he wasn't bothered the few times when his lover gagged.

"Don't hurt yourself. If you wanna suck the head, that's more than fine with me."

Rance refused his offer and continued to try and stretch his throat enough to take more of Bo's length. Bo couldn't help but grin. Rance was a man who needed to be the best at everything he did. And from the way he was making Bo feel, he didn't need to worry about his blow job abilities.

Once Rance seemed more comfortable, Bo let himself go, threading his fingers through Rance's dark hair as he began to fuck his lover's mouth. "Oh, Christ you're good at that."

With his balls tightening, Bo warned Rance of his impending climax. "Almost there."

Rance's fingers danced over Bo's scrotum and asshole as he continued the assault on Bo's cock. He sucked in his breath as the first pulse of cum shot from his shaft into the tight latex.

With his hand working the base, Rance continued to milk every drop of cum from Bo's cock. Reaching down, Bo pulled Rance up and into a deep kiss.

"That was...amazing." Bo gave Rance another kiss before carefully removing the condom. With no idea where to dispose of it, he dug, one handed into his duffle and removed the baggie he had his toothbrush in. Dropping the tied condom inside, he set it aside.

"Wow. You're really careful," Rance commented.

Bo removed one of the moist towellets he always carried in his duffle and thoroughly cleaned his cock. "I'm a bit obsessive actually, but I never want to do to a lover what was done to me. It's a small price to pay for peace of mind."

As soon as Bo had put the towellet into the baggie, Rance growled and rolled on top of him. "My turn."

"How do you want me?" Bo asked.

"Just as you are," Rance chuckled, starting a slow grind.

Bo had to be honest. He longed to reach down and hold his lover's shaft in his hand, but at this point in their relationship, he wasn't sure his touch would be welcomed. The truth

was, he didn't want to hold Rance's cock out of some sense of morbid curiosity, he wanted to touch it because it was attached to the sexiest man he'd ever known.

The intensity in which Rance was grinding against him, Bo could very well imagine what making love with the ranch foreman would be like. For all his quiet reserve, Rance was surprising him at every turn.

With a hand to the back of Rance's neck, he pulled the sexy sonofabitch down into a deep, tongue fucking kiss.

A grunt, followed by an all-over body shiver signalled Rance's orgasm. "Oh, fuck."

Bo welcomed the heat of his lover's seed as it shot between their bodies. He pushed his hand between them, and gathered as much of Rance's essence as he could. Bringing his fingers to his lips, Bo stared into his partner's eyes as he slowly licked at the thick, white cum.

Rance groaned and leaned down for another kiss, sweeping his tongue into Bo's mouth to taste his own flavour.

"Mmmm," Bo hummed. "You taste good."

Rance reached into Bo's bag and extracted another towelett. After a quick clean-up, he collapsed on Bo's chest. "You've worn me out."

"And that was with just one condom. Imagine what we could do with an entire box at our disposal."

* * * *

During the early hours of the morning, the entire trailer tilted as a loud noise woke Rance and Bo from a sound sleep.

"What the hell?" Bo shot up onto his feet.

The trailer listed to its side, as once again it was rocked by what Rance suspected was a one ton fucker named Zero Tolerance.

Scrambling for his clothes, Rance began to turn in circles. "Where's my goddamn underwear."

"Forget 'em. We've got to get that sonofabitch in here before he gets away again. Bo threw on his clothes and started to climb the lumbar walls of the trailer.

Another hit threatened to send Bo toppling over the top. "What the hell are you doing?" Rance asked.

"Trying to get the hell out of here without getting myself killed. I thought if I could make it to the hitch, I could climb into the back of the truck."

"And then what? You gonna take on Zero by yourself?" Rance yelled.

"I guess unless you get your clothes on, I will."

It was then that Rance realised he was still standing in the centre of the trailer completely naked. "Shit."

He found his jeans and quickly stepped into them, hoping it was still too dark for Bo to have seen him.

"So how're we gonna play this?" he asked, pulling his T-shirt over his head.

"Uhhh, drop the back and chase him in with a couple of baseball bats?"

Rance rolled his eyes even though he knew the gesture went unseen. "How about we try the lassos first and then move to the bats as a back-up plan?"

"You love to ruin my fun. Have you forgotten what that beast did to me?"

Rance paused in the act of sliding on his boot and gazed up at Bo. "No. I'll never forget what happened to you. I've seen it enough in my dreams to have a permanent imprint on my brain."

Bo grinned down at him. The first rays of sun were slowly peaking up from the horizon, casting his lover in a soft orange glow. "I've got a box of condoms back at the ranch. What say you bring that sweet ass up here and help me wrangle this ornery bull."

Rance nodded and tossed Bo his duffle, slinging his own over his shoulder. "What about the sleeping bags?"

Zero hit the trailer with an echoing grunt. Rance began to climb the opposite wall. "Fuck the bags. Can ya get the bolt on that side while I release this one?"

Rance took hold of the bolt and waited for Bo. "On three. One, two, three!"

The bolts were pulled simultaneously, allowing the back gate to drop to the ground. Rance smiled and winked. "Now we just have to make it to the lassos in the truck bed."

"Or the baseball bat that I always keep behind the seat," Bo added.

Shaking his head, Rance jumped down and moved to the front of the trailer and once again climbed up the wooden slats. He was halfway up when he heard Bo lower himself to the trailer floor. Swinging his leg over the top rail, he turned back to Bo. Shit.

"Uh, Bo?"

"What?" Bo paused with his foot on the first board.

Rance pointed at Zero Tolerance who stood at the bottom of the ramp with murder in his eyes. "You might wanna hurry."

* * * *

"And then, Bo climbs that damn wall faster than Spider Man," Rance doubled over in laughter as the rest of the hands joined him.

Bo rolled his eyes and stared at Zero through the slit in the boards. "Isn't it bad enough you caused me to miss planting? Now you have to make me the butt of jokes among my lover and my friends? I'm soooo disappointed in you."

Zero's head butted the two by six in front of Bo's face hard enough to splinter it, catching the cowboys' attention. As the ranch hands scrambled to get the trailer backed up to Zero's pen, the animal started destroying everything in sight. Bits of Bo and Rance's sleeping bags floated in the air like plaid confetti.

Jim and Buddy climbed up the sides of the trailer to release the bolts. When the ramp came down, Zero stormed towards it, huffing and snorting up a storm. Bo had never seen or heard anything like it.

The ramp bowed under the bull's tremendous weight as he made his way into his pen. Bo's first look at the bull had him cracking up.

"Those must be yours," he hollered to Rance.

A red-faced Rance shook his head at the one ton bull parading around the pen with Rance's boxer briefs caught on one horn.

Another round of laughter ensued, surpassing the one earlier. Bo smiled, satisfied. His work was done.

Sliding up behind Rance, Bo whispered in his ear as he casually brushed his hand across his lover's ass. "I don't know about you, but I could sure use a shower."

Rance looked over his shoulder, worry in his eyes. "I can't. Tonight? Maybe we could go out or something?"

The insecure expression on Rance's face melted his heart. Despite the still cackling cowboys, Bo leaned in and placed a soft kiss on Rance's neck. "You've got yourself a date."

As he walked towards the bunkhouse, Bo took a calming breath. "I'm gonna break down that final wall if it's the last thing I do."

Chapter Six

Bo knocked on Rance's door at seven o'clock sharp. He dressed in his fanciest duds, which wasn't saying a whole lot. Still, he thought he looked presentable in his dark jeans, white dress shirt and black leather vest.

Rance opened the door and Bo almost fell to his knees.

"Goddamn you're hot." No matter what Bo did, he'd never be able to compete with Rance in the looks department. The man was fine with a capital F. Dressed all in black, with a big silver belt buckle, Rance's clothes definitely drew attention to the large bulge behind the man's fly. Scarred or not, that dick was something to be proud of.

After settling his black dress Stetson onto his head, Rance leaned in for a kiss. "You look pretty damn good yourself."

Bo moved even closer, wrapping his arms around his lover. Groin to groin, Bo did a slow slide. "We could always stay in?"

Rance nodded. "Yeah, we could, but I'd kinda like to do a little courtin' before we jump into bed. Besides, if people see us out and about together maybe it'll put some of the rumours of me being straight to rest."

Chuckling, Bo kissed Rance again, this time pushing his tongue in to taste the minty-flavoured toothpaste Rance had obviously just used. "Cattle Valley is a little backward compared to most towns, but I never believed for a second that you were a straight man hiding out in town."

"Erico's the one who started the whole damn thing."

"Why, doesn't he like you?" Bo asked.

"At one time he liked me a little too much and couldn't figure out why he couldn't get into my pants. He figured I must be straight to turn him down."

Bo placed soft kisses down Rance's jaw. "His loss."

"If we don't get out of here, our first official date will be ruined."

Before releasing the man in his arms, Bo pressed his face to Rance's neck and inhaled. The smell was fantastic. Rance mixed with something soft and citrus. "You've never worn cologne for me before."

"Don't wear it much, draws mosquitoes," Rance explained in a matter of fact tone.

Bo rolled his eyes and pulled his date out the front door. What a romantic he had on his hands.

Rance opened the driver's side door and Bo climbed in, sitting in the middle. Once they were both buckled up, Bo captured Rance's lips in yet another kiss. "You're addictive."

"Good. I'm glad you feel that way." Rance slung his arm across the back of the seat and backed out.

"So, where're we going?" Bo asked.

"Well I thought you might enjoy a nice steak dinner at the Grizzly Bar. Maybe even take a turn or two around the dance floor while we're there."

"Sounds good. I've only been there once, and then only for drinks."

Rance's hand started playing with Bo's hair as they made the drive up the mountain. "So when're you bringing Joey down?"

The question surprised Bo. "Why? Are you looking forward to meeting him?"

"Well sure. I mean, I never thought it would be possible to have a kid, but since I've been thinking about it, I'm getting pretty damn excited by the whole idea."

The statement made Bo feel all gooey and sappy, something he definitely wouldn't divulge to the rough and tumble cowboy next to him. "I'm happy you feel that way because Jim, Lynda and Neil are bringing him down on the private plane on Saturday. I offered to come back up, but they said they wanted to see Lark and Kade anyway. They've also been gracious enough to give me all the baby stuff they bought for Joey."

Rance removed his arm from the back of the seat when the roads began to wind their way up the mountain. Bo could tell by the expression on Rance's face he was deep in thought.

"Something wrong?" Bo asked.

"Huh? No, I was just thinking."

"About?"

"Nothing in particular." Rance reached down and squeezed Bo's thigh. "It's a lot to take in. You'll need to be patient with me."

Bo nodded. "I know. I'm trying."

He let the subject drop, but it continued to bother him. They reached the lodge and went inside. Walking into the Grizzly Bar was like old home week.

"What the hell are all these people doing here on a weeknight?" Rance asked.

Bo shrugged and found a table. Rance sat in the chair beside him, ordered a pitcher of beer and asked to see a menu. As Rance sat in silence once again, Bo studied the heavy beamed ceilings. The place was spectacular.

Their waitress, Payton, was back in no time with their drinks and menus. Pouring himself a beer, Bo perused the menu. Although the Grizzly offered a bit of everything, he immediately settled on the steak and potatoes. Setting the menu aside, he glanced around the room.

The music was too loud for general conversation, but not loud enough to dance. Not that it mattered. Rance didn't seem inclined to do either. Bo was actually pleased to see Payton weaving her way through the crowd towards their table. The quicker he could eat, the faster he could get home. Being patient with Rance was one thing, but sitting next to him in this current mood was quite another.

"You ready?" Payton asked.

"Yep. I'll take the ribeye with a loaded baked potato, carrots, and a side order of spinach, please."

As Rance ordered, Bo watched him carefully. The uptight manner in which he held himself was not about to prove to anyone in the room that yes, he actually was a gay man. What happened to the passionate lover of the previous night? Had coming back to the real world broken the spell?

Payton left to put their orders in, and Bo decided to engage Rance in conversation. Hell, anything was better than feeling alone while on a date. Trying to speak over the music, he leaned closer to his lover. "Wanna dance?"

Rance studied the small dance floor and shook his head. "Maybe later. Music's a little too fast for my comfort."

Bo nodded, grinding his teeth. "I'll need help loading and unloading the hay this week."

Rance nodded. "You already told me that. I've scheduled Steve to give you a hand."

Well, so much for starting a conversation. He decided to try once more. "I've been thinking about joining The Gym. If you're interested, I think they give a discount for couples."

Rance shook his head. "I get enough exercise at work. Don't see the point in paying someone for what I can do for free in my own home."

Done. Bo didn't know what kind of bug crawled up Rance's ass, but he sure as hell didn't feel like playing the game just then. He spotted Asa Montgomery sitting at a table by himself and leaned back towards Rance.

"I'm gonna go ask Asa if Lynda and Jim can use his runway."

Rance acknowledged that he'd heard Bo, but said nothing.

With an irritated groan, he stood and made his way through the maze of tables. "Mr. Montgomery?"

Asa looked up from the paperwork he had spread out on the table. "Yes?"

"Sir, can I talk to you about something?" Although he'd never met Asa, he'd heard the man was a bit of a loner, preferring to stay holed-up in his large mansion on the edge of town. When Asa joined The Gym it seemed so out of character, it quickly became the buzz around town.

"Sure," Asa said, indicating a chair.

Bo took the offered seat. "We haven't met, but my name's Bo Lawson, and I do the farming at the Back Breaker ranch."

Asa nodded. "I've seen you in O'Brien's before. What can I do for you?"

"Well, sir, I recently found out I have a son, a baby boy named Joey. Anyway, the people who've been taking care of him are planning to bring him down from Canada this weekend."

"Yes?" Asa seemed to prod, no doubt wanting Bo to get on with his story and get the hell away from him.

"They're flying down in a private jet, and I wondered if it would be possible for them to use your landing strip instead of having to fly into Sheridan. I know it's a lot to ask, and I normally wouldn't have the balls to do such a thing, but I figured it couldn't hurt." There, he'd asked, like he'd told Jim he would.

"Sure. Call my office and they'll give you the coordinates and the runway specs."

"Just like that?" Bo was shocked. He thought he might have to do a bit of ass kissing to get Asa to agree to such a thing.

"Why not? The town council allowed me to put the damn thing in because I travel so much. The least I can do is make it available for other residents if they need it."

"Okay, great, thank you so much." Bo reached across the table, extending his hand.

Asa accepted the handshake with a grin. "Why do you seem afraid of me?"

Surprised by the question, Bo blinked several times. "Well, because you're Asa Montgomery, sir. You've been featured in every business and financial magazine out there."

Asa chuckled. "I'm just a guy from a small town in Kansas who happened to be in the right place at the right time. And the name's Asa."

Bo stood. "Thank you, again."

"You're welcome and congratulations on your son. Take care of him."

"I will." Feeling good, Bo walked back over to rejoin Rance. "That went well."

"That's good."

He'd barely sat down before Payton brought their food. "Mmm, smells good."

"Thank you," Rance said when Payton placed his prime rib in front of him.

Bo dug in to his meal, high on the thought of seeing Joey in a few days. If Rance wanted to be a stick in the mud, well so be it. Bo wasn't going to allow his lover's current mood to get him down. He ate with gusto and appreciation, making a mental note to bring Lynda, Jim and Neil here while they were in town.

"How's your food?" he asked Rance.

"Good, and yours?"

"Mine's good."

By the time they'd both finished, Bo was at the end of his rope. It was obvious by Rance's closed off mood there would be no dancing. Bo dug out his wallet and placed a couple of bills on the table. "You ready to go?"

"Yeah." Rance placed the money for his meal on the table and stood.

Evidently Bo'd been right about the dancing. He couldn't figure out what had changed on the drive up the mountain. If he pressed Rance for an answer would it backfire in his face?

He waited until they reached the bottom of the winding road before voicing his frustrations. From his seat beside the window, he turned to Rance. "I'm not sure what's going on, but I've got a feeling it's more than you're letting on."

Bo noticed the way Rance's hands tightened around the steering wheel before he answered. "I've already told you..."

"Yeah, I know, I have to be patient," Bo cut Rance off, tired of hearing the same old record.

"Well, if you know, then why can't you let it go?"

"Because I don't believe this has anything to do with your cock, that's why." He knew he was louder than the conversation warranted, but he was damn frustrated.

"It's not just my cock. It's everything. You, me, Joey. It's a lot to take in on a day's notice. If you can't give me some space while I work through it then we don't have much of a chance for a future."

Bo seethed. He had been prepared to work around Rance's body issues, but when his lover brought Joey into the mix, all bets were off. Even though Rance hadn't come out and said it, evidently raising a child wasn't something he was interested in. *Well, fuck you*, he mentally said to Rance.

Instead of breaking things off right there, Bo decided they both needed a few days to cool off. "Tell you what. You go ahead and do your brooding, thinking, whatever you call it, and I'll go on living. Maybe eventually you'll come to some kind of decision, but in the meantime, maybe it would be best if we don't see each other outside of work."

Rance chuckled in a bitter fashion. "You're sure quick to change your tune when things don't go your way."

Rance pulled into the Back Breaker and parked his truck. Bo tried to calm himself before saying something he'd regret later on.

"Quick? That's rich. I've been in love with you for a year and you know it. I've done the patient thing. I can't afford to put my life on hold indefinitely while you figure out whether or not I'm worthy."

When Rance didn't say anything right away, Bo grunted and got out. Walking towards the bunkhouse, he felt like he'd been sucker punched. *Fuck it*. He was tired of feeling like shit because of Rance.

* * * *

Rance punched the pillow, changing positions once again. When it was obvious he wasn't getting to sleep anytime soon, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and shuffled towards the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of beer.

He knew he'd screwed things up. He should've been honest and told Bo what was on his mind. Carrying the beer back to bed, Rance turned on the television.

A commercial for Montana tourism caught his eye. It depicted a father and son fishing and talked about slowing down and taking the time to enjoy family. "Damn, it's a conspiracy," he mumbled, shutting off the TV.

Rance knew his strange mood had given Bo ideas that weren't at all accurate, but what should he do about it? To confess that he was actually trying to decide whether or not to ask Bo and the baby to move in would leave him out on a limb. It wasn't that he didn't think the two of them could live together, but cohabitating would also mean Bo would see him naked.

He finished his beer and set the empty bottle on the bedside table. Sliding back under the sheet, he thought about the torture Bo had put him through over the previous year. How many times had he wanted Bo in his bed? Too many times to count.

As the months had gone by and his feelings for the bohemian farmer had grown deeper, he'd made himself keep his distance. After the previous night's passion, it was obvious Bo would accept Rance's physical deformities, but was he ready to expose himself?

In a rare move, Rance slid his hand down to his groin. He'd made a habit of sleeping in pyjama pants after the shooting to keep even himself from accidentally seeing his ruined cock.

As he ran his hand over the scarred, lumpy flesh he became hard. Rance tried to imagine what Bo would feel if he did the same. Would Bo know rubbing the scars gave Rance another level of excitement, that the ridges of tissue were more sensitive?

Rance shook his head and released his cock. What did it matter? He'd probably fucked things between them anyway. Tossing back the sheet, Rance got to his feet. *Maybe if I explain myself Bo will cut me some slack?*

He was almost to the front door when he realised the time. Maybe it would be best to at least wait until after breakfast. One thing was certain. He wanted Bo and Joey in his life. What difference could a few hours make?

* * * *

With new resolve, Rance walked towards the bunkhouse, hoping to talk to Bo before he started his day. A car pulling up beside his truck caught his attention however.

"Hey, what's up?" Rance asked Lark.

Lark settled the baseball cap on his head and withdrew a cooler from the back seat. "Just got back from taking Bo to the airport. He decided to fly up to Canada to get Joey instead of waiting for my folks to bring him here. Hope you don't mind, but he asked me to fill in while he's gone."

Rance's heart sunk. "How long will he be gone?"

Lark shrugged. "It's Bo. Who knows."

Lark started to walk off but stopped and turned to Rance. "He seemed pretty depressed. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

Without answering, Rance strode towards his office in the barn. He'd heard too much about Sunrise Gardens to feel comfortable with Bo's unplanned trip. Maybe he should hop on a plane and go after him?

Walking into his office, he was almost run over by Shep.

"It's about time you got here. We're gonna be late."

"Huh?" Rance asked.

"We've got the meeting in town with the Cattle Valley Days committee," Shep reminded him.

Shit, how could he have forgotten they were supposed to present their choices for the rodeo bulls? "Okay, let me grab the stock files."

"I'll be in the truck."

As Rance pawed through the stack of files on his shelf, he forced himself to get his head back into foreman mode. It wouldn't do to have a love-sick cowboy presenting to the committee.

Information in hand, Rance jogged towards Shep's pickup. "Sorry about that."

Shep pulled out of the drive and headed into town. "Do I need to even ask how your date went?"

"Probably not," Rance mumbled.

"Have anything to do with why I may have lost a damn good farmer?"

The file dropped to the floor of the truck as his heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean by that? I thought Bo just went to Canada to get Joey."

Shep seemed to study Rance for a few moments before answering. "All I know is he left a message on my cell phone saying he had to go. He said he hoped his job would be here when he got back, but he'd understand if I needed to hire a fulltime replacement before he returned."

Rance's head fell back against the seat. "I've really fucked stuff up, huh?"

"Wanna talk about it?"

"Not sure it'll do any good. We...um...got close on the overnight trip."

"Yeah, I figured that when I saw the two shredded sleeping bags zipped together. So what went wrong?"

"Nothing," Rance was quick to say, but the more he thought about it, the more depressed he became. "Everything."

"Well I know he didn't reject you. That wouldn't be something Bo had in him."

"No, he didn't reject me. He was wonderful when I told him what happened. I just wasn't ready to expose myself to him. I asked him to be patient, he agreed."

"So what's the problem?"

"Me. I started thinking, and I wanted to ask him and Joey to move in, but I got cold feet. We both know I tend to withdraw and clam up when that happens. I think Bo took it wrong though. By the end of our date, he was pissed and rightly so."

Shep pulled the truck to a stop in front of City Hall. "So what're you gonna do about it?"

"Wait for him to come back and beg for forgiveness?" Rance offered.

"Sure, if you want to put the fate of your relationship in someone else's hands. But as an alternative plan, why not go after him?"

Before Rance could fully think about it, Nate stepped out of the building.

"You coming?" Nate yelled.

Rance bent over and gathered the fallen file. "I'll give it some thought."

Shep joined Rance at the bottom of the steps. "Don't think too long. Bo's got more than just his own heart to worry about now. I imagine if he's worried about your feelings, he won't be in a hurry to put Joey in that situation."

Rance knew Shep was right, but he didn't have time to think about it just then. He followed his boss into the meeting room and took a seat. Expecting a smart-assed remark from Carol on their tardiness, Rance was surprised when it didn't come.

The woman across the table from him seemed to have her own problems to deal with. Several times during the first ten minutes, her focus seemed to be more on her cell phone than the meeting. Rance didn't know what the text messages said, but with each one she seemed to become more uptight.

After an hour's discussion of the rodeo events, they took a short coffee break. Rance noticed the way Nate led Carol quietly into an adjoining room.

"What do you think that's about?" Shep asked from beside him.

"No clue, but whatever it is, I'm sure Nate will handle it."

Shep nodded. "I've seen Carol pissed before, but I think this is something else. She almost looks sad, which would mean she actually has a heart behind that nice rack."

Shocked, Rance's jaw dropped. "Since when do you notice a woman's boobs?"

"Since I was born with eyes. Just because I don't feel like playing with them doesn't mean I don't appreciate 'em."

Rance couldn't say the same, so he shrugged instead. "I've got my own problems to deal with. I'll let Nate deal with Carol's."

"And I'm sure he'll deal with them in true Nate fashion," Shep chuckled.

Chapter Seven

Bo was having a fantastic dream about Rance when a hand groping his crotch woke him. He opened his eyes and grinned. "What the hell're you doing?"

"Well, I came out to tell you supper was ready, but it seemed as though you had other more urgent needs," Jim chuckled, gripping Bo's hard-on.

As good as the pressure felt, Bo wasn't about to proceed. Whether things worked out with Rance or not, it was Rance's hand he wanted shoved down the front of his jeans, not Jim's.

Bo brushed Jim's hand away. "Sorry, but you're the wrong guy for that job."

Jim sighed and got to his feet beside the hammock. "Shame to waste a perfectly good erection for a man so far away."

"Yeah, well my cock agrees with you, but the rest of me disagrees."

Bo flipped his way out of the hammock and kissed Jim on the cheek. "It's no reflection on your skills as a lover, believe me."

"Now you're just trying to make me feel better," Jim pouted.

Laughing, Bo wrapped his arm around his old friend as they headed inside. "Maybe."

Before he could have a seat at the table, the house phone rang. "Want me to get it?"

"If you would," Jim answered, setting a platter of roast and vegetables on the table.

Bo walked into the living room and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, just the guy I was looking for," Randy, the guard at the front gate, said.

Smiling, Bo shook his head. "I told you when I got in that this was a business trip, not a pleasure trip."

"Funny. I'm not after your dick, well I am, but that's not why I'm calling. There's some guy here that says he needs to speak to you."

Bo's jaw dropped. The first person he thought of was Joey's biological father suddenly showing up. "Who is it?"

"A hot cowboy all duded up in black, says his name is Rance."

Bo's heart jumped for joy. "I'll be right there."

Hanging up the phone, Bo strode into the kitchen. "That was Randy on the phone. Rance is at the gate."

Jim whistled. "He must've picked up on that dream you were obviously having earlier."

Rolling his eyes, Bo bent to kiss his son on top of the head. "Don't hold dinner. I've got a few things to work out before I can bring Rance back to meet Joey."

Lynda grinned and kissed him on the cheek. "Good luck, sweetie."

"Thanks."

Jogging towards the golf cart, Bo ran his fingers through his hair. It had been four days since he'd last seen Rance. Maybe he should run upstairs and shave?

Quickly rejecting the idea, he hopped into the cart and took off. He hoped like hell Rance showing up was a good sign. Surely if he was being fired, Shep would've called.

As he neared the gate, the sight of the good-looking cowboy hardened his cock once more. Damn, that was one fine looking man.

"Hey," he greeted, pulling to a stop. He didn't dare make a move without a sign from Rance.

"Sorry for just showing up like this, but I need to talk to you." Rance gestured to the small duffle at his feet. "You mind?"

"Not at all. Hop in."

As soon as Rance was settled, Bo headed towards his favourite spot by the lake. When Rance didn't say anything, Bo decided to start off the conversation. "So, what brings you all the way to Canada?"

"Don't be a dumbass. You know I came for you."

Bo slowed the cart to a stop and turned off the battery. "I don't really think I'm the one being the dumbass, do you?"

Rance took off his hat and tossed it into the backseat. "No. I know perfectly well who the ass has been. But in my own defence, I think you took my mood the other night to mean more than it did."

"What the hell else was I supposed to think? You asked me out, and then practically ignored me all night. I had more conversation with the damn waitress than I had with you."

"I know, but I had a lot of things on my mind." Before Bo could say anything, Rance held up a hand. "And yes, I should've discussed them with you, but before I could work up the nerve you got pissed off and flew up here."

Bo shook his head. "It wasn't about being pissed, hurt maybe, but not pissed."

Now that Bo had the chance to pull Rance into a conversation about their date, he wasn't about to pass it up. "I understood that you needed time, but what hurt was you shutting me out completely."

"I know, and I knew it that night. I thought I'd be able to talk to you about it the following morning, but you were already gone."

Bo shrugged. "I felt the need to be around people who loved me."

Rance reached over and put his hand on Bo's thigh. "You could've stayed on the ranch and received that if only you'd believed in me."

Closing his eyes, Bo leaned towards Rance. Brushing his lover's lips with his own, he opened his eyes. "Are you saying you love me?"

Pulling Bo closer, Rance took the kiss deeper. Bo melted at the tender way Rance's fingers threaded through his hair.

Breaking the kiss, Rance stared into Bo's eyes. "I've loved you for a long time. I was just too scared to admit it."

Bo put his hand over the bulge in Rance's jeans. "And this?"

"That loves you, too."

Bo grinned. "You know that's not what I'm talking about."

"Yeah, I know."

"So?" Bo prodded.

"Okay, here's the thing. I want you and Joey to come back to the ranch and live with me. The problem is I'm not sure if I'm ready to expose myself to you." Rance took a deep breath. "There, I've said it."

It finally made sense to Bo why Rance had acted like an ass on their date. His lover had been doing a lot of heavy thinking. Bo wanted to spend the rest of his life with Rance, but...

"Until you trust me enough to share yourself, body and soul, I can't live with you."

"It's not a matter of trust," Rance tried to say.

"Yes, it is. Your dick is ugly, so what? If you think that's what's most important to me, then you really don't know me at all."

"Really? How many different men have you fucked over your lifetime?" Rance challenged.

Bo reared back as if he'd been slapped. Knowing that he'd told Rance about his past, he couldn't believe the man had the nerve to ask the question. "Fuck you, you sonofabitch."

Rance held up his hands to stop Bo's tirade. "All I'm saying is you're used to sex a certain way. A way I'm not sure I can even give you."

"You did a pretty good imitation of it the other night."

Rance shook his head. "I can get hard, I can even come, thank God, but I haven't fucked anyone since the shooting. I..."

Bo stopped Rance with a kiss. Why did the guy insist on putting so much pressure on himself? Bo finished the kiss and climbed out of the golf cart. Walking to the water's edge, he crossed his arms and turned back to Rance.

"What do you tell someone who gets thrown from a horse?"

"Huh? I tell 'em to get right back on, but what does that have to do with anything. I was shot. I didn't fall off a damn horse."

"It's the same thing if you'd take the time to think about it," Bo tried to tell him.

The expression on Rance's face told Bo he wasn't buying it. "Look, I like to fuck, even more than getting fucked, but that's beside the point. Whether you can or can't doesn't matter to me. I think you're making a mountain out of a mole hill. So fucking strip already."

Rance's eyes rounded. "What?"

"You heard me, strip. Take the jump. Stop trying to talk yourself out of this relationship."

"I'm not doing that," Rance argued.

"You damn sure are. And I can see it driving a wedge between us. So, strip. If you trust me, you'll just do it."

Rance's jaw snapped shut. With narrowed eyes, he got out of the cart and stalked towards Bo. "You wanna see what I can't even bear to look at? Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you."

Rance reached down and unfastened his jeans. He bent over and pushed the denim along with his underwear to his ankles. With an expression Bo couldn't read, he crossed his arms.

Though he'd asked for it, Bo hadn't been mentally prepared for the sight of Rance's cock. He quickly schooled his shock and stepped forward. Kneeling in front of his lover, he took the flaccid shaft in his hand, seeing Rance's muscles tense.

He felt he owed it to Rance to thoroughly inspect the damaged member. Thick scars intersected midway up the length, giving the cock the appearance that it had indeed been surgically reattached.

Leaning forward, he began kissing the more prominent scars. As he did, the cock in his hand began to lengthen. Bo smiled as he continued to soothe the savage beast standing in front of him.

Hard, it was easy to see why Rance worried about his ability to fuck. The head and about three inches of the shaft jutted out at an unnatural angle. Gazing up into Rance's eyes, Bo grinned. He knew Rance would know if he lied, so he decided to tell his partner exactly what he thought.

"Well, you were right. It is an ugly fucker, but guess what?"

Rance continued to stare down at him, not saying a word.

"It doesn't change my feelings for you one damn bit."

He reached up and pulled Rance to his knees. With his lover now at eye level, Bo kissed him, hoping like hell he'd passed whatever test Rance needed as proof of his feelings.

The swipe of Rance's tongue across Bo's lips gave him the answer he sought. Putting all the love he felt into the kiss, Bo opened and moaned. The issues with Rance's body image would take time, but he now knew his lover trusted him. He'd take that over a perfect cock any day.

* * * *

Rance ground his erection against Bo's. "Take me somewhere and make love to me."

Releasing him, Bo grinned. "I can do that."

As Rance watched, Bo quickly stripped out of his clothes. "What're you doing?"

Digging a condom out of his wallet, Bo reached for Rance's shirt. "I thought we were going to make love?"

"Here?"

Bo chuckled. "This is the perfect place. You'll find out when I take you to meet the others, Sunrise Garden's is special."

After making sure no one else was around, Rance stepped out of his shoes, jeans and underwear. He'd never had sex in a semi-public place, and the idea secretly thrilled him. He stretched out in the soft grass and waited for Bo to join him.

The erection bobbing above him did more than anything to prove that Bo wasn't disgusted as he'd feared. Spreading his thighs in invitation, Rance held out his arms and welcomed the weight of his lover's body as it covered him. Rance didn't need to remind Bo it had been years since he'd had sex. His lover held fingers in front of Rance's mouth. Opening, Rance thoroughly bathed the long, graceful digits in his own saliva.

Bo quirked an eyebrow. "Damn, keep that up and I'll blow before I even suit up."

Chuckling, Rance released Bo's fingers. "Can't have that."

Bo leaned down for a kiss as his fingers began to explore Rance's puckered hole. *Fuck*. Rance had forgotten how good it felt to be stretched. His body opened for Bo's penetrating touch as he softly nipped his lover's bottom lip.

Adding another finger, Bo gave him a worried expression. "You probably shouldn't do that. You could get carried away and draw blood."

Running his fingers through Bo's silky hair, Rance shook his head. "I'm not going to live my life afraid to touch and love you. I won't purposely do anything stupid, but I won't police my every action either."

"Do you have any idea what it would do to me if you contracted this damn virus?" Bo asked.

"We need to get something straight between us before we go any further. I'm choosing to make love with you, knowing full well what could happen. If for some reason I contract HIV I don't want you to feel guilty. I'm a big boy. I know the risks involved, and I'm willing to accept them in order to be with you."

Bo shook his head. "You shouldn't have to."

"But I do, and I have. So open up that condom and fuck me already."

Bo slid back and came to rest on his knees between Rance's spread thighs. Reaching for the foil packet, he sheathed his erection. Rance knew his lover was still worried, but Rance also knew he had a lifetime to convince him that he'd accepted the consequences.

Positioning the crown of his cock at Rance's entrance, Bo began to rock back and forth until the head breached Rance's hole. The hesitation in Bo's surge forward told Rance his lover was still thinking too much.

"After the shooting I thought my life was over. I lived every day as if I were already dead. You changed that for me. A single year with you and Joey means more to me than a lifetime of being alone."

With a thrust of his hips, Bo buried himself inside Rance's body. The burn took his breath away as he patiently waited for his body to become accustomed to Bo's cock.

Closing his eyes, Rance moaned as the ache soon gave way to pure pleasure. "God, you feel good."

"Not half as good as you," Bo grunted, pulling out slowly before sinking back in.

Hooking his arms under his knees, Rance opened himself further. Without lube, he had no doubt he'd be sore as hell by the time Bo was finished with him, but he couldn't have cared less. Truly making love for the first time in his eventful life was worth every ounce of discomfort.

Gazing up into Bo's dark eyes, he wondered how he could've ever been fooled by Oren. Never had his ex-boyfriend looked at him the way Bo did.

Bo surprised him by reaching between them and fisting Rance's cock.

"You don't have to," Rance was quick to say.

"Relax. I want to," Bo whispered, his hips moving in time with his hand.

How long had it been since someone had touched him? Hell, for that matter, how long since he'd even had the nerve to pleasure himself?

"Stay with me," Bo panted, picking up speed.

Rance felt Bo's thumb press against the thick scar just under the head of his cock. "Fuck!" he screamed as his shaft erupted in ropes of thick white cum, painting not only his chest but Bo's as well.

Raising his face to the setting sun, Bo roared as his climax overtook him. Rance was in awe of the power his lover exhibited in the pumped muscles and chorded tendons on display. *Damn, I'm one lucky sonofabitch.*

Lowering himself, Bo began licking his way down Rance's stomach, tasting the seed spilled earlier. Fisting his lover's hair, Rance's mouth watered as Bo noisily enjoyed the taste of cum. "I wish..."

Bo's finger covered Rance's lips. "Shhh, I'll share some of your own with you."

Rance blinked, unaccustomed to someone being able to read him so clearly. Yeah, he wished he could lick every inch of the man poised over him, including the life-threatening essence. Rance wondered if making love to an HIV positive man would always leave him to feel like he was missing out on something.

The sex was fantastic, but it was the before and after play that seemed to be so one-sided. What would it be like to put Bo's naked cock into his mouth and pleasure him to completion? Rance knew it would never happen. With Bo there would be no unprotected sex of any kind, including blow-jobs and rimming. He'd heard about the whole plastic wrap thing, but that wasn't the same as being able to taste the man you loved.

"What's wrong?" Bo asked, crawling up Rance's body to kiss him.

"Nothing," Rance answered, licking Bo's lips.

"Liar."

Rance knew he needed to be honest with Bo. "I just realised all the implications of making love to someone with HIV."

Bo's body tensed. "Will the dangers be too much for you?"

Rance shook his head. "No. It just seems so one sided. There are so many things I'd like to do to you, but I know I can't. I guess I'm like the boy in the proverbial candy store who wants everything and is told he must only pick from a certain rack."

Bo rolled off Rance and took care of the condom, tying it off and stuffing it into the pocket of his shorts. Getting to his feet, Bo walked to the golf cart and extracted a tissue from the centre console.

Rance watched his lover, trying to discern Bo's mood. "Did I hurt your feelings or piss you off?"

Bo returned to his position beside Rance. "Neither. Just worries me."

"How so?" Rance asked.

"Will I be enough? Is what I'm able to give you enough?"

Rance's heart melted. He'd been so caught up in what he couldn't have with Bo, he'd forgotten to take into account the most important thing that he did receive.

Reaching out, Rance pulled Bo into his arms and kissed him. "Loving you, becoming a family with you and Joey is more important to me than anything. Please don't let my whining lead you to believe anything different. It's a new way of making love, that's all. I just wish I could bring you the same pleasure you bring me."

Bo grinned. "No worries there."

It seemed as though Bo wanted to say something else, but he snapped his mouth closed and shook his head.

"What?"

After several long moments, Bo buried his face against Rance's neck. "The day I found out I was positive was the worst day of my life."

"That's understandable," Rance cut in.

Bo nodded. "I suppose, but it wasn't the threat of getting AIDS that scared me. I was damaged goods. What decent man would want someone like me for a life partner? So, I fucked. And I fucked. And I fucked some more. Always safely, but never allowing myself to get attached."

"Oh, babe," Rance soothed, kissing the top of Bo's head.

"When Lark and Kade came up to visit last year, I saw the two of them together and knew I wanted what they had. I thought it was an impossible dream, but I decided that sex wasn't enough for me anymore."

Bo looked up into Rance's eyes. "You're the first person to ever truly love me."

Rance felt the need to open his soul to the man in his arms. For too long he'd allowed himself to live the life of a victim, always afraid of what someone might think of him. "I think we're more alike than you realise. For you it was contracting HIV, for me it was being shot. Both of us thought we were too damaged to be loved."

"And now we have each other."

"And Joey," Rance added. "Speaking of which, when am I gonna get the chance to meet the newest addition to our family?"

Bo's entire face lit up. "Right now."

They both reached for their clothes at the same time and began to dress. Bo was almost vibrating with excitement as he struggled with his shirt.

"Wait until you see him. He's absolutely perfect."

Rance chuckled and climbed into the golf cart. "As you've already shown me, perfect is in the eye of the beholder. So I have absolutely no doubts our Joey is perfect."

* * * *

After giving his hands a good scrubbing in the kitchen sink, Bo led Rance into the living room. Sitting in front of the TV, Neil's boxer-briefs were around his ankles as Jim lazily sucked his cock.

Rolling his eyes, Bo cleared his throat. Jim eventually pulled his mouth from Neil's shaft and smiled.

"You must be Rance," Jim greeted.

"Yep," Rance answered.

Bo wrapped an arm around Rance. His lover seemed a bit unnerved by Jim and Neil's apparent lack of modesty. Bo would have to remember to ask Jim and Neil to cool things a bit while Rance was in the house.

"Where's Joey?" Bo asked.

"Upstairs. Lynda's getting him into his pyjamas." Neil gestured towards a chair. "Have a seat."

Bo shook his head. "Thanks, but I think I'll take Rance up and introduce him to Lynda and Joey."

He started to lead Rance through the living room. He stopped beside the sofa and whispered in Jim's ear. "Do me a favour and try to finish before we get back down."

Laughing, Jim nodded. "No problem."

As soon as they were out of sight, Bo pulled Rance into his arms and kissed him. "Sorry if that made you uncomfortable. Things are a little different around here."

"I guess so. I mean, I've heard stories, but...wow."

Chuckling, Bo continued to lead Rance upstairs. Stepping into the room, Bo's heart melted like it did every time he looked at his son.

"Is he asleep?" Bo asked Lynda.

"No, but he's not far from it." Lynda rose from a rocking chair and gently handed Joey to Bo.

"I'd like you to meet Rance," Bo introduced, not taking his eyes from Joey's sweet face.

"Nice to finally meet you." Instead of shaking Rance's hand, Lynda cupped his cheek in greeting.

"Likewise. Thanks for taking care of Bo and Joey for me."

Bo probably should have been offended by the way Rance said it, but he felt nothing but warmth at the words.

"It's been my absolute pleasure," Lynda answered. "I'll leave the three of you alone. Come down once you get Joey to bed and have something to eat."

Bo nodded his agreement and Lynda left the room. Turning to Rance, he held out his son. "Would you like to hold him?"

Rance bit his lip and nodded. "Let me sit down first."

After taking a seat in the rocking chair, Bo placed Joey in Rance's arms. Joey gave a little start as his eyes opened, but quickly settled back down.

"He's beautiful," Rance whispered, running his index finger over Joey's long black lashes.

"What, you didn't believe me when I told you earlier how perfect he was?" Bo teased, kneeling in front of Rance and Joey.

Rance leaned down and placed a soft kiss on Joey's forehead. "I didn't think it was possible. Can I ask a personal question?"

"Sure. I've got no secrets."

"Is his biological father Native American?"

"According to Jan, he was, but she didn't know what tribe or anything. Hell, she didn't even know the guys last name, only that he went by Hawk and they met at some sex party she attended. It's a shame really. Joey will probably never know his true ancestry."

Rance shook his head. "If there comes a time when Joey wants to know, we'll help him. I imagine there are tests or something that can be done. In the meantime, we'll give him all the love and self-confidence any child could ask for."

"You got that right."

Chapter Eight

After stacking the last bale into the hay barn, Bo took off towards the house. Although he still had two hours before the baptism, Bo was hoping to stop by the reception room to see if Tyler needed any help getting the room ready.

It had worked out perfectly when he and Rance had run into Tyler and Hearn at O'Brien's on Tuesday. They'd mentioned getting Joey baptised and Tyler had suggested a dual baptism with Gracie the following Sunday evening.

"I'm home," Bo called, entering the house he and Joey shared with Rance.

"Back here."

Bo pulled the sweaty T-shirt over his head as he made his way to the bedroom. "I'm just gonna jump in the shower..."

Bo's voice trailed off as he took in the sight in front of him. Rance was spread eagle on the bed with his hand wrapped around his cock. More than anything it was the growing acceptance Rance had over his own body image that told Bo how much his lover trusted him.

"Well, hello." Bo gazed at Rance's cock as he stripped.

"Been waiting for you."

"I can see that. Give me a second to wash the stink off, and I'll be more than happy to take over for you."

"I don't mind stink," Rance informed him, spreading his legs further apart.

Bo grinned. "Where's Joey?"

"The boys have him over at the bunkhouse."

As much as he wanted to bury himself in the ass on display, Bo was more interested in the cock currently being stroked to full hardness. They'd been back from Canada for over a week, and ever since he'd wanted to be filled by that particular appendage, but had put off saying anything. He knew the last thing Rance needed was to be reminded of his injury, but Bo was sure they could make it work.

Retrieving the bottle of lube and two condoms from the drawer, he knelt on the side of the bed.

"Fuck me," he finally begged his lover.

Rance's eyes shot wide open. "What?"

"You heard me."

Rance blinked several times before lowering his eyes. "I don't think I can."

Bo watched Rance's newfound self confidence begin to wane. No, that definitely wasn't an option. Pulling his lover into his arms, Bo gave Rance a passionate kiss. "I think you can. But even if it doesn't work out, we'll be fine."

Rance gave him a short nod of acceptance, but Bo could tell his partner was still uneasy. Positioning himself on the bed, Bo squirted some lube onto his fingers and reached between his legs.

Bo was no stranger to the allure of butt plugs, often inserting them before a long day on the tractor, so the process of stretching himself went fairly quickly. He watched as Rance struggled to get the condom rolled down his shaft. Bo had a feeling it had more to do with the fact Rance wasn't as hard as he'd been earlier rather than the awkward curve his cock took midpoint.

Reaching out, Bo removed Rance's frustrated, fumbling hands. "Let me help."

He began running his fingers up and down Rance's length, taking time to appreciate the heavy ball that had centred and now hung between his partner's legs. With the crown of Rance's cock safely sheathed, Bo leaned forward and sucked the head into his mouth. He smiled around the growing erection and smoothly slid the rest of the condom past the odd angle and down as far as it would go.

Task complete, he sat up and rolled a condom down his own length, never could he take too many safety precautions to protect his family. "I think it'll be better if I'm on all fours."

Bo got into position and Rance knelt behind him. With his ass well-lubed, the first half of Rance's cock slid in without too much discomfort. The scarring Rance had sustained made his cock much thicker than the plugs Bo had been using, but it was a pleasant ache.

When Rance reached the main injury site, he shifted to raise himself behind Bo.

"Tell me if I start to hurt you."

Rance slowly buried more of his cock. Holding his breath, Bo almost came on the spot when the crooked penis rubbed against his prostate.

"Fuck, babe, I think I've just discovered heaven," he panted as more of Rance's cock was fed slowly into him.

Rance hadn't even fully seated himself before Bo lost the fight on his control. Bo's entire body began to convulse at the intensity of his orgasm. Through every quake, Rance's cock continued its assault on Bo's prostate.

With his ass still in the air, Bo gripped the base of the condom, knowing he wasn't quite finished yet. *Damn*. Why hadn't he realised Rance's cock would be at the perfect angle to give so much pleasure?

The answer came to him immediately. Because they both had been so focused on the cosmetic appearance of Rance's cock they hadn't thought of anything beyond that. If ever the saying, 'Looks could be deceiving' were true, it was in the case of Rance's scarred cock.

"You okay?" Rance asked, when Bo's breathing returned to normal.

"Fuck, no, I'm not okay," Bo answered. "Never in my life have I felt anything like it."

"Want me to pull out?"

"Hell, no. I want you to fuck me like you mean it."

Rance's hand came down hard on Bo's ass. "You asked for it."

By the time Rance had a steady rhythm going, Bo couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs. The constant stimulation of his prostate was overwhelming, almost to the point of true pain.

Rance yelled Bo's name as he plunged in once more and came. Unable to breathe, Bo gave Rance a nudge until his lover got the hint, pulled out and collapsed to the side.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Bo tried like hell to regain his faculties. Jesus Christ he'd never experienced anything like that.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there, but eventually he turned his head to face Rance. His lover appeared to be sound asleep. Evidently he hadn't been the only one affected by the intense session.

His hand around the base of his cock reminded Bo he needed to dispose of the condoms. As much as he hated to move, he made himself trudge towards the bathroom.

After cleaning himself, he took a washcloth back into the bedroom and removed the condom from Rance's flaccid cock. He couldn't help but chuckle at the amount of ejaculate present. "Poor baby's probably dehydrated now."

Rance stirred as Bo bathed his groin. "Shit, what time is it?"

"Relax. We've got over an hour before we need to leave."

Settling back down onto the mattress, Rance sighed. "That was nice."

Laughing, Bo leaned down and kissed Rance's temple. "That my love, was heaven and hell combined. I don't know that my heart could take it all the time, but I definitely plan on doing it again."

* * * *

Rance whistled as Bo came out of the bedroom dressed in his new black suit. The only thing off about his lover was the way Bo had his hair tied at the nape of his neck. He knew his partner was trying to look respectable, but then, it just wasn't the man he'd fallen head-over-heels in love with.

"You look good enough to eat," Rance told Bo, giving him a hug.

"I feel kinda silly," Bo admitted, pulling at his starched white collar.

"Maybe this'll help." Rance reached up and pulled the leather thong from Bo's hair. The soft strands fanned over Bo's shoulder. "Yep, that's better."

Bo grinned. "Feels a lot better, too."

"You ready?" Rance asked, running his hands over Bo's tight ass. He still hadn't fully recovered from the pleasure of being buried inside Bo.

"Yeah. Let's hope the guys managed to get Joey changed into the outfit you sent over."

"I wouldn't count on it."

They made their way to the bunkhouse, only stopping twice for kisses. Rance couldn't seem to keep his hands off Bo's ass. Damn, he'd turned into a sex maniac in the last few hours.

The way Bo continued to brush his hand across the front of Rance's fly, Rance had a feeling he wasn't the only afternoon convert.

Walking into the bunkhouse, Rance's jaw dropped. Joey was in the pristine white outfit Lynda had sent from Canada. Not only was he spotless, but it appeared his cowboys were taking their job as babysitters seriously.

Joey was sitting up in the centre of a blanket with pillows surrounding him. Jim, Steve and Buddy were dressed in suits, sitting cross-legged on the floor as well. Steve had a burp cloth in his hand ready to catch any escaping drool, Buddy had Joey's stuffed frog, trying his best to entertain the little guy, and Jim had a bottle and diapers at the ready in case they were needed.

Bo bumped Rance with his hip. "See? No need to worry."

Rance chuckled at the goofy grins plastered on the faces of the rough-stock cowboys. "I never thought I'd live to see the day."

Stepping over the circle of pillows meant to be some sort of barricade, Rance picked Joey up. "How's daddy's boy?"

Joey smiled as he reached for Rance's hat. Rance pulled his head back enough to keep the hat on his head. "You ready to go to your first party?"

The cowboys stood and brushed off their dress clothes. "I changed him about twenty minutes ago," Jim informed Rance.

"Good. Thanks, guys. You can baby-sit anytime."

"We'll hold ya to that," Buddy piped up.

* * * *

Except for Joey filling his diaper halfway through the service, everything went off without a hitch. Bo and Rance took turns holding Joey, while the army of Godfather's stood behind them. Bo knew Joey was lucky. Instead of one Godparent, Joey had seven men willing to step in and take over care of him should anything ever happen to Rance or Bo.

As his friends from Cattle Valley began filtering over to the reception hall, Bo passed Joey off to Uncle Lark. "We'll be in shortly."

Lark nodded and proudly escorted Joey to his party. Bo turned and pulled Rance into his arms. Standing at the front of the church, he kissed him. "After the farce of my marriage to Jan, I promised myself never to do it again. But loving you has changed my way of thinking."

Rance cocked his head to the side. "You saying you want to get married?"

"Yep. Right here, right now. I don't need anyone but you me and God to do it. A traditional ceremony is all about the ceremony. I want this to just be about the two of us and our love for each other."

Rance buried his fingers in Bo's hair and gave him a kiss as soft as an angel's wing. "I Rance Benning, take you, Bo Lawson, to be my husband. I will cherish and protect you all the days of my life."

Though it was short and sweet, Bo felt himself getting misty-eyed. "The day I saw you in the bakery was the day my heart began truly beating for the first time in my life. I don't know what I've done to deserve you, and to be honest, you'll probably never convince me that I do, but I thank you. You, Rance Benning, are the only lover and partner I'll ever need."

Their kiss following their impromptu ceremony was more sexual than sweet. Bo couldn't seem to pull Rance close enough to satisfy him. Their tongues duelled and fucked each other's mouths as Rance slid his leg up to wrap around Bo's hip.

"No sex in the church," Reverend Sharp chuckled from the doorway.

Breaking the kiss, Bo glanced over his shoulder at Casey. "Give us a break, we just got married."

"What?" Casey walked further into the sanctuary. "Congratulations."

"You're not mad that we did it without you, are you?" Rance asked.

Reverend Sharp shook his head. Casey leaned forward and gave them both a hug and kiss on the cheek. "You had the most important witness. That's all that matters."

"My thoughts exactly." Bo took Rance's hand and pulled him towards the door to the hall. "Let's celebrate."

Because of their earlier activities, he hadn't been able to stop into the hall before the service. Bo stopped just inside the door in awe of Tyler's decorating. Gazing around the room at all the white draped fabric with pink and blue accents he shook his head. "Does the man do anything half-way?"

"He wouldn't be Tyler if he did," Rance answered squeezing Bo's hand.

They joined the crowd in search of their son. Rance spotted Joey first, pointing him out. "There he is."

Bo rolled his eyes. "Hell, we'll never get him back."

Joey was safely perched on Gill's massive forearm, pulling on the man's ears as everyone around them laughed, including the ex-football player.

"Looks like there's a line," Rance said, pointing to the left of Gill.

Resigned to sharing his son, Bo led Rance over to the food table. Sean O'Brien was setting out another pan of lasagne as Bo picked up a plate. "Looks good, Sean."

"It is. Jay's a damn good cook. A hell of a lot better than I am."

Bo's eyes strayed to the quiet man in the kitchen. He didn't know much about the newcomer, but then again, he doubted many did. Other than Nate, Jay tended to keep to himself. Although he had to admit, the guy appeared to be a lot happier than when he'd first arrived in town.

Filling his plate, Bo found two empty seats next to Isaac, Matt and Sam. "Mind if we join you?"

"Not at all," Sam replied.

Rance gestured to the three men. "It's rare to see the three of you out together."

Isaac finished swallowing a bite of food before responding. "Yeah. We finally decided to hire someone to fill in on the weekends for us."

"Really? Someone from Cattle Valley?" Bo asked.

"No. Daniel was one of my professors. We kept in touch after graduation, and when he mentioned breaking away from the university, I suggested he come here," Matt informed them.

"Well, we can always use another doctor in town." Pointing towards his lasagne, Bo rolled his eyes. "This is a little bit of heaven on a plate."

"You haven't tried the tiramisu yet," Rance said, shovelling a bite into his mouth.

"No, but I'm about to." Bo leaned over and thrust his tongue into Rance's mouth. The taste of espresso mixed with cocoa teased his taste buds. "Mmm, more."

Laughing, Rance fed him a bit of his dessert. "This is, like, our wedding cake."

"What? You two got married?" Isaac asked.

Bo swallowed the delectable sweet before answering. "Just a few minutes ago actually."

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" Isaac probed further.

Bo looked at Rance and shrugged. "It was just the two of us. The way we wanted it."

Isaac nodded. "Then congratulations."

"Thanks." Bo squeezed Rance's thigh under the table.

A cry sounded from across the room. Both Rance and Bo shot to their feet. The other men at their table started to chuckle. Bo blew them a raspberry and took off, Rance in tow. The problem was evident the closer they got to Joey.

Their sweet baby boy was desperately trying to climb out of Erico's arms. Before Bo could reach them, Jay stepped up and extracted the screaming child from Erico's grasp. Joey settled immediately against Jay's thin chest and stuck his thumb in his mouth.

Rance started to pass Bo, but he reached out and pulled his new husband to a stop. "Have you ever seen Jay look that happy?"

Rance seemed to study the androgynous-looking man. "No, I don't believe I have."

Jay kissed the top of Joey's head as he walked with the baby towards the corner of the room. Erico was left looking slightly unnerved. Bo wondered if the master chef had ever been put in his place quite so blatantly and by someone as sweet and quiet as Jay.

"Let's leave 'em be for now," Bo whispered in Rance's ear.

Rance nodded. "I think we've found the perfect babysitter."

"More perfect than a bunkhouse full of rowdy cowboys?" Bo joked.

"Well, maybe we can reserve Jay for those special occasions when the cowboys are whooping it up on the town."

"Yeah, like next month's rodeo. Shit, maybe we'd better get our bid in early. I saw the way Hearn's eyes lit up when Jay took the baby from Erico. You can't tell me that man doesn't have designs on our babysitter."

Rance laughed and gave Bo a loud smacking kiss. "Go get 'em, tiger."

Crossing the room to the quiet corner Jay had retreated to, Bo advanced slowly. The young man seemed easily startled for what ever reason, and the last thing Bo wanted was to cause Jay to drop Joey.

He stood back a good ten feet and waited for Jay to notice him. Although it was hard to hear over the noise of the partying crowd, Bo caught snippets of *Hush, Little Baby*, sung in Jay's soft calming voice. The tone was so perfect, it brought tears to Bo's eyes. What the hell was this kid doing working in a bar as a cook?

The song ended, snapping Bo out of his trance. When he glanced up Jay was staring at him. "I'm sorry. I hope it's okay. He was crying and..."

"It's fine. More than fine actually. You're amazing with him." Bo stepped forward and ran a hand over Joey's back. His poor little guy was sound asleep. "Rance and I were wondering if you'd be interested in sitting for us occasionally."

"Me?"

Bo smiled at the shocked expression on Jay's face. "Yes, you. From what I can tell, Joey already trusts you, so why shouldn't we?"

Jay gazed down at the sleeping face pressed against his chest. "I'd like that very much."

"Good. I don't know if anyone's told you about the Cattle Valley Days coming up the first part of July, but there's a Saturday night street dance that Rance and I would like to attend, if you're free to stay with Joey."

Jay nodded. "I can do that. I hadn't planned on going anyway."

Strong arms wrapped around Bo's waist. "You about ready to head home? I've already said our goodbyes. I told them I was hot to get you into our honeymoon bed."

Bo turned his head to the side and kissed his partner. "Just about."

Regarding Jay once again, Bo stepped forward. "Time to take the big boy home."

Jay kissed Joey's forehead again before handing him off to Bo. "If you can hold on a minute, I'll write down my phone number."

"Sure." Bo settled Joey on his shoulder. Once Jay had fled to find a scrap of paper, Bo walked back over to Rance. "You should've heard him singing to Joey."

"Good?"

"Better than good." Bo led his family towards the door. He hated to be a party pooper, but his day had started early, and he had another one starting at six in the morning. The trip to Canada had set his schedule back a few days. Lark was good, but he simply wasn't as strong as Bo.

Jay met them near the door. "That's the number for O'Brien's. I work there most nights, so you should be able to reach me. I'm hoping to get a phone soon, so when I do I'll make sure you get that number as well."

Bo thanked him again and they headed to the truck. "Have you ever heard Jay talk that much?"

"No, can't say as I have," Rance answered.

After getting Joey buckled into his car seat, Rance pulled out of the parking lot. "By the way, Shep said for you to sleep in, that Sundays weren't meant for working."

Bo grinned. He knew there was a reason he liked his boss. "I wonder if we could find someone to take Joey for a couple hours in the afternoon."

"Probably, why, what've you got in mind?"

Reaching across the back of the seat, Bo tickled the back of his partner's neck. "Oh, I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve."

About the Author

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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