



CATTLE
VALLEY



Recipe
for Love

CAROL LYNNE

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Recipe for Love

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Cattle Valley

RECIPE FOR LOVE

Carol Lynne

Dedication

When I initially ran across the picture of Jay, I knew I had to write a character to go along with it. The photo absolutely fascinates me. I hope you all fall in love with him as much as I did while writing this book.

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Chapter One

Erico set down his knife and braced his hands on his prep table. He closed his eyes and took slow, even breaths until the wave of dizziness passed. Opening his eyes, he glanced around to make sure no one had noticed the episode.

They were becoming more and more frequent. A continual reminder that he needed to find a qualified sous-chef quickly or be forced to shut down the restaurant he'd put his heart and soul into.

Turning his attention back to the radish-roses he'd been creating, his thoughts went to Jay. He knew the man had the skills to become a damn fine sous-chef, and more importantly, he trusted Jay to watch over The Canoe in his absence.

Mario's warning to Jay to stay away from Erico had gutted him. When had he become the kind of person people were warned away from? He finished off the garnishes and put them in an airtight container before slipping them in the cooler.

A large part of him was happy there was a fucked up blizzard raging outside. At least it meant he could work as slow as he needed to. With only a few customers braving the cold and blowing snow, Erico had managed to keep up quite nicely.

With the majority of prep work completed, he cleaned his work area and washed his hands before wandering into the bar area. He sat on his usual stool at the end of the bar. "Would you mind making me a glass of ice water, Troy?"

"Sure thing." Troy rose from the stool he'd been resting on behind the bar and made Erico his drink. "I hope it picks up. I'm bored out of my skull."

Normally Erico would have suggested Troy start cleaning, but from the shine to the glasses hanging over the bar, he'd already done it. "Anything good on TV?"

Troy shook his head. "Reruns. That's all that's on between Christmas and New Year." Troy grinned. "Unless you wanna watch one of those Christmas cartoons. I'm sure I can find one."

"I'll pass." Erico took a big gulp of his water. A glance at the clock proved just how long a day it had been. Although it felt like it should be near quitting time, it wasn't even six o'clock. "Have you caught a recent weather report?"

"This is it for the next three days. Snow, snow and more snow. Next week we're supposed to warm up fifteen degrees. Does that help?"

Erico thrummed his fingers on the bar. "Maybe we should go on home. Guess I should've shut down like everyone else in town."

"I'm all for that," Troy agreed.

Erico took another look around the empty restaurant. "Before you leave, go tell Ellen and Chip to call it a night. I'm going to start closing up the kitchen."

"You want us to stick around until you're done?" Troy asked.

"No need. I'll probably just sleep on the foldout couch in my office." It was something he usually did when the weather was bad. His house wasn't far away, but Erico liked to be close enough to switch on the generators if there was a power failure.

Erico reached for the remote and turned off the TV. "Give me a call before you come in tomorrow. If the weather keeps up, no sense in coming in. If we do happen to get a customer, I can tend the bar."

Troy pulled on his big down parka. "Thanks. Have a good one."

Erico headed to the kitchen. There wasn't much to do but turn the pots of soup off. He'd need to put them in the cooler, but he'd do that before bed. After a last check of the kitchen, he turned the main light off and headed to the front to lock up.

At the front door, he reached for the deadbolt when movement outside caught his attention. He saw a woman hurrying across the street towards the restaurant. "Damn."

The bundled shape stepped onto the sidewalk. Erico was prepared to open the door and welcome the customer when the woman's feet flew out from under her. As if in slow motion, the customer fell backward, striking her head on the sidewalk.

Erico flung open the door and raced as fast as he dared down the steps. He heard a moan as he knelt beside the downed woman. "Are you okay?"

The injured woman reached up and pulled the scarf away from her face. "I'm okay, I think."

Erico was shocked to see Jay's beautiful face staring up at him. "Can you stand?"

Jay nodded, and Erico helped him to his feet.

"Let's get you inside where it's warm." Erico wrapped an arm around Jay's tiny waist and helped him up the steps.

Erico felt incredibly guilty. He knew if he were in the city, he'd be sued for everything he had over such an accident. Although they'd taken turns throughout the day clearing the steps and sidewalk, it was almost impossible to keep up with the blowing snow.

After shutting the door behind them, Erico led Jay to one of the padded benches in the waiting area.

Jay sat and started shedding his winter clothing. "I think I'm going to have a nice bump on my head, but nothing too serious."

Erico took a seat beside Jay. "You mind if I take a look?"

Jay pulled his hat off and shook his head. Erico stared at the shiny brown hair. How many times had he longed to run his fingers through the long, silky locks? He reached out and felt the back of Jay's head. It didn't take long to feel the goose egg.

"You've got a pretty nasty bump. Would you like me to call the paramedics?"

Jay reached up, and his long, thin fingers brushed across Erico's. "Here?"

Erico moved his hand and placed Jay's over the injury. "Feel it?"

"Yeah," Jay answered.

"Would you like me to call someone?" Erico asked again.

"No. I'll be fine." Jay's hands moved down to his waist. He twisted his torso several times.

"Did you hurt your back, too?" Erico asked. He knew it was wrong, but he couldn't help but cringe at what a back injury would mean to his insurance premiums.

Jay's hands gently began probing his lower back. "I think I just scraped it on the pavement."

With his worries over an insurance claim put at ease, the guilt began to sink. *What the hell kind of person am I?* Erico fisted his hands in an attempt to get himself under control.

Jay flinched and shut his eyes, evidently seeing Erico's fisted hands.

"No. Oh, God, no. I'm not going to hurt you." Mario's warning came back to Erico loud and clear. Completely disgusted with himself, Erico balanced his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands. "I'm sorry. I was mad at myself, not you."

After several moments, Jay rested a hand on Erico's back. "Why would you be mad at yourself? I'm the one who fell."

Erico felt Jay's touch like a brand on his skin. What had it taken for the timid man to reach out to him? The gesture spoke volumes for the kind of man Jay was. Erico had no choice but to be perfectly honest in return. "I'm a despicable human being. My first thoughts were of losing my business should something be seriously wrong with you."

"Oh. Well I think that's pretty understandable. I mean, you have something here to be really proud of. I think it's natural you'd be afraid of losing it."

Erico turned his head. "You're the one who's hurt, so why're you trying to make me feel better?"

Jay grinned. "I don't know. You seemed to need it, I guess." Jay glanced around, probably for the first time. "Where is everyone?"

Erico studied the empty restaurant. "I sent 'em home. The weather's obviously keeping folks at home. Were you coming to eat?"

Jay glanced away, sucking at his plump bottom lip. "I was going stir-crazy. Sean shut the pub down for two weeks while he visits his parents in Ireland. Ethan gave me a Canoe gift certificate before he left for Christmas. I thought..."

Jay shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I can come back some other time."

"Don't be ridiculous." Erico stood and held out his hand.

Jay stared at Erico's hand for several moments before standing on his own. Erico tried not to take the gesture personally. "Would you like to eat out here or in the bar?"

Jay shrugged.

Erico noticed he seemed to do that a lot. At least he was speaking more than he did when he'd first arrived in Cattle Valley. "I've got a pretty nice table in the kitchen if you want to keep me company while I work?"

Jay seemed hesitant but eventually nodded. "Okay. I'd like to watch you cook."

Erico knew it was the perfect opportunity to see how well the two of them could work together in the kitchen. "Or you could help? I'll make you a deal. You help me prepare our dinner, and you can keep your gift certificate and use it again later."

Jay surprised Erico by shaking his head. "Oh, no, I couldn't..."

"You don't want to cook with me?" Erico knew Jay was uneasy with him, but his refusal hurt.

"I don't have the training," Jay continued. "I'd end up making a fool of myself."

Erico stopped in the act of pushing the kitchen door open. "Don't be silly. I've eaten your food. I've told you before I think you're a fantastic cook."

"Yeah, but you're a trained chef. They aren't the same thing at all."

Erico walked into the kitchen. He glanced around at the state-of-the-art facility. He knew it could be intimidating for someone who was used to working at smaller restaurants. The last thing he wanted was to make Jay more uncomfortable. "I'm in the mood for steak and potatoes. How does that sound?"

Jay smiled. "Good."

Erico stepped into the walk-in refrigerator and pulled out two thick fillets. On his way back into the kitchen, he noticed Jay running a hand lightly over his lower back again. It was then Erico noticed the patches of blood drying on the already red button down shirt. Erico set down the meat. "You care if I take a look?"

"Huh?"

Erico gestured to Jay's back. "I think you might be bleeding."

Jay looked worried as he twisted his torso, trying to get a glimpse of his back. "Did it get on my shirt?"

Erico went to stand behind Jay. "Yeah. I'm sorry. Is it new?"

Jay nodded. "Nate gave it to me for Christmas before they left for Nebraska."

"If you can't get it out, I'll buy you a new one." He hesitated before lifting the bottom of the untucked shirt. "I'd like to see how bad it is. Are you comfortable with that?"

Looking over his shoulder, Jay made eye contact with Erico before unbuttoning the bottom-half of his shirt. "Okay."

Erico lifted the material and winced at the raw and scraped skin of Jay's knobby lower spine. "It's just scraped but it could use some cleaning and probably an antiseptic."

Erico couldn't help but brush the back of his hand over a patch of pale soft skin. He closed his eyes and clenched his teeth as he fought his body's urge to continue. Pulling his hand back, he stepped away from Jay. "I'll go get the first aid kit."

As he walked to the break room, he rubbed his chest. His heart was starting to flutter which meant he needed to calm the fuck down before he embarrassed himself. The fact that he'd made himself stop at one touch said more than words ever could. Had he ever filtered his actions to that extent with a man he was interested in?

He opened the first aid cabinet and extracted peroxide, gauze pads, antiseptic gel and bandages. When he returned to the kitchen, Jay was firing up the large gas grill. He'd seasoned the steaks and had them resting on a plate.

Erico swallowed as he got his first glimpse of Jay's stomach. The low-rise jeans were so low, Erico had no doubt the man had to wax his groin. He licked his lips as he took in the deep crevices leading from his lower stomach towards the promised land.

"I hope you don't mind," Jay said, gesturing to the grill.

"Nope. Not at all." He held up the supplies. "Ready for this?"

"I should probably put the potatoes in the oven first," Jay said.

"How about if we keep it simple and just have steak and salad?"

"That's fine."

Erico narrowed his eyes as Jay started getting salad fixings out of the fridge. "Are you putting me off?"

"Huh?"

Erico held up the first aid supplies. "I promise I won't hurt you."

Jay grinned. "I've never been good with stinging stuff."

Erico put the supplies on the counter and held up the peroxide. "No stinging stuff, promise."

Jay took the indicated seat. "Hang on." He lifted his shirt and tied it high on his chest.

Erico had never seen a man wear a shirt in that particular style. What would have made him laugh on any other guy had him practically drooling. He swallowed a groan as he took his position behind Jay and glanced at the inch of ass on display.

He cleared his throat. "Let me get a warm cloth to wipe the area down first."

Erico hurried out of the room like the devil was on his heels. He grabbed a dishrag from the supply closet and retreated to the men's restroom. Turning on the hot water, he stared at himself in the mirror.

“Keep yourself in check, or you’ll never get a chance with him,” he told his reflection. He was amazed at the vehemence with which he felt those words. A chance with Jay meant everything to him. He braced his arms on the sink and closed his eyes. Why? Why this particular man? Why now? There were so many other things he should be concentrating on.

“Is everything okay?” Jay asked from the doorway.

Erico opened his eyes and stood. “Yes. Sorry. Just taking a moment.”

“I’m ready to put the steaks on and thought I’d ask how you like yours prepared?” Jay asked.

Jay’s voice was so soft and unsure Erico wanted to wrap him up and protect him from the world. “Medium rare, please.”

Jay nodded and left the room.

Erico took a deep breath and ran the dishcloth under the hot water. He wondered how long he’d been deep in thought instead of attending to Jay like he’d promised. Erico turned off the faucet and squeezed the excess water from the cloth. *Dinner and first aid*, he repeated over and over to himself as he headed back to the kitchen.

* * * *

Jay tested the filets with a touch of his finger. “Perfect.”

He had the steaks plated with a small salad by the time Erico arrived back in the kitchen. He wished he knew what was bothering the normally at-ease man. Jay blinked several times as a thought struck him. Erico hadn’t lost his cool exterior until he’d seen Jay’s back. It had been even worse once he’d tied his shirt up which had exposed his entire lower torso.

Jay carried the plates to the long prep table. It was obvious his thin frame bothered Erico. It wasn’t the first time his bony body had turned a man off. He’d even had older women approach him on the street and offer to fatten him up. His size wasn’t a choice. If the sight of him turned Erico’s stomach, he could do little about it.

With Erico standing at the end of the table, Jay released the tie on his shirt and rebuttoned it. He wanted more than anything to just get the hell out of there, but one skill he had mastered was not letting someone know when he was hurt. “Are we eating in here?”

Erico's head tilted to the side. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Where did you want to eat?" Jay worked to get his temper under control. He rarely got angry, so it was a surprise to him that something so minor could affect him in such a major way.

Erico held out the wet cloth. "What about your back?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll take a shower when I get home." Jay shrugged. "I've had worse."

Erico stared at Jay for several moments before answering. "We can eat in the bar."

Jay picked up the plates and handed one to Erico. "I hope it's cooked to your liking."

Erico carried his plate into the bar. Instead of sitting at the bar itself, he chose one of the small booths. He went behind the bar and filled two glasses with ice. "What would you like to drink?"

"Water's fine," Jay answered.

"Two waters coming up."

Jay sat down and spread his napkin over his lap. He was secretly happy Erico chose this room instead of the dining room. Although he'd wanted to try the food at The Canoe since he'd moved to town, he didn't feel comfortable in the formal atmosphere. Table manners weren't the problem. His nana had drilled those into him from an early age. It was more a feeling of not belonging that bothered him. Without the gift certificate from Ethan, there was no way Jay would ever be able to afford it.

Jay watched as Erico cut into his fillet. He held his breath waiting for the chef's reaction. Jay cooked steak almost every night of the week. Once again, he knew it was his lack of formal training that made him feel inferior.

"Mmm. This is cooked perfectly," Erico said.

Despite his earlier anger, Jay smiled at the compliment. "Thank you."

"Do you have plans for New Year's Eve?" Erico asked.

Jay waited until he finished swallowing his bite. When he'd agreed to dinner, he hadn't considered Erico would want to initiate small talk. Jay had never been good at it with people he didn't know. He'd found it was best he stay quiet rather than make a fool of himself by saying something stupid or improper. Yet here he was, expected to carry on a conversation

with someone he barely knew. "I'm running the kids' New Year's Eve party at the lodge while their parents celebrate in the ballroom."

"Are you doing that by yourself?" Erico asked.

"Ethan's supposed to be back from visiting his dad." Although his best friend had only been gone for a week, Jay missed him. Ethan helped keep him grounded. If his friend was here, Jay would have never given in to his desire to visit The Canoe on his own. He knew it was loneliness mixed with a good deal of curiosity that had him putting on his new shirt and favourite jeans to dine at the restaurant.

"You really like kids, huh?" Erico asked after he took a sip of water.

Jay nodded. He'd often wondered if people thought him a pervert because of his love for children. Actually, he'd even wondered himself a time or two. He'd come to the conclusion it wasn't wrong to want to be with the children. There was nothing sexual in his need to be hugged by them. They made him feel normal, like he was, in some way, part of their family. If they liked him, it wasn't because they thought they could get something from him. Jay knew he couldn't explain it to Erico without sounding like a complete wacko, so he didn't try.

Jay glanced down at his plate. Although he'd only managed half of his steak and perhaps a third of his salad, he was stuffed. He wiped his mouth and set his napkin to the side of his plate.

"You're not finished are you?" Erico asked.

"I'm full. I'll take the rest home and eat it for dinner tomorrow," Jay answered.

"The salad won't be any good by then. Why don't you try to eat a little more?"

Jay clenched his hands under the table. People were always the same. "I'm a grown man. I think I know when I've had enough." Jay stood and pushed in his chair. "Sorry if the sight of me sickens you."

Without giving Erico a chance to answer, Jay stormed through the bar to the front of the restaurant where he'd left his coat, hat, gloves and scarf.

"Wait a minute," Erico said, his voice gruffer than Jay had ever heard it.

Jay continued to pull his coat on. From the expression on Erico's face, Jay knew he needed to get out and fast. Before Erico could reach him, Jay snatched up the rest of his winter gear and pushed open the front door.

Jay was on the sidewalk before Erico reached him. "Wait a goddamn minute. Where do you get off saying something like that and then just walking off? I never said your body sickened me. I'm a fucking chef. I know salad doesn't store once you've put dressing on it."

Jay backed away, stepping into the street as he pulled his hat over his head. "Forget it."

"I won't forget it!" Erico yelled. "It's taken everything I have to keep my hands off your body all evening long. I won't let you paint me with a brush that has nothing to do with me."

Jay's jaw dropped. Although his body tingled at the declaration, it didn't make him feel any less nervous. Horny or angry, men tended to lose control of themselves where Jay was concerned.

He continued to back his way into the street. Unfortunately, the entire town seemed deserted except the two of them. "I'm sorry. Thank you for dinner, but I need to go now."

With those words, Jay turned and ran to his apartment over the flower shop. By the time he made it up the stairs and shut the door to his apartment, Jay was shaking, and not just from the frigid temperature. He'd made a complete fool of himself and he knew it. It no longer mattered that he had a small crush on Erico. He doubted the man would ever talk to him again. "Serves me right for looking outside my comfort zone."

Chapter Two

Erico fired another email off to the sous chef he'd hired with the employment papers attached. He tapped his fingers on the desk, hoping he'd made the right decision. He'd interviewed François Tilmont six months earlier but had decided to go with another applicant at the time.

Now that François was hired, Erico hoped things would iron out quickly. The man seemed rather flirty in their initial interview and then again in his emails. In a surprising move, even to himself, Erico had been quick to inform his new sous chef that he was after a working relationship with him and nothing more.

Erico pulled up the photo which had been sent with François' initial resume. The man was hot, there was no two ways about it, but he did nothing for Erico's cock. The buzz cut black hair and deep dimples were intriguing, but Erico couldn't get another man to stop haunting his dreams.

He thought about the fillet he'd wrapped up and stuck in the fridge the previous night. Erico still couldn't figure out what he'd done to make Jay so angry. He wondered if people often gave Jay a hard time about his size. Erico knew the waif-like physique wasn't everyone's cup of tea, and until he'd met Jay, it had never been his, but Jay wore it well. There was something about the man's body that had Erico dreaming of licking every square inch of it.

Erico's cock began to harden in his sweatpants. It seemed like forever since he'd fucked or been fucked. The last really good fuck he'd enjoyed was before the grandstand tragedy. Erico closed his eyes, trying to force the images of the moments leading up to the collapse out of his mind.

It still shamed him to remember being balls deep inside Ethan's ass when Jay had called his best friend, frantic with the news of the disaster. Erico still couldn't believe he'd fucked the newcomer. What was even worse was that he'd pictured Jay's face the entire time he'd fucked his way to oblivion.

Afterwards, Ethan had made Erico promise to never mention their encounter to Jay. It wasn't a hard promise to make. Erico was ashamed of himself for using the younger man like he had. The reason he'd asked Ethan to come into his office in the first place had been to pump him for information about Jay. Little did he know he'd end up pumping Ethan in an entirely different way.

Watching the way Jay cared for the townspeople that horrible day, had changed his feelings towards Jay. No longer did he merely want in the man's pants, he wanted in his heart. It was a totally out-of-the-blue revelation for Erico. Never had he wanted to fall in love. He'd seen how broken his beloved mother had been when his father died. He'd vowed at the time to never let anyone have that much control over his happiness. His resolve had lasted the next seventeen years of his life until that fateful day in July.

He closed the image of Francois and pulled up the photo album on his laptop. He scrolled through the various pictures, most of them nudes of past lovers, to the picture of Jay he'd secretly taken at the spring picnic.

It had been one of the first warm days of spring and everyone broke out their shorts. Jay was no different, but his shorts were almost indecently short. Those delectable shorts paired with a tight, white crop top, and Erico had been a goner from that moment on. He'd spent the entire day secretly watching the incredibly sexy man.

The strange part about it was no one seemed to take offence to Jay's chosen outfit. When Jay had first shown up in town, it had been to murmurs about the beautiful man wearing make-up. Jay didn't wear a lot, but the man did enjoy expertly applying eye makeup and the occasional hint of blush on his cheeks.

As Erico stared at the picture of Jay, he reached down and slipped his hand inside his sweats. He'd always been attracted to muscles, so his undeniable desire for a man wearing makeup and short shorts had knocked him on his ass at the time.

He fondled his balls for several moments before slowly stroking his cock as he imagined bending Jay over the picnic table he was standing by in the photo. He'd rip open the seat of Jay's shorts and ram his cock into the already stretched and lubed hole in front of the entire town, marking the man as his.

The heat shooting into his hand took him by surprise. He lifted his fingers to his mouth and slowly licked them clean.

The ringing phone made him jump. He quickly reached for a tissue and began cleaning himself as he answered the call. "Hello?"

"How's my Niño today?"

Erico grinned, glancing down at the mess he'd made in his pants. "I'm good, Mama. How're you?"

"Not feeling dizzy?" Rosa prodded.

"No. I'm feeling strong today. Please don't worry about me." His mama insisted on calling daily to check on his declining health. He knew she worried and he loved her for that. "I hired someone to help me with the restaurant. He'll start on Monday."

"You'll call when you schedule your surgery, no?"

"Yes, Mama. I promised you I would."

"Your Papa, God rest his soul, felt like a new man after he had the angioplasty. I'm sure you will too. But that is not all, you know? You must learn to take better care of yourself."

"I know, Mama. That's why I'm trying to find someone I can trust to run the restaurant. If I can take more time off, I'm sure it will help."

His mother sighed into the phone. "I love you. It's a mama's job to worry."

"I know. I love you, too."

"Call your fancy heart doctor and let me know. The sooner I can buy my ticket, the cheaper it will be."

"I'll buy your ticket. I've already told you that." Erico grinned. It was an ongoing battle between them. Erico had quite a hefty savings account, but his mama still refused to let him help her with her bills.

Rosa made a noise in her throat. "I don't need my son to take care of me. Just call when you have a date."

"I will. I'll talk to you later, Mama." Erico hung up the phone and leant back in his chair. He doubted he'd have any diners, but he decided he'd better get cleaned up just in case. He was glad he kept a fairly complete wardrobe in his office closet.

* * * *

Jay sat staring out his window towards The Canoe. He felt an overwhelming desire to apologise to Erico for his actions the previous night. Once he'd gotten home and had a chance to think about it, he realised he'd been the one to jump to conclusions. Erico's declaration that he'd been fighting to keep his hands off Jay had come as a complete shock.

The only thing that kept him rooted to his apartment was the fear of what might happen if he did go to see Erico again. He knew Erico's reputation as well as anyone. The man was known as the playboy of Cattle Valley. Jay wondered if his loneliness and attraction to Erico was deep enough to drive him into the arms and bed of the handsome man.

It had been nearly a year since he'd felt the warm invasion of a lover's cock. For someone who'd been sexually active since the age of fifteen, the dry spell was grating on his last nerve. Would an affair be such a bad thing? He knew he'd have to keep such a relationship to himself. Ethan would have a fucking cow if he found out Jay was letting Erico fuck him.

Jay still couldn't figure out why Ethan hated Erico so much. Every time he asked Ethan about it, his friend would change the subject or say something to the effect that Erico was no better than a dog looking for a bitch in heat.

An image of Erico fucking him doggie-style came to mind, making Jay's cock hard as a rock. Yeah. He thought maybe a couple of rounds with Erico might just scratch the itch he'd put off for months.

He checked to see that Erico's expensive SUV was still parked in its usual spot beside the restaurant. With no other cars in sight, he knew if he was going to do it, now was the time. With his mind made up, he walked to his bedroom. Looking at the clothes in his closet, he grinned.

Although he didn't make a lot of money, what little extra he had went on clothes he found for sale on the internet. It didn't bother him to wear used clothing, so his money went a long way in building his wardrobe. He fingered through the shirts and came up with one of his newest. It had been an impulse buy for sure. He couldn't imagine where in Cattle Valley he'd ever be able to wear a sheer, white silk-blend T-shirt, but the moment he saw it, he knew it needed to be his.

Jay bit his bottom lip and took the shirt off its hanger. Before he changed his mind, he pulled his cheap, drugstore T-shirt off and slipped into the tight white one. As much as he

wanted to see what he looked like, he wanted the full effect. He stripped out of his baggy sweatpants and pulled on a pair of his oldest, tightest jeans. The ripped and faded denim fit like a second skin and he was sure was a stark contrast from the expensive looking shirt.

Walking into the bathroom, he turned on the light and stared at himself in the mirror. "You are such a slut."

He covered his mouth with his hand as he laughed. What would the good citizens of Cattle Valley think of him if they could see him now? Although he knew most men had sexual secrets, he doubted any of them would suspect him of being a slutty, but confident, sensualist.

After a quick hair and makeup touch-up, Jay was ready. He hoped like hell he wasn't about to make a fool of himself. As long as Erico's temper remained in check, he thought he'd be fine with the man.

Mario's self defence lessons hadn't done much in the way of making him stronger, but he did understand that everything was fair when you were trying to get away from an attacker. Jay had no qualms about kneeing someone in the balls or poking their eyes with his thumbs. He doubted it would ever come to that, but at least he knew he could do it if he needed to. Besides, if Erico were going to hurt him, he probably would have done the previous night when Jay had pissed him off.

Right before leaving the apartment, Jay ran back into his bedroom and grabbed his old grey zip-up sweatshirt. He figured it would be best not to advertise the purpose for his visit right away.

He grinned as he locked the apartment door. Erico was probably the kind of guy who liked to feel like he was in charge. Jay would gladly let the handsome man think that if it got him what he needed.

Instead of wearing his hat, Jay flipped the parka hood over his head and jogged down the street a block before crossing to The Canoe. He was only mildly surprised to see the 'Open' sign on as he pushed the door open.

"Be right there," Erico called out.

Jay took off his coat and adjusted the hard cock trapped within the tight confines of his jeans. He tossed his coat onto the bench along with his gloves and waited.

Erico came around the corner. His smile fell when he spotted Jay.

"I came to apologise," Jay said, his earlier resolve slipping dramatically. It was always like this for him. He'd get himself all pumped up to show his inner-slut to the world and then something would happen to destroy his confidence. The confused expression on Erico's face made Jay feel like an idiot.

"I figured you'd never step foot in here again," Erico mumbled.

Jay shrugged. "I'm a big enough person to admit when I'm wrong."

"How's your back?" Erico asked.

"Okay. Bruised a little, but the scrapes aren't so bad."

Erico gestured towards the kitchen. "I wrapped up the rest of your fillet. You want me to get it for you?"

Jay nodded. "I'll come with you if you don't mind."

"Uhh, sure."

Jay followed Erico into the kitchen. It wasn't until he was behind the man that he noticed the damp curls at the nape of Erico's neck. Evidently he'd either just taken a shower or he'd been working up a sweat. Jay brushed his hand over the front of his jeans. Both images renewed his resolve to seduce the man without him even knowing it.

As he entered the kitchen, he unzipped his sweatshirt. Even though he didn't take it off, he opened the front enough to tease Erico with glimpses of the skin beneath the sheer white fabric. He leaned with his back against the prep table and zeroed in on Erico's ass.

Erico turned around and nearly dropped the foil-wrapped package. "Nice shirt."

Jay smiled and spread his jacket open even further. "You like it?"

With his mouth half-open, Erico nodded. "A lot."

Jay shrugged out of his zippered jacket and let it drop to the floor. He'd seen himself in the mirror earlier, so he knew exactly what Erico was looking at. His small dark brown nipples were clearly on display through the sheer fabric and Erico's eyes appeared glued to them.

Erico's head snapped up as he met Jay's gaze. "What're you doing?"

And *BAM*, just like that, Jay's confidence flew out of the restaurant and straight back to his lonely apartment. He bent over and scooped his jacket off the floor. "I...uh..."

Before Jay could take a step in the direction of the door, Erico reached out and wrapped his hand around the back of Jay's neck seconds before their mouths slammed together. It was

as if they'd both been sitting on a powder keg just waiting for something to ignite the passion between them.

Suddenly Jay couldn't get close enough or get his tongue deep enough into Erico's mouth. His hands grabbed at the shirt keeping him from Erico's skin. "Off. Off."

Erico ripped his shirt open. The buttons pinged like hail against the stainless steel surfaces of the industrial kitchen. Jay ran his fingers down Erico's lightly furred chest as he once again devoured the man's mouth.

Jay was completely out of his head with long-restrained lust. He wanted to be naked, he wanted to be fucked and, more than anything, he wanted to be desired. Strong arms lifted him off the floor and set him on the prep table.

Jay spread his legs and allowed himself to be pushed back onto the cold metal surface. He knew he was being laid out like a succulent feast by the chef and blissfully welcomed Erico's lips and tongue on his skin.

"So fucking sexy," Erico growled as he licked Jay's nipple through the shirt.

Jay looked down and groaned as Erico switched to the other pebbled nub, leaving the first clearly visible through the now transparent fabric. He reached up and ran his fingers through Erico's slightly curly dark brown hair.

Erico glanced up and met Jay's gaze. Jay could tell Erico was as riddled with lust as he was, but there was something more in the man's eyes. It was almost as if he was worried he was going too fast. He knew Mario had spoken to Erico and began to wonder exactly what his friend had told the chef.

"I won't break," he whispered, running his fingers down the side of Erico's cheek.

"I won't hurt you," Erico whispered back, capturing Jay's fingers in his mouth, giving each one a kiss before releasing them.

Jay sucked in a deep breath as Erico's hand went to the front of his jeans. Instead of immediately unfastening Jay's pants, Erico bent and rubbed his lips over the skin just above the waistband.

"So sexy," Erico moaned again, popping the top button of Jay's jeans. He took his time, lavishing each inch of uncovered skin with kisses and licks.

Jay's cock was so hard it was becoming more and more painful contained within the denim. "Please," he begged.

Erico continued to take his time, but did reach inside and manoeuvre Jay's cock out of its trapped position and into the cool air of the kitchen. "Better?"

Jay sighed. "You have no idea."

With a soft chuckle, Erico captured the head of Jay's cock in his mouth.

"Oh, fuck!" Jay reached down and pushed his jeans as far out of the way as they would go. There was something about a warm mouth wrapped around his cock that had always driven Jay crazy. Either Erico was better than anyone who'd ever sucked him or it had been too damn long.

Jay kicked at his jeans, trying to get them completely off. Without missing a beat, Erico took over and within moments, Jay was completely naked. He propped his feet on the edge of the prep table and spread his legs further apart, inviting Erico to explore.

The subtle scrape of Erico's teeth against the sensitive vein running up Jay's cock nearly sent him into orbit. "Oh fuck!"

Erico groaned at the expletive and pulled his mouth off Jay's cock long enough to spit in his hand.

Jay held his breath, knowing what Erico planned to do with the saliva-slicked fingers. He reached behind him and gripped the opposite edge of the prep table. "Do it."

Erico's lips wrapped around Jay's cock as he prodded the puckered hole of Jay's ass. When the first finger pushed its way inside, Jay's body bucked.

More. The single digit only served to tease Jay's hole with the promise of more. The burn as the second finger slid inside made Jay's balls tingle. He wanted the cock that was still trapped inside Erico's slacks.

"Fuck me," he cried.

Erico released Jay's cock and shook his head. "No stuff."

Jay frantically gestured with his hand. "Back pocket."

Erico pulled his fingers from Jay's ass to grab the jeans from the floor. Jay sat up and reached for the front of Erico's pants. The slide fastening came undone quickly. Jay eased the zipper down carefully over the monster trying to break free of Erico's underwear.

I knew it. Once exposed, Erico's cock was a sight to behold. Long and thick, his cock was a much richer brown than Erico's skin. While Erico ripped the condom package open, Jay

took the opportunity to bend down and taste the pre-cum running down the length of Erico's shaft.

For several luxurious moments, Erico allowed Jay to taste his way around the big cock before pulling back. "Stand up."

As rubbery as his legs felt, Jay knew he had no other option. The table was too high for fucking.

Erico helped him off the table and turned him around.

Jay stuck out his ass and rested his arms and head on top of the shiny work surface. He heard Erico spit again, this time the warm fluid shot directly onto Jay's hole. "Give it to me."

"Gladly," Erico grunted, pressing the head of his cock against Jay's pucker.

Jay bore down as the bulbous head made its way passed the outer ring of muscles. His entire body tingled as the fire was lit in his ass. With a firm grip on Jay's hips, Erico slowly rocked his way inside.

Several times Jay was afraid he'd have to ask the man to hold on, but he gritted his teeth and worked through the pain, knowing what lay on the other side. When he felt the slap of Erico's balls against his skin, he knew the man was fully seated.

One of Erico's hands slid up Jay's chest to rub against a pebbled nipple. Jay turned his head and sought the kiss he so desperately needed. It was sloppy and involved more tongue licking than actual kissing, but it was hotter than hell and so was Erico.

"Fuck me hard," Jay whispered.

Erico's brows drew together. "I don't want to bruise you."

"Make me black and blue," Jay ordered as his need threatened to overwhelm him.

Erico's nostrils flared slightly before he withdrew his cock and slammed it full force as deep into Jay's ass as it would go. Jay let out a grunt of satisfaction at the move. His body may be thin but he could take a hard fuck like no one else. He loved it hard. It wasn't the bite of pain he loved as much as knowing the man ploughing into him was losing control.

Jay wanted that control. He thrived on driving a lover crazy with his body. His only problem was finding a lover who knew how to fuck like a madman in the bedroom but was relatively sane outside of it.

Jay had high hopes for Erico as he was lifted off the floor with each and every thrust the bigger man made. How long had it been since he'd had an ass reaming like the one he was presently receiving? Maybe never, he quickly thought as a slap landed on his ass cheek.

"Again," Jay begged.

Another slap followed quickly by a bite to his back just above the injuries he'd sustained the previous night.

"Oh, fuck!" he screamed as his cock erupted. Some of the warm seed splashed its way onto the stainless steel surface, making for an erotic slip and slide.

"You like that?" Erico asked around a grunt.

Before Jay had time to answer, Erico lifted Jay's feet off the floor and delivered a hard, fast series of thrusts at lightning speed, finally burying himself to the hilt before calling out Jay's name.

Jay managed to get his feet under him before Erico collapsed against his back. Jay could feel the rasp of Erico's chest hair against the abraded skin from the previous night and his cock threatened to harden again.

Jay smiled. Yeah, he could definitely get used to riding Erico's cock a couple of times a week for a few months.

He noticed Erico's breathing change and started to wonder if the man had fallen asleep. "I need to get up before you take a nap."

Erico slid to the floor and Jay straightened and turned around. Erico had gone completely pale and his hand was holding his chest.

Warning bells went off in Jay's head. He knelt beside the man who'd just fucked him senseless. "Are you okay?"

Erico shook his head. "Pills. In my pants," Erico gasped around clenched jaws.

What the fuck? Jay picked up Erico's suit pants and found a small silver pillbox. He opened the container and withdrew the tablet. He knew exactly what they were, the same thing his nana had used during the last several years of her life. Nitro-glycerine. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?*

Chapter Three

After helping Erico to the sofa in his office, Jay went back to the kitchen to retrieve their clothes. He still didn't feel right about not calling 9-1-1, but Erico had insisted he was fine.

Jay made a quick trip to the restroom before dressing. He picked up Erico's clothes and walked back into the office. It was a completely unique situation for him. Never had he had such fantastic sex only to bring about some kind of angina for his lover. He sat on the floor beside the couch. "Is there anything I can get for you?"

Erico smiled and brushed the side of Jay's face with the back of his hand. "I just need to lay here for a few more minutes, and I'll be fine."

Jay turned his head and kissed the caressing fingers. "I didn't know..."

Erico shook his head. "No one does. Well, except Isaac but he's been sworn to secrecy."

"Why?" It didn't make sense to Jay. If Erico had heart problems, shouldn't everyone know in case he needed assistance?

Erico grinned. "I don't deal well with hovering. If the few friends I have found out, they'd be all over me to do something about it."

"So why haven't you? Done something, I mean."

"I'm trying. I need to have a procedure done, but I can't do that and worry about The Canoe. It's why I tried so hard to get you to come to work for me," Erico explained.

Jay broke eye contact. Not only did he feel like shit for turning Erico down at every opportunity, but he'd always hoped the job offer had to do with Erico's attraction towards him. "So you really did want me in your kitchen and not your bed," he surmised.

Still naked, Erico slowly sat up. "I wanted you both places. Still do. I did, however, give up the dream of you coming to work for me. I hired a new guy this morning. He'll be here on Sunday to start on Monday morning."

Jay tried to push down the spark of jealousy. It was widely known around town that Erico fucked his sous chefs on a regular basis. "So you won't need me anymore."

Erico leant forward and snatched Jay's hand where it rested on his thigh. He tugged Jay towards him. "Come up here."

Although Jay often enjoyed post-fucking cuddles, he doubted Erico was physically up to it. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Bullshit. I've lived with this condition for a while now. I'm fine, believe me."

Jay gave in and joined Erico on the sofa. He hesitated to touch the man, afraid he'd bring on another bout of angina.

Erico was having none of it and pulled Jay onto his lap. Jay settled comfortably, his legs folded under him on either side of Erico's.

"I didn't get a chance to say this before but...wow!" Erico chuckled. "I think I might have finally met my match in the fucking department."

Although crude, Jay embraced the compliment. "I could easily say the same to you."

Erico brushed several soft kisses across Jay's lips. "What I want to know is what happened to that shy guy who's been masquerading all this time as Jay De Luca?"

Jay grinned. He knew he was a hard person for most people to figure out. It was his nature to be unassuming, but why would that particular personality trait have to follow him into the bedroom? "I thought all men enjoyed a librarian out of the bedroom but a slut inside it?"

Erico laughed. "Yeah. We do, we just don't often come across them."

"Well you have now," Jay stated proudly. "I love sex and once you get that ticker of yours repaired, I'd like to indulge that side of myself more often."

Jay began to worry Erico would think he was after more than he actually was. "Don't worry though. I'm not looking for a boyfriend, just a fuck buddy."

Erico's forehead creased. "Why not a boyfriend?"

"Boyfriends want control. I'll never allow anyone to have control over me again."

Erico circled Jay's nipple through the sheer shirt he'd put back on. "People only try to take control if you let them. Not everyone's like that."

"That's why I'll never give someone the chance. Nope. I'm just fine having sex without all the other shit that goes along with it." Jay leant forward and pushed his tongue between Erico's parted lips for several moments before sitting back. "And I'd rather keep it quiet if you don't mind."

"Any particular reason?" Erico asked, squeezing Jay's ass.

Jay knew Ethan's hatred of Erico was the biggest reason, but it wouldn't be as exciting either. Besides, if the townspeople found out, they would start pairing him with Erico as a couple, and Jay didn't want that. "I like the idea of having a secret lover. It makes me hard just thinking about sneaking away to ride your cock at a moment's notice."

Erico's eyes went wide. "Secret liaisons? I like that idea."

Jay licked Erico's neck. "So what kind of procedure do you need to have done before I can do all the wicked things to you I want?"

"Angioplasty. They want to put a stent in while they're at it. Recovery time isn't bad though."

"Yeah, but when will you be strong enough to fuck me like you did earlier?" Jay asked.

"I should be able to fuck you within a few days, but the kind of fucking we did earlier will probably take a week or two of healing first."

Jay wondered how long it would be before Erico returned to work and began fucking his new sous chef. He didn't know why he even worried about such a thing but he did. "And this new chef? What's his name?"

"Francois," Erico answered.

"You planning to fuck him?" Jay asked bluntly.

"No. As a matter of fact, I told him it would be a working relationship only."

"And why did you feel the need to tell a new-hire that?" Jay couldn't imagine the kind of interview where the subject of sex would come up.

"When I picked up on his innuendos. It's one of the reasons I didn't hire him months ago when he first applied," Erico explained.

"So what's different about this guy from the other sous chefs you've fucked?" Jay had to ask.

"I didn't have access to your ass then. Hopefully I do now."

Jay nodded. "Okay. I may enjoy being slutty, but I don't fuck more than one person at a time. I expect the same from my partner."

Erico's fingers began rubbing the seam that ran between Jay's ass cheeks. "I've no problem with that. I have one other issue I need to tell you though. My mom will be in town for a few days when I have the procedure done."

Jay made a face. "Not good. Mothers don't like me. I'll have to make myself scarce while she's in town."

"Nonsense. You don't want me to suffer blue balls while she's here, do you?"

Jay grinned and shook his head. "We couldn't have that."

"No, we couldn't. Besides, my mom's cool. I've been out for a long time."

Jay shook his head. He knew it didn't matter. "Women don't understand men who wear makeup, especially mothers. I think it reminds them a little too much that their sons like to suck cock."

Erico started to laugh and pulled Jay down to lay beside him on the couch. "Stay with me tonight."

Jay wasn't sure he was comfortable with that. It smacked too much of being a couple. He knew he shouldn't let Erico fuck him again after the earlier episode. If they weren't going to screw, what would be the point of staying? On the other hand, maybe Erico was nervous about having another episode while being alone in the restaurant.

"We'll see how the rest of the day goes," he finally answered.

Erico began kissing Jay's neck. "Good. I have the rest of the afternoon and evening to convince you."

* * * *

Jay spotted the taxi pull up outside the bakery across the street. He knocked on the window as Ethan climbed out of the cab and waited for the driver to unload his luggage.

Ethan looked up at Jay's apartment window and waved.

Jay turned away from the window and threw on his coat, hat and gloves before leaving. It had been a week since Ethan had left for Virginia to spend Christmas with his dad. As he ran down the stairs, his body reminded him of the previous day's activities with Erico. He hadn't spent the night, but he had stayed until well after midnight. Jay was pleased with himself for being strong enough to go home when he had.

"Hey!" Ethan yelled at Jay.

Jay waited for the taxi to drive away and embraced his friend. "How was your trip?"

"Okay. Of course the cab from the airport nearly broke the bank, but it was worth it."

Jay released his friend and picked up one of the smaller bags and followed Ethan inside. He walked up the steps leading from the bakery and waited for Ethan to unlock the door.

Once inside, Ethan quickly crossed the small living room and turned up the heat. "I didn't miss the snow that's for damn sure."

"Virginia gets snow," Jay reminded Ethan.

"Yeah, but nothing like this."

Jay shrugged. "It wasn't so bad. I'm actually enjoying the break from work."

Ethan gave Jay a sideways stare. "Something interesting happen while I was gone?"

Fuck! "No. Why would you think that? Look around, the town is practically empty."

Ethan stared at him for several more seconds before looking away. "What time do we need to be at the lodge?"

"Chad is picking us up at six. He even reserved a room for us, so take an overnight bag." That was the most exciting part of the evening for Jay. He'd never stayed in a motel you paid more than hourly for.

"After that eighty dollar cab ride from the airport, I'm busted," Ethan complained.

Jay shook his head. "No. It's completely free. It's part of our payment for working the kids' party tonight."

"Oh. Well in that case, cool," Ethan said around a yawn.

"I'll get out of your hair and let you take a nap. You'll need all your energy for later."

"I'll take you up on that offer." Ethan stretched and yawned again. "Meet me back here before six?"

"Sure." Jay waved as he walked out the door.

Once he was on the sidewalk, he glanced up at Ethan's window to make sure his friend wasn't looking and jogged down the sidewalk towards The Canoe. He didn't know if Erico would have time to see him, but figured it was worth a shot.

* * * *

Erico was putting the last prime rib into the oven when he heard someone rustling around in the dining room. He glanced at the clock and frowned. His staff wasn't supposed to arrive for another hour.

He shut the oven door and untied his apron, tossing it onto the prep table. "Hello?" he called as he exited the kitchen.

"It's me," Jay answered, entering the dining room from the bar area.

Erico smiled and opened his arms. He'd hated Jay leaving the previous night, but had held his tongue.

Jay walked straight into Erico's arms and kissed him.

The slide of Jay's tongue against Erico's wasn't meant to be loving, it was meant to entice. No problem there. Erico's cock went rock hard within seconds. He ground his erection against Jay as the kiss grew into an all-out mouth fuck.

Breaking for air, Erico stared into those dark brown eyes he'd dreamt about all night. "Nice. What brings you by?"

"I was already out. Ethan just got home. Thought I'd stop by and give you your New Year's kiss while I had the chance."

"Mmm," Erico moaned, rubbing his cock against Jay's. "Happy New Year."

Jay's long, elegant fingers threaded their way through Erico's hair as he glanced around the dining room. "Are you expecting a big crowd tonight?"

"No. We're only serving from seven to nine. So far I've only had around fifty reservations." He leant in for another kiss. "Of course that means I'll be finished early. Do you want to come by?"

"Can't. Remember, I'm working the children's party. Chad gave me and Ethan a room for the night."

"Well then I'll come up and join you," Erico said, kissing Jay's long, slender neck.

Jay stiffened. "You can't. I'll be sharing a room with Ethan."

Erico felt like he'd been slapped. He wrapped Jay even tighter in his arms and gazed into his eyes. "Sharing as in *sharing*?"

Jay grinned and shook his head. "Sharing as in we're sleeping in the same room but separate beds." Jay nipped Erico's lower lip. "If I was fucking around with Ethan, I wouldn't be here right now."

Erico felt better about Jay staying at the hotel, but he hated the thought of being alone on New Year's Eve. "Are you sure you won't be able to sneak away, even for a few minutes? I could head to the Grizzly Bar after I close the restaurant."

Jay nuzzled his face against Erico's neck. "I doubt it. You're not open tomorrow, are you?"

"No. I thought I'd head home and do some laundry." Erico couldn't keep the disappointment out of his voice. He couldn't help but wonder whether Jay really couldn't get away or if he was just afraid of being seen with Erico.

"Can I come by?" Jay asked.

"Sure. I can pick you up if you want?" Erico offered.

"That's okay. It's not far."

Erico narrowed his eyes. "Does this have to do with you not wanting to be seen with me?"

Jay grinned. "Partially. Being tacked on to the long string of the men in this town you've fucked doesn't exactly appeal to me."

Erico released Jay and stepped back. "You're ashamed to be with me?"

Jay shook his head. "I didn't say that. Hell, if I did, I didn't mean it that way. I just want us to be together for us, not for the town gossip mill, that's all."

Although he prayed Jay was telling the truth, Erico still had his doubts. When Jay wrapped his arms around Erico again and cuddled close, Erico admitted defeat. He didn't know that he'd ever be able to stay mad at Jay for long.

"I've been thinking, and since I'm off for another week, I wondered if you'd like me to help your new guy out while you're gone. At least long enough to get him settled."

"Sounds good. I called the doctor earlier and he said he could do the procedure on the fifth, but I'd probably need to go in on the fourth to get the blood work and stuff done."

Jay whistled. "Wow. That soon?"

Erico shrugged. "He's been bugging me for months. I guess now that I've cleared my schedule, he's jumping on it. My mom will be in on the fourth as well. I'll pick her up in Sheridan before heading to the hospital."

"If I can find a car to borrow, I'll come up and see you while you're in the hospital," Jay said.

"My mom will be staying at my place. I'm sure she wouldn't mind bringing you up with her," Erico offered. Jay had made it clear he didn't want to be around Erico's mom, but Erico knew his mama wasn't like most. She may try to mother Jay to death, but she certainly wouldn't turn up her nose at him.

"We'll see," was all Jay said.

Erico ran his hands over Jay's ass, stopping to give the twin globes a rough squeeze. "Are you sure you won't change your mind about tonight?"

"I'm sure, but I'll spend all day tomorrow with you."

"And tomorrow night?" Erico pleaded.

"Maybe." Jay teased Erico by reaching between them and running his hand over the front of Erico's suit pants.

* * * *

With the last of the prime rib carved, Erico decided to make a tour through the dining room. He spotted Nate, Ryan and Rio and immediately headed their way. "Hey. How was your trip?"

"Good," Nate answered, taking a sip of his red wine. "Lilly said to tell you she couldn't wait to get back here and have more of your crême brulée."

"She's a sweetheart," Erico acknowledged.

"Sit down and have a drink with us," Nate invited, indicating the vacant chair.

Erico glanced around the room to make sure everyone was taken care of before taking the offered seat. "You're lucky you missed the big snow storm."

"The hell we did," Ryan burst out laughing. "We had to drive back through all that shit and with Nate whining and Rio snoring..." Ryan shook his head. "Let's just say I was damn glad to get home."

"So how was your Christmas? Did you get home?" Nate asked, obviously ignoring Ryan's complaints.

"I didn't get home, but Mama is coming into town in a couple of days so I'll celebrate with her then." He hated that he hadn't seen his sisters and nieces and nephews since last

Easter, but the doctor had advised against travel and he'd been needed at the restaurant anyway.

"I'd like to meet her. You'll have to bring her by City Hall while she's here," Nate said.

Erico thrummed his fingers on the table. He knew the time had come to tell his friends the truth. "Well, actually, she's coming into town to help me out."

Nate leant forward. "Oh?"

Erico took a deep breath. "I'm going into the hospital for a balloon angioplasty on the fifth." He watched as one by one, his friends jaws dropped.

"That's what the sweating and dizziness was about on Thanksgiving," Rio surmised, speaking up for the first time.

"Yes."

"What's this about sweating and dizziness?" Nate asked, slapping Rio's stomach. "Why didn't you say anything?"

Rio shrugged and rubbed his stomach. "I just figured he was getting the flu or something."

"Aren't you kinda young for angioplasty?" Nate prodded.

"Heart disease runs in my family. All the Santos men die young." With a sudden rush of emotion threatening to overwhelm him, Erico knew he had to get out of there. "I'd better get back to the kitchen."

"Wait," Ryan called out before Erico could get away from the table. "Do you need help with anything?"

Erico smiled while biting the inside of his cheek. This was precisely the reason he'd waited so long to tell his friends. "No. I've got it all taken care of."

Before he could be questioned further, he strode back through the dining room with a fake smile plastered to his face. He pushed open the kitchen door and immediately went to the refrigerator. The dessert was the only thing left to serve.

Erico took deep breaths as he fired up his mini blow torch and began finishing the crème brûlée he was known for. As he worked crystallizing the sugar, he had to stop several times to dab at his eyes. *Dammit!*

Bone tired, Jay reached for the phone as soon as Ethan jumped into the shower. He called Erico's cell phone, hoping he wouldn't mind.

"Hello?"

"Were you asleep?" Jay asked.

"Hmmm, yeah, but that's okay. I'm glad you called."

"I just wanted to tell you Happy New Year."

"Thank you, baby." Erico replied, his voice sounding all deep and sleepy.

Jay wasn't sure what he thought of the endearment. He decided to play it off for now. Maybe Erico was still half asleep. "I was thinking how much I wish you were buried deep inside me right now and had to call."

"Mmm, that sounds nice," Erico moaned. "Of course I'd have to start out by eating that pretty asshole of yours."

Jay's cock went painfully hard at the image. "I'd let you. I'd beg you to fuck me with your tongue." Jay started a slow stroke of his cock. He heard the shower shut off and new Ethan would be out any moment.

"Are you hard?" Jay asked Erico.

"Fuck yeah."

"I have to go, but keep that for me until tomorrow."

Erico growled. "You're killing me."

Jay thought of Erico's episode the previous day. "Not funny."

"I know."

"I'll see you tomorrow," Jay whispered.

"I'll be waiting."

Jay heard the door knob turn and quickly ended the call, putting the room phone back into its cradle.

Ethan stepped into the room, still rubbing his blond hair with a towel. "Were you talking to someone?"

Jay shook his head and laughed. "You're probably still hearing the echoes of a roomful of children."

Ethan shucked the towel around his waist and climbed into bed.

Jay turned onto his side, hoping his friend in the opposite bed wouldn't notice his erection. "I saw you talking to that new deputy tonight. You like him?"

Ethan reached over and turned out the lamp between their beds. "Brian? He's okay. He has a kid. That's the only reason I was talking to him."

"Benny. He's a cute boy. His dad's not bad either."

Ethan groaned and threw one of his pillows at Jay. "You're such a horn dog."

Jay chuckled. "I wasn't talking about wanting him. I was just making an observation. You should ask him out."

"No thanks. I do just fine with my toys. The last thing I need is one who talks."

Jay threw Ethan's pillow back at him. "Toys are in no way an acceptable substitute for a tongue and a cock and we both know it. You need to get back out into the dating scene before you're too old to get it up."

Ethan laughed. "Yeah, look who's talking."

"Hey, I'm six years younger than you are," Jay said, trying to dodge the bullet. He hated lying to his best friend, but he knew he couldn't maintain his friendship and continue to see Erico if he told the truth.

Ethan settled into his bed and pulled up the covers. "Too bad we have to leave in the morning. I could get used to this."

Jay glanced around the room. "Yeah. Someday we'll have to come back for a whole weekend."

"Sure, buddy. As soon as we both strike it rich."

As Jay snuggled in, he thought about spending a weekend with Erico in front of the room's fireplace. He pushed the romantic notion away. He had no use for romance. He lived in the real world and true romance only happened to a lucky few. Jay hadn't had a lucky day in his life, no reason to think it would change anytime soon.

Chapter Four

Jay had no sooner dropped his overnight bag on the floor when there was a knock at the door. He spun back around and opened the door. "Hey," he greeted Erico with a smile.

"I've been watching from the restaurant, waiting for you to get home," Erico said.

Jay moved into Erico's embrace and offered him a kiss. He opened immediately and welcomed Erico's exploring tongue. Although he'd had a nice time with the kids, he'd decided halfway through the evening he'd wished he'd made plans with Erico instead.

Erico broke the kiss. "Go get your warm clothes on."

"Why?"

Erico grinned and shook his head. "I'm not telling you. It's a surprise." Jay's ass received a playful swat. "Go."

Rubbing his butt, Jay hurried to his room and stripped out of his jeans. He found the pair of long underwear he'd bought the first week of winter and pulled them on. He decided to tease Erico and walked out into the living room wearing nothing but the long underwear. "Do I have to wear a shirt?"

Erico practically lunged for Jay, tackling him to the floor. Once trapped under the bigger man, Jay laughed as Erico bit and licked his nipples. "Where I'm taking you, these little beauties will freeze and drop off."

"Ooh," Jay quickly covered his nipples with his hands. "We can't have that."

"No, we can't," Erico agreed. After another deep kiss, Erico rose to his feet and pulled Jay off the floor.

"Why won't you tell me where we're going?" Jay asked.

Erico turned Jay in the direction of the bedroom and gave him a nudge. "It's a brand new year. A time to experience new things."

Jay stopped and glanced back at his new lover. "This sounds suspiciously like a date." Jay wasn't sure what he thought about that.

"It's not a date. It's an outing."

An outing. Jay nodded his head. "Well okay then."

* * * *

Erico pulled to a stop. The hill rose in front of them. It was obvious they weren't the first to slide its slopes, but Erico was grateful it was deserted at the moment. "Well, what do you think?"

"I...think it's a big hill," Jay answered, looking confused.

Erico chuckled and gave Jay a quick kiss. "You're right. Come on."

Erico got out of the SUV and walked around to the back. He opened the double doors and pulled out a bright blue sled. Walking around to the front of the vehicle, he tapped on the hood. "You coming?"

Jay opened the door. "Sledding? Seriously?"

"Yeah. Why? Don't tell me you don't enjoy whizzing down a snow-covered hill at lightning speed on a long sheet of formed plastic?"

Jay leaned against the hood of the SUV. "I don't think I've gone sledding since I was ten. Are you sure you're up for this?" Jay grinned, his entire face lightening up. "You're not exactly a kid anymore."

"Bite your tongue," Erico chuckled. He held out his hand and waited for Jay to join him.

The two of them trudged up the hill, trailing the bright blue sled behind them. Once they reached the top, Erico sat in the back of the plastic toboggan and patted the space in front of him. "Settle that sweet little ass right here and let me take you for a ride."

Jay straddled the sled and slowly lowered his butt to nestle between Erico's spread thighs. Erico couldn't hold in the groan as he felt Jay wiggle against his cold, but still healthy cock.

"Ready," Jay said.

"Hold on to my legs," Erico said in Jay's ear. He put his hands into the snow and rocked them back and forth towards the edge of the slope. With one last mighty push, the toboggan started down the hill.

Jay squealed with delight as the ends of his hair battered Erico's face. Erico didn't mind a bit. The younger man's delight far outweighed any discomfort he was suffering at the hands of whipping hair and a bony ass bumping against his hardening cock.

Erico wrapped his arms around Jay's waist as they coasted to a stop.

"That was fantastic!" Jay shouted.

"Yes it was," Erico agreed. Instead of immediately getting off the sled, Erico took a moment to relish the feel of Jay in his arms. He'd spent many winters in Cattle Valley and never enjoyed a single one as much as he'd enjoyed that singular ride down the side of the hill.

"Can we go again?" Jay asked.

"Sure. We can play all day if you want."

Jay rolled out of the sled and onto the ground. "Although this is great, there are a lot of other things I want to do with you today."

Erico followed Jay and lay on top of him in the cold snow. "You do?" He ground his cock against Jay.

"Yep." Jay wiggled his hips. "It involves great big balls."

"Mmm, I like the sound of that."

Jay pushed a handful of snow in Erico's face. "Good, because I haven't built a snowman since I was a kid, either."

Laughing, Erico sputtered and shook the snow off his face. "A snowman? I thought you were talking about my balls."

Jay reached between them and rubbed Erico's sac. "Take me on another ride down the hill, build me a snowman, and I'll thaw these out with my mouth when we get home."

Erico got to his feet and held out his hand. Pulling Jay up into his arms, he kissed him. "Now what sane man would argue with that?"

* * * *

"You're not peeking, are you?" Erico asked, coming into the living room.

Jay touched the tie Erico had secured over his eyes. "Nope, no peeking."

Erico set the bowl down and quickly took his clothes off once more. Jay, on the other hand, was still gloriously naked, sitting cross legged on the floor in front of the fireplace. Once again undressed, Erico grabbed the bowl and sat down in front of Jay.

He scooped a teaspoon into the ice cold creamy goodness and held it up. "Okay, open your mouth."

With a soft chuckle, Jay complied. The simple gesture of trust meant a lot to Erico.

Erico fed the bite of ice cream to Jay and waited for his lover's reaction.

"Mmm," Jay moaned and opened his mouth for more.

Erico gave him another spoonful. "Good, right?"

"It's amazing." Jay reached up and tore the blindfold off. "Do you have another spoon?"

Erico handed him the extra one he'd brought in with him. "Guess what this is made of?"

Jay took another bite. "Hmmm, milk and sugar, of course. Vanilla. I'm assuming eggs."

"You're right so far, but you're leaving out the most important ingredient."

Jay's brow wrinkled as he took another bite of the ice cream. He seemed to be mentally running through the list of ingredients. "What else is there?"

"Snow!" Erico laughed.

"No way," Jay said, pushing against Erico's chest.

"Yes way," Erico continued to chuckle. "You know what the best part about snow ice cream is?"

"The flavour?" Jay guessed.

Erico shook his head. "You have to eat it all really quickly before it melts because you can't freeze it."

"In that case pass the bowl back over here." Jay started to giggle. It had been a long time since Erico had heard such open joy from a man.

When the bowl was empty, Jay lay back on the carpet and rubbed his stomach. "I'm not gonna be able to eat for at least a week."

Erico set the bowl aside and pulled the blanket over them. He ran his hand over the small bump on Jay's stomach and grinned. "I'm pretty sure you've gained a couple of pounds after that."

Jay's body stiffened. He reached down and tried to remove Erico's hand from his stomach, but Erico refused.

Scooting closer to Jay, Erico looked him in the eye. "I thought we'd already gone over this, but I can see we need to do it again. I love your body. Every dip. Every ridge. And, yes, every fucking bone. Don't push me away because you believe otherwise."

Jay stopped trying to shove Erico's hands from his abdomen. "I've always been made fun of for the way I look."

After they'd returned from playing in the snow, they took a shower together to warm up. Erico wanted to say something at the time about how different Jay looked without his makeup. Not worse, just different. He wondered if it would be a good time to bring it up. The last thing he wanted was to make Jay feel more self-conscious.

"Can I ask you something?" Erico propped his head on his hand and stared down at Jay.

"I don't know. Depends I guess," Jay answered truthfully.

Erico reached out with his free hand and ran a fingertip under Jay's eye. "When did you start wearing makeup?"

Jay's expression clouded. "You don't like it?"

Erico shook his head. "Didn't say that. If I didn't like it, I wouldn't have been attracted to you in the first place. I was just curious."

Jay was silent for several moments before he finally spoke. "When I was little, my nana lived with us. She babysat me while my parents worked."

Erico noticed the utter look of peace on Jay's face when he spoke of his nana. He knew from talking to Jay earlier that his grandmother died when he was barely thirteen, one year before he'd been kicked out of his parents' house.

"I remember sitting on the bathroom sink as she applied her makeup. I asked her why she did it and she told me what God didn't give her, Maybelline did." Jay looked at Erico and grinned. "My nana was funny."

"Sounds like it," Erico agreed.

"According to nana, makeup was invented to help people feel better about themselves. Even at the age of four, I knew I wanted that. I asked her one day if she would put some on me. After studying me for several seconds, nana told me I should always concentrate on my eyes because they would always be my best feature. She outlined them for me and added mascara."

Jay started to chuckle. "I remember she said it was incredibly unfair for a boy to have the long lashes so many women would kill for." Jay shrugged. "I didn't wear it out of the house, of course, but whenever the two of us were alone, she let me have what I needed to feel better about the way I looked."

Erico brushed his hand over Jay's cheek again. "You know you're gorgeous with or without it, right?"

Jay shrugged again. "I was in the seventh grade when nana got sick. I went into her room every morning before school and made up her face for her." Jay gazed into Erico's eyes. "It made her happy."

Erico leant in for a soft kiss. "I'm sorry she had to leave you."

"Me, too. After she was gone, I'd go home after school and put her clothes on and make up my face. We looked a lot alike, and at the time I still felt she was with me when I looked in the mirror. My parents never understood me anyway."

"Did they catch you? Is that why they kicked you out?" Erico asked.

Jay shook his head. "Not right away. I remember going home and dressing up like I usually did after a bad day at school. My brothers were in the other room, they didn't get me either," he said, shaking his head.

"Anyway, I heard them start to fight. Like a real fight, not just arguing. I ran out to the living room and was trying to break it up when my dad came home. He took one look at me all made up in my makeup and nana's dress, wrestling with my two brothers and just exploded."

Jay sighed. "And that was that."

Erico could tell Jay had had enough of reliving his past. He kissed his lover again and smiled. "And for the record, I think your lips are your best feature."

Jay grinned and pursed his plump lips. "Oh you do, do you?"

Erico rolled over to lie on top of Jay. "Yeah, I do," he said before delving in for a deep kiss.

Chapter Five

Jay stretched his arms over his head and yawned as he woke to the sound of a blender. He rubbed his eyes and smiled. Tossing the covers off, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the big bed.

As he stood, his body tried to protest the movement with blissful aches and pains, reminders of the previous day's activities. Even though Erico admitted his body wasn't at full capacity, Jay knew he'd never find another lover who could compete with Erico's intensity in bed.

He found a thick terrycloth robe in the en suite and shrugged it on, not bothering to belt it. One of the main things that set Erico apart from Jay's past lovers was his need to see and touch Jay's body.

Jay wandered into the kitchen to see what the chef was cooking up for him. He leaned against the doorjamb and watched the master at work. Erico was busy making eggs Benedict, his skill as a chef apparent in every easy move he made.

"You know, I'd have settled for toast and coffee," Jay said.

Erico spun around and smiled. "This is probably the last time I'll get to make you breakfast for at least a week. I thought I'd make it special."

Jay walked towards Erico, his body protesting each step he took. He hated to be reminded of the crazy week ahead of them. When he'd tried to question Erico further about his procedure, Erico had quickly shut down the conversation. Jay could tell Erico was more frightened than he was letting on, but didn't feel it was his place to call him on it. Theirs was a sexual relationship, nothing more.

As he walked into Erico's embrace, he sighed. Although Erico was in no way a big, muscular guy, his arms made Jay feel safer than he'd ever been. He wondered if Erico had ever hit anyone out of anger. He wanted to ask, but once again, it wasn't his place.

Jay ran his hands over the smooth skin of Erico's back. He wished his lover hadn't put on pyjama pants, but at least he'd left his chest bare. "Mmm. You feel good."

With his hands inside Jay's robe, Erico lightly trailed his fingertips up and down Jay's back and ass. "Not half as good as you feel."

Erico turned slightly and reached for the stove. "If I don't finish this it'll be ruined."

Jay released Erico with a quick kiss. "I'll let you work."

Erico glanced over his shoulder. "It's not work to me. I love cooking."

Jay closed his robe and sat on one of the island stools. "What time do you have to pick the French guy up at the airport?"

Erico glanced at the wall clock. "Francois' flight gets in at eleven. He's renting a car and driving down on his own."

Jay leaned against the black granite surface and rested his chin on his hand. "Is he hot?"

Erico finished off the plates and carried them to the island. "Francois? Yeah. But I've already told you I'm not interested in him."

Jay noticed the remarkable difference between his eggs Benedict and Erico's egg white omelette. It was yet another reminder of Erico's ill health. "Will you tell Frenchy about us?"

Erico paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. "I can, but I thought you didn't want anyone to know."

"You're right. I did say that," Jay was quick to amend.

"I'd be more than happy to tell him. You know that, right?"

Jay hated the feelings of jealousy he was experiencing. He was afraid it meant he was starting to care for Erico more than was wise. Falling for a love-em-and-leave-em kind of guy wasn't a smart thing to do. He cut into his breakfast and took a bite. "Oh, hell, this is good."

"I'm glad you like it." Although Erico smiled, Jay could tell it was somewhat forced.

"You can make this for me anytime you want." Jay took another bite, allowing the rich Hollandaise sauce to coat the inside of his mouth before swallowing.

"Don't make statements you aren't prepared to back up."

Even though Erico tried to say it in a teasing manner, Jay could see the seriousness in the man's eyes. Jay wiped his mouth and reached for the glass of juice Erico had also set out. He decided to change the subject. Getting into discussions about their future together was something Jay refused to do. As far as he was concerned life should be lived on a day to day basis. Wishing for things only led to disappointment.

"So who taught you to cook?" he asked.

Erico took another bite of his omelette as he seemed to ponder the question. "Well, I guess my earliest lessons were at the hands of my sister, Anna. My dad was always sick so Mom had to work. Anna was in charge of dinner every night. I guess I was around eight when she decided it was time I learn to help."

Erico took a sip of his water. "It seemed natural to enrol in cooking school after graduation."

"My nana taught me most of what I know. The rest I picked up working in the diner back in DC." Jay rarely shared personal information about himself. It surprised him he was doing it with Erico.

Erico set down his fork and reached over to lay a hand on Jay's arm. "I know your parents kicked you out of the house when you were young. Was it because you were gay?"

Jay pulled his arm away, breaking the connection. "Partially I guess. They didn't understand a son who liked to sneak his mother's makeup. They said I was a pervert, and they were afraid I'd try something with one of my little brothers."

Jay got up from the island and carried his half-eaten breakfast to the sink. He couldn't believe he'd just said that. There was only one other person, outside his family, who knew exactly why his parents had kicked him out of the house. That person was his ex-boyfriend. Randy had used the information against him on numerous occasions, going as far as to threaten to go to the cops and tell them Jay had molested his own brothers. It wasn't true of course; he would never have laid a hand on his brothers.

"Hey." Erico wrapped his arms around Jay's waist from behind. He placed a soft kiss on the side of Jay's neck. "I'm sorry they did that to you."

Jay shrugged. Compassion wasn't something he was comfortable with. He turned around and kissed Erico before he could say anything else. Like every time they kissed, their passion soon took over and before Jay knew it, his cock was hard and in Erico's hand.

"Mmm," Jay moaned and hiked his leg up to wrap around Erico's hip. Jay's robe was roughly pushed off his shoulders as Erico's free hand began to wander to Jay's ass. Although exquisite, the first touch of Erico's finger to his hole made Jay flinch.

Erico withdrew his finger and broke the kiss. "Help me with the dishes?"

Jay nodded. "Sure."

* * * *

Erico was sitting at the bar drinking a big glass of water, when Ellen, his hostess, came into the room. "Francois is on the phone for you. Line one."

"Thanks." Erico stood and went around behind the bar. "Francois?"

"Hello, Erico. I'm heading into town and wondered if I should come by the restaurant or go directly to your place and drop my stuff there?"

"Actually, I reserved a room for you at the Apple Valley Inn and B&B."

"Oh. I understood that I'd be staying with you until I found a place of my own."

Erico rolled his eyes. He'd not offered any such thing, and Francois knew it. "No. I told you I'd come up with a place for you to stay, but I didn't mention my place."

Francois chuckled. "I guess I just assumed..."

"I'm sorry, but you assumed incorrectly." Erico gave Francois simple directions to the B&B. "Addie's expecting you, so why don't you go there first. The lunch rush is due to start any minute, so it would be best to meet after that anyway."

There was a brief pause before Francois answered. "Okay. I'll be there in a couple of hours then."

"Sounds good. See you then." Erico hung up the phone and glanced at Troy who had a big grin on his face. "Shut up."

Troy continued to wipe down the bar top. "I didn't say a word."

"You were thinking them though," Erico said with a grin.

Troy held up his hands in a sign of surrender. "Seriously, boss, you can't blame the guy for assuming."

Erico bit his tongue. He knew Troy was right, but it didn't make him feel any better. He was the only one responsible for his reputation and he knew it. Just one more thing to despise about all the years he'd been young and stupid.

He drained the rest of his water. "Take care of that glass for me, will ya?"

"Sure."

Erico walked back into the kitchen and picked up the phone. It rang several times before going to Jay's voicemail. "Hey, baby. Francois will be here in a couple of hours. I was thinking it might be a good idea for you to come in and meet him since the two of you will be

working together off and on this week." Erico shuffled his feet. "So...uhh...either give me a call back or just come in. Thanks."

He hung up the phone and sighed. He hated that he'd promised Jay to keep their relationship a secret. Jay may classify them as merely fuck buddies, but Erico knew it was starting to go beyond that, at least for him. Maybe he could give Francois hints as to what was going on with Jay without actually telling him?

* * * *

Jay was spread out on Ethan's couch watching one of his favourite old black and white movies when his cell phone rang. He dug it out of his pocket and grinned when he saw Erico's name appear. He turned off the ringer and shoved it back into his pocket.

"You're not going to answer it?" Ethan asked, coming into the room with a fresh bowl of popcorn.

Jay had made the decision earlier in the day not to out-and-out lie to Ethan about his relationship with Erico, but that didn't mean he wanted to open a conversation he wasn't ready to have. "It was Erico. He has to go into the hospital for something this week and asked if I'd keep an eye on his new sous chef. The guy was supposed to come into town today, so Erico's probably just letting me know he's here."

"Erico? Since when do you talk to him?" Ethan asked, throwing himself into the recliner.

"I went there for dinner a couple days ago. That's when he told me about the procedure he has to have done. I guess it's the reason he's been trying to get me to come to work for him." Jay shrugged. "It's no big deal. Sean won't be back until next weekend, so it's not like I have anything else to do."

Ethan took a handful of popcorn and shoved it into his mouth, his eyes still narrowed. Jay prayed his friend would drop the subject.

"You know he'll try to get into your pants," Ethan said, his mouth still full of popcorn.

The way Ethan said it, made Jay wonder... "You think he's trying to get into my pants? Is that why you hate him so much?"

Ethan broke eye contact and started watching the movie.

"Ethan? Are you going to answer the question?" Jay prompted, sitting up on the couch.

Ethan's face went red with anger, something Jay had rarely seen in all the years he'd known his friend. "I hate him for trying to get into your pants via my asshole."

Jay's stomach clenched. "What?"

Ethan leaned over and tossed the popcorn bowl onto the coffee table, spilling kernels all over the table and floor. "He fucked me, okay? I thought he liked me, but then I found out it was you he liked."

The news was so shocking to Jay he couldn't say anything. He sat with his mouth open, stunned. It made a hell of a lot more sense to him why Ethan hated Erico so much, though. His best friend had a crush on the guy Jay was currently fucking. Shit.

"How long did it go on?" Jay asked. He suddenly didn't feel so bad for keeping his affair from Ethan. It seemed they both had secrets.

"Just once. The day of the collapse."

Ethan had his arms crossed in a defensive posture. Jay wondered if Ethan still carried a torch for Erico. He hated that his friend had been hurt, but a small part of him was torn by the rest of it. If Erico had wanted Jay all those months ago, why hadn't he acted on it? Jay already knew Erico enjoyed travelling from bed to bed, so that much didn't come as a surprise. What did was suddenly being jealous of his own friend.

Jay ran his fingers through his hair. He took the elastic band off his wrist and put his hair into a ponytail. Why did he have the urge to hurt his best friend by telling him who'd been in Erico's bed recently? The mere thought shamed him.

Jay lay back down. "We gonna finish watching this or what?"

* * * *

By the time Jay made it to The Canoe, he was out of sorts. He still wasn't sure whether or not to confront Erico about fucking his best friend. Stepping into the kitchen, he spotted Erico going over a sheet of paper with a man he assumed to be Francois, who was leaning way too close to Erico for Jay's comfort.

"Hey," Jay said, announcing his presence.

Erico looked up and smiled. Jay could swear the man looked relieved to see him. "Glad you made it."

Erico gestured to Jay. "Francois, this is Jay. He's the friend I told you would be helping you out from time to time this week. Jay, this is Francois Tilmont."

Jay stepped forward and reached out to shake the man's hand. He didn't miss the way Francois looked him up and down before taking his hand. Evidently, Erico hadn't missed the leer either. Twice Jay attempted to pull his hand away only to have Francois tighten his grip. Jay flashed a look at Erico.

"Introductions finished, let's go over the menu for the week," Erico said in a brusque tone.

Francois finally released Jay's hand. "Yes," he said and returned to his original position at Erico's side.

Erico reached out and pulled Jay against his other side. As he began to go over the menu, Jay felt Erico's hand land on his back, rubbing circles against Jay's skin.

Jay glanced at Erico and smiled. He knew what Erico was doing and oddly enough, didn't mind a bit. To further prove the two of them were together, Jay took a deep breath and placed his hand on Erico's shoulder. *Was he ready to bring his relationship with Erico out for public consumption?* He knew it was a huge thing to do, especially with someone he didn't even know, but he refused to be leered at every time he turned around.

Jay felt Erico's body relax under his hand. Jay began to wonder what had happened before he'd arrived. It was obvious there was tension between the two men. Perhaps Francois had made a move towards Erico. Jay prayed if it had happened, Erico had rebuffed the handsome man.

Jay slid his hand to the back of Erico's neck, idly playing with the soft curls he enjoyed so much. He spotted movement out of the corner of his eye and glanced over to see Francois staring at him. "Yes?"

Francois made a noise before clearing his throat. "Nothing."

"So you think you can handle this?" Erico asked Francois.

"I'm good at what I do," Francois stated bluntly.

“Yes. I’m sure you are. Otherwise I would never have hired you.” Erico said, letting the sous chef know in no uncertain terms that he’d been hired to do a job and not to warm his bed.

Jay wanted to wrap his arms around Erico and kiss him until they were both hard and gasping for oxygen. Instead he subtly rubbed his erection against Erico’s side.

Francois simply nodded at Erico’s statement. “Will you be staying through the dinner shift?”

“Of course,” Erico answered. “I’ll also be here tomorrow.”

“I’m going to go over a few things with Jay in my office. Why don’t you go introduce yourself to the wait staff? Your assistants should be showing up any time, too.”

With a sharp nod, Francois exited the kitchen. Erico stood and led Jay out the back door of the kitchen towards his office. Jay followed, swinging Erico’s hand towards him to brush against the front of his jeans.

“You’ve got me horny,” Jay confessed as Erico opened his door.

Erico pulled him into the office and slammed Jay against the solid wood door. “Fuck, you’re driving me crazy.”

Jay sighed as Erico immediately dropped to his knees and began fumbling with Jay’s jeans. While Erico went to work pulling them down, Jay toed off his shoes. Getting his dick sucked was nice, but he had something else in mind.

Erico’s face pressed against Jay’s genitals. The first rasp of teeth against Jay’s balls had him ready to whimper. “Need your cock,” Jay begged.

“You’ll get it,” Erico said, licking his way up Jay’s erection.

Jay wanted to argue but the hot mouth enveloping his cock felt fantastic. He placed one foot on Erico’s shoulder, hoping his lover would get the hint that his ass also needed some attention.

Right on cue, Erico held up his hand, and Jay quickly spit on the man’s fingers before rubbing the saliva down their length. Erico’s fingers found their way easily to Jay’s ass. As he eased them inside, Jay almost lost his balance.

Erico released the cock in his mouth and pulled Jay onto the carpeted floor with him. “Hands and knees.”

Jay gleefully assumed the position and moaned when he felt Erico's tongue take its first swipe across his hole. "Aahhh, yeah, eat me."

It hadn't taken Jay long to learn talking dirty to Erico only made their sessions more intense. Jay was all for that. He loved to talk dirty. He figured it had something to do with his normally shy nature outside of the bedroom.

"Gonna shove that fat cock up my ass?" he asked.

"Mmm hmm," Erico answered without taking his face out of Jay's crack.

Jay rocked back and forth as Erico's tongue worked its way inside of him. "You need to tell Frenchy this tongue is mine."

Erico pulled out his tongue and nipped the sensitive flesh surrounding Jay's hole. "I'll bring him in here right now and make him watch me fuck your brains out if that's what you want."

Jay chuckled. He may be a slut but he'd never been into exhibitionism. "Uhhh, I think you telling him will be enough. Now fuck me like you really mean it."

Erico made quick work of his pants, pulling a condom from out of his pocket. Jay rested his shoulders on the floor, sticking his ass up even higher into the air and wrapped a hand around his cock.

"Need you," he began to whimper when Erico took longer than Jay thought he should.

"You got me, baby."

Jay felt the first touch of Erico's cock a second before it slammed deep inside of him. He howled as his body fought to accommodate Erico's length and girth. "So good. So fucking good," Jay babbled.

Erico barely gave Jay a moment to catch his breath before he started a hard, fast rhythm. This was no leisurely fuck, this was a complete ass reaming, and Jay loved it. "Faster. Harder."

Jay was forced to put one hand under the side of his face to keep it from catching fire as it continued to rub across the carpet. He heard a loud gasp from Erico and assumed his lover was coming, but all too quickly Erico landed on the carpet beside him.

Jay glanced over to give the man a hard time. Erico was clutching his chest and staring helplessly at Jay. "Fuck!"

Jay jumped to his feet and scrambled for the pill case in Erico's pants. In his haste to open the container, he ended up spilling the contents. "It's okay. It's okay. I got it." He grabbed one off the carpet and shoved it under Erico's tongue.

Jay could tell by the expression on Erico's face this attack was different. He got to his feet and ran for the phone on Erico's desk, punching 9-1-1.

"9-1-1 operator."

"I need an ambulance at The Canoe. Erico Morrelli's having a heart attack." Jay knew he was supposed to hold the line, but he tossed the phone down and returned to Erico's side. He ran a hand over Erico's creased forehead. "Hang on. They're coming."

"Dressed," Erico gasped.

Jay shook his head. Fuck his clothes. He wasn't leaving Erico's side until the paramedics arrived. "Don't worry about me. Just take slow, deep breaths."

Erico nodded. "Getting better," he panted.

Jay continued to soothe Erico with soft touches and words until there was a banging on the door. He leant over Erico's body and unlocked the door. "Be careful," he shouted. "He's in the way of the door."

Jay tried his best to move Erico far enough away to let help in. The first person through the door was Zac Alben, quickly followed by Sammy Lee. Jay scooted back to give the men room to work and reached for his jeans. He was grateful neither man asked him what had happened. It was pretty obvious what he and Erico had been doing.

As they questioned Erico about his heart condition, Jay slid into his jeans. He glanced up just in time to see Francois staring at him with a grin on his face. The stupid smile set Jay off. "Fuck you, asshole. Shouldn't you be more concerned with your new boss than my cock?"

All faces in the room turned to stare at Jay. He stared right back until they went back to their jobs. When George Manning and Collin Zeffer made their way into the office with a stretcher, Jay began to pace. *This isn't good if they're taking him to the hospital.* Erico seemed fairly alert as they began to load him onto the stretcher.

"Where're you taking him?" Jay asked.

"To the clinic and then probably to the hospital in Sheridan," Sammy informed Jay.

"Can I ride with him?" Jay asked.

Sammy shook his head. "Sorry."

"My keys," Erico mumbled, pointing to his pants.

"You're going to let me take your SUV?" Jay was shocked. Erico's pride and joy cost more than most houses in town.

Erico nodded. "Need you."

Jay tried to smile. He wasn't ready to admit he also needed Erico, but he had a bad feeling that he did. Jay was rummaging in Erico's pants pocket for his keys and phone when he overheard Erico say something to Francois as they wheeled him out of the office.

"He's mine," Erico mumbled.

Jay followed the paramedics out of the restaurant, thankful they'd placed a blanket over Erico's nude lower-half. Instead of loading Erico into the ambulance, they pushed the gurney across the parking lot to the clinic.

After pocketing Erico's keys, he opened the phone and scrolled through Erico's numbers until he came to one he thought must be Erico's mother. It wasn't exactly the way he'd wanted to talk to the woman for the first time, but Jay knew Erico's mom would want to know. He just hoped the woman didn't hate him for bringing on her son's heart attack.

Chapter Six

Jay sat in the hospital waiting room alone. Rosa, Erico's mother, had tried to get him to sit in Erico's room with her, but Jay didn't feel right about it. He was still pissed at himself for getting Erico worked up to the point of having a minor heart attack.

Dammit. They both should have learned their lesson after the first time. With his feet up in the chair, Jay hugged his legs. After the ambulance had transferred Erico to the hospital in Sheridan, he had to undergo a series of tests to prepare him for today's procedure. The call to Erico's mother had been one of the hardest of Jay's life. Bless the woman for not getting overly upset. It had been almost like she'd been expecting the call.

Jay had picked her up at the airport that morning and brought her to the hospital in time to see Erico before he went in for his procedure. Rosa had offered to wait and let Jay go in first, but he'd refused. His feelings were all over the place. Guilt and confusion were still at war within him.

According to Erico's doctor, the angioplasty and stent they put in should take care of Erico's immediate problem, but Erico would need to completely change his lifestyle if he intended to live a long and full life.

Jay wondered if good food, alcohol and stress were the only things the doctor expected Erico to give up.

"Jay?"

Jay looked up to see Rosa's kind face looking down at him.

"Erico is awake. He'd like to see you."

Jay shook his head. "I don't know if I should. Especially after what happened yesterday."

Rosa sat down beside Jay and patted his arm. "You think his pain was your fault?"

Well, he was pounding my ass at the time. Instead of voicing his true thoughts, Jay simply nodded.

"My son has lived recklessly for most of his life. It's his fault he's in that hospital bed and he knows it. He watched his father die when he was still a very young man, and instead of learning from it, Erico got it in his head to live every day like it was his last."

Jay blinked. That's exactly how he'd always tried to live. "That's a good thing, though, right?"

Rosa shook her head. "That's a dangerous thing. A selfish thing. He should have been taking better care of himself instead of living that way. Unfortunately, his bad habits caught up with him. That's why he's here, not because he was...*intimate* with you."

"You know?" Jay asked. He was even more embarrassed than he had been earlier.

Rosa squeezed Jay's arm. "I suspected. Why else would you feel so guilty?"

"I'm sorry," Jay tried to apologise.

Rosa leant in. "I'm not. When he woke up a few moments ago you were the first person he called for. I've never known my son to care so much for someone." Rosa released Jay's arm. "Now, go in there and see him while he's still awake."

Jay's mind was reeling. He wasn't sure how to take Rosa's statement. It was way too early for Erico to have developed actual feelings for him. Wasn't it?

He entered the room and stood by the door as a nurse spoke quietly to Erico. Although Erico was pale, he looked a hell of a lot better than he had the previous day. The nurse smiled at Jay as she left the room.

"Hey, you," Erico said, sounding tired.

Jay walked over and stood, uncomfortably, beside the bed. "How're you feeling?"

Erico grinned. "Like I'd love to move my leg. You know how it is when someone says you can't do something, just makes you want to do it even more."

Erico's good mood went a long way in putting Jay at ease. He noticed the chair next to the bed and sat down. "So how long do you have to stay?"

"I'm crossing my fingers that everything will go smoothly and they'll let me out tomorrow. I'll have to take it easy for a few days, but I actually feel better than I have in years." Erico held out his hand.

Jay stared at Erico's palm for several moments before accepting the gesture. "I'm glad you're feeling better. You scared me really bad yesterday."

Erico lifted Jay's hand to his lips and kissed it. "It scared me, too. But I'm glad you were with me."

Once again, Jay felt uncomfortable. He saw true feelings in Erico's eyes and it scared him. Their new relationship was supposed to be built on sex. Feelings weren't part of the deal.

Jay knew he had a lot of thinking to do. He wasn't ready for anything other than an affair. The illness was a wrench in the plan, but Jay figured they would go back to their sexual encounters in a few weeks. Erico's expression told him something completely different.

"I'm glad you're okay," Jay said, subtly pulling his hand away. "I'm planning to go to The Canoe this evening to check things out for you. Sean'll be back Thursday, so I'll have to work at the pub."

"Will you stop by my place once I get home?" Erico asked, confusion wrinkling his brow.

"You should probably rest. With your mom there, you don't really need me anyway," Jay told Erico. He hated it, but Jay knew he needed to pull back and regroup.

"Have I done something wrong?" Erico questioned.

Jay studied Erico for several moments. Was it better to be honest now or later? "I just think things are moving too fast. I know you've had a lot of fuck buddies over the years."

Jay shook his head. "I'm sorry. I guess I just don't know that I'm ready for more."

"I don't consider you a fuck buddy. I know I didn't contradict you when you first called us that, but it was never my intention to have a brief affair with you." Erico reached out, but Jay kept his hands tucked safely in his pockets.

"I've watched you for months, trying to figure out a way to get close to you," Erico continued.

In a defensive gesture, Jay lashed out. "And you thought the best way to do that was to stick your dick into my best friend's asshole?" Jay shook his head. "Sorry. I'm not buying it. Men like you don't change. You'll always be on the lookout for the next piece of ass."

"No!" Erico yelled.

Jay jumped at the vehemence in Erico's voice. He knew getting upset wasn't good for the man, so he took a step back. "I'll try to give you a call later in the week."

"Please don't go. I'm sorry about what happened with Ethan. It was you I wanted. The thing with him just happened."

Jay stopped at the door and turned back. "Exactly my point. It'll always 'just happen'. Goodbye, Erico."

Shutting down his emotions, he walked back to the waiting room and held out the keys to Erico's SUV. "I'm leaving to check on the restaurant. Will you be able to drive yourself back to Cattle Valley?"

Rosa stared at Jay before reaching out to take the keys. "What happened?"

Jay wasn't about to get into the particulars of his relationship with Erico's mom. He shook his head. "Nothing. We just needed to straighten some things out. I'm going to call a friend to pick me up."

He could tell by the look on Rosa's face she didn't believe him. Jay shrugged and walked out of the waiting room. He hated to hurt people, but he also knew not only his own limits, but Erico's as well.

* * * *

"Hey, sickie," Mario chuckled walking into Erico's room.

"What're you doing here?" Erico asked, trying to keep his leg still. God he wanted to move it.

"I'm picking up Jay, so I thought I'd pop in to see how you're doing." Mario took the chair beside Erico's bed. "I thought Jay said your mom was here."

"She is. I sent her down to the cafeteria to grab some dinner." Erico tried to ignore the hurt that slammed into him at the mention of Jay's name.

Mario crossed his legs and arms as he sat, studying Erico. "So I guess you didn't listen when I warned you about putting the moves on Jay."

Erico held up his hand. "He made the first move, not me."

"Jay? Sweet, quiet Jay?" Mario snorted.

Erico wanted to tell Mario the truth about Jay's sexual appetite, but he knew defending himself with the truth would only hurt Jay's reputation. Instead of opening that can of worms, Erico shrugged. "Believe what you want. Everyone does anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mario questioned.

"Just that when people get certain ideas into their heads about what kind of person you are, they'll never see anything else," Erico mumbled. In the past, Erico hadn't cared what people thought of him and damn was it coming back to bite him in the ass.

"Are you talking about your reputation or Jay's?"

"Mine mostly, but both, I guess." Erico gestured to the glass of water beside his bed. "Will you hand me that?"

Mario held the glass while Erico chased the straw around for a moment before capturing it with his lips. Erico took a big gulp and released the straw. "Thanks."

Mario nodded and set the glass back down. "You really like him, huh?"

Erico took a deep breath. "Yeah."

"But I'm guessing he doesn't feel the same," Mario seemed to surmise.

"He called us fuck buddies. I guess that's all he wants," Erico admitted. His chest tightened and Erico started to worry before realising it was emotional not physical pain.

Mario tried to hide a grin behind his hand. "Where have I heard that term before? Oh, yeah, from you." Mario shook his head. "You can't really blame the guy for not wanting to get emotionally invested in a relationship with you."

"Fuck you!" Erico spat.

The door opened and a nurse popped her head into the room. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that, Debbie," Erico apologised.

Debbie nodded and closed the door, making sure it shut all the way.

Erico returned his attention to Mario. "I'm sorry that you and I didn't fall in love, but that doesn't mean I'm not capable of it."

"Love? You're telling me you're in love with Jay?" Mario asked.

"I think so." Erico turned to look out the window beside his bed. The mini-blinds were down, but open just enough to see the light snow falling outside.

"I'm guessing you told him and he didn't react well to the news?"

Erico shook his head. "I didn't tell him, but I think he knows. Everything seemed great between us, and then today he suddenly backed off." Erico turned to stare at Mario. "He's been here almost non-stop since I was brought in and suddenly he tells me things are going too fast. What the hell is that about?"

"Sounds like he's scared."

"Of me?" Erico questioned.

"Duh. You're an unhealthy SOB who's known around town for fucking anything you can get your hands on. What do you expect? Jay hasn't exactly learned to trust people over the years. Don't forget he carries his own scars."

Once again his reputation was thrown in his face. He knew Mario wasn't doing it out of malice. His friend was just stating the facts. Erico knew he'd given people a good reason to think that way about him.

"So how do I go about changing the way people see me?" Erico asked. "More importantly, how do I get Jay to understand that a guy like me can and will change?"

Mario stood and squeezed Erico's hand. "I'm not sure. Baby steps? I think the biggest thing is to let Jay know you're there for him without putting pressure on him."

Mario chuckled. "And by the way. If you start putting pressure on him, I'm gonna be back to putting it on you."

"I don't want to hurt him. I just want him to trust in me," Erico mumbled.

Mario seemed to ponder what Erico said for a few minutes. "Sorry, buddy. I really don't know how you're gonna do that unless he lets you back in the door."

Erico nodded. "Guess I've got some thinking to do."

Mario nodded and turned towards the door. "I'll stop by your place in a couple days."

"Bye." After Mario left, Erico closed his eyes. He knew how to get himself back in Jay's good graces, but how did he do that and not let on how much he cared for the man?

* * * *

Mario pulled up in front of The Canoe and put the old truck in park. Jay reached for the door handle. "Thanks for the ride."

"Anytime," Mario replied.

Before Jay could get out of the truck, Mario reached out and touched his arm. "I never thought it was possible, but I think somehow you've managed to change him."

"Who?" Jay asked, playing dumb.

"You know who. He genuinely seems to care about you."

Jay shrugged his shoulders. He really didn't want to discuss his fucked-up relationship status with Mario. "Saying and doing are two totally different things and we both know it." Jay shook his head. "Better to stick with fucking than to risk getting hurt."

Mario's eyes rounded. "I've never heard you talk that way."

"That's because we've never discussed my sex life before."

Mario chuckled. "You really are like two people trapped inside one body, aren't you?"

"No. I'm one person who people only half understand." Jay ended the statement with a smile.

He climbed out of the truck and walked up the steps to the front door. Going inside, he waited for Ellen to finish seating a group of four. He wondered how he'd be greeted after the previous day's debacle. Jay noticed several glances his way. Evidently the news of his rendezvous with Erico had already made it around town.

When she returned to the hostess stand, she smiled. "How's Erico?"

"Good. He says he's feeling better than he has in years."

Ellen shook her head. "I can't believe none of us knew he was having health issues."

"I think that's the way he wanted it." Jay gestured towards the kitchen. "How's Francois getting along?"

Ellen rolled her eyes. "He's a good enough cook."

"But...?" Jay prompted when he could tell she wanted to say more.

"I'll put it this way. If I weren't already a lesbian, I'd seriously be considering it after spending two shifts with him."

"He's putting the moves on you?" Jay questioned.

"Oh, no. I think he knows better than that, but he thinks he's God's gift to humanity." Ellen performed an exaggerated body shiver. "At least Erico is genuinely charming. That ass just thinks he is."

Jay chuckled. "I told Erico I'd check in with him. Now I'm wondering if that's such a good idea."

"Just stop by the bar and tell Troy to come in and rescue you if you're in there too long," Ellen said with a wink.

Jay nodded and turned right towards the bar. Troy was mixing a blended margarita when he stepped up to the polished wood surface. He rested his arms on the bar and waited.

Troy immediately acknowledged Jay with a nod. "I'll be right there."

"No hurry," Jay answered back. He tapped his fingers on the bar and looked around. Although not to capacity, there were quite a few customers in the restaurant. Jay couldn't help wondering if gossip had anything to do with the sudden shift in business.

Troy eventually worked his way over to Jay. "Hey, man."

"Hey," Jay returned. "I'm checking on the kitchen for Erico. Any news for me?"

Troy grinned. "Other than the obvious news milling around this place about you?"

Jay's face heated. He couldn't get mad at Troy. It was his own fault for fucking in the office and he knew it. "You can skip that part. Anything about the new sous chef?"

"Umm, well, I nearly punched his lights out earlier today for grabbing my cock."

"What?"

Troy grinned and nodded. "He's a pushy fucker. Thinks everyone wants him even once you make it clear you're not interested."

Shit. "I'm supposed to observe him."

Troy glanced at the clock. "You should be safe enough. Bobby and Les are in there working with him right now. They usually go home between nine and ten unless we slow down before then."

Jay started to walk off, but Troy stopped him. "Uhh, Jay, there's something else. I don't think you should say anything to Erico, but I've heard a couple of customers complain about the food."

"What about the food?" he asked.

Troy shrugged. "Just that it wasn't as good. I've seen quite a few plates with half-eaten dinners being picked up by Les this evening."

Jay nodded. "I'll see what's going on." He wasn't a chef, but hopefully Jay would be able to tell what was wrong.

When he stepped into the kitchen, he noticed Bobby's guilty expression before the cook quickly found something to do in the food locker.

"Hey," Jay said by way of greeting. He studied the kitchen but didn't notice anything out of place. "Everything going okay?"

Francois glanced over his shoulder. "Just fine," he grumbled. "Did your lover send you in to spy on me?"

“Erico told you yesterday that I’d be in while he was gone.” Jay didn’t even address the lover comment.

Henry, one of the waiters came into the kitchen and put two orders up before walking back out. It seemed Henry wasn’t speaking to Francois. *Interesting.* Jay knew Henry had been a loyal employee since Erico had opened The Canoe.

Jay followed the waiter out of the kitchen. He figured he’d get more out of Henry than Francois and there was definitely tension brewing. “Hey,” he called, catching up to Henry. “Can I talk to you for a second?”

Henry gestured to the dining room. “I’ve got customers.”

Jay looked around before nodding. “Will you at least tell me what’s going on?”

“Look in the dumpster. The asshole’s been trying to pass off packaged food as his own.”

Jay thanked Henry and went straight back through the kitchen and out the back door. It took him a few minutes to climb into the dumpster and rip open one of the trash bags, but it had been worth it. Evidence in hand, he stalked back to the kitchen.

Seething, Jay held the empty bag of frozen ravioli in one hand and a large industrial-sized can of spaghetti sauce in the other. “What the hell is this?”

Francois stared at Jay with disdain. “What does it look like?”

“It looks like you don’t care much about your job,” Jay fired back.

“Pasta isn’t something I’m comfortable preparing. I decided to stick with what I knew and buy the rest.” Francois turned back around, obviously dismissing Jay.

Jay was so angry he threw the bag and empty can across the kitchen. If it was his restaurant, he’d fire the fucker on the spot. Unfortunately, it was Erico’s place and he was in no position to deal with the issue at the moment. He made a spur of the moment decision he hoped he wouldn’t regret.

Taking a deep breath, he walked over to Francois. “Until Erico comes back, I’ll be preparing the pasta and sauce for you to use.”

Francois shrugged without even turning around. “Suit yourself.”

Jay took a deep breath. “The only reason I’m doing this is because Erico isn’t healthy enough to come in and fire you, because believe me, he would. He takes the food in this place very seriously and you, quite frankly, don’t measure up to his standards.”

Francois spun around, his eyes narrowed. "You figure since you've had the guy's dick up your ass you know his standards?" Francois let out a loud snort. "If you're a regular in his bed, I'm not really sure I care about living up to Erico's standards."

Jay bit his lip and turned to walk towards the door. Before reaching it, he glanced over his shoulder. "I wouldn't bother looking for a permanent place to stay if I were you."

* * * *

By the time Jay made it back to his apartment he was completely worn out. After spending the majority of the last two days in a hospital waiting room, and the altercation with Francois, Jay wanted to shut out the world and bury his head under the covers.

As soon as he entered his apartment, he started shedding his clothes. By the time he reached the shower he was completely nude. Jay reached in and turned on the hot water. Whether it was the fight with Francois or the emotions churning inside of him over Erico, he wasn't sure, but he was chilled to the bone. He'd learned long ago the only cure was a long, hot shower.

He stepped under the spray and groaned as the hot water nearly scalded his skin. Jay stood where he was, not bothering to turn up the cold water. He'd get used to it, he always did.

The next two days wouldn't be a big deal as far as preparing the pasta and sauce, but he wondered how he'd manage once he went back to work. He could go over before his shift at O'Brien's and make it, but that would put him in the same kitchen with Francois. Jay finally decided it would be better to go over to The Canoe after he finished his shift at the pub. It would mean he'd have to try to catch as much sleep as possible during the day, but he knew he could handle it for a couple of weeks.

When the water started to cool, he turned it off and grabbed his towel. He'd just dried off when he heard a knock at his door. Jay rolled his eyes. He knew who it would be. Despite the numerous phone messages throughout the day, Jay hadn't spoken to Ethan since the news of his affair had obviously made its way around Cattle Valley.

"I know you're home," Ethan yelled through the closed door.

Jay sighed and wrapped the towel around his waist. He opened the door and looked at his friend. "I was in the shower. Hold on while I get something on."

Jay turned and strode towards his room.

"What's going on? I heard around town that you were fucking around with Erico when he had his heart attack."

Jay dug in his dresser and pulled out some clean underwear and a pair of sweats. He dropped the towel and started dressing, ignoring Ethan's question until he was covered. He grabbed a thick pair of socks and a T-shirt before leading his friend back to the living room. "It just happened."

"Really?" Ethan asked. "So why didn't you tell me?"

As Jay pulled on his sock, he noticed a rather large hole in the toe. He stared at the hole wondering where the hell it had come from.

"Jay?" Ethan prompted.

"Because I know how much you hate him," he mumbled. Jay leant back in the recliner and closed his eyes. The conversation he didn't want to have in the first place was bringing the emotions he'd struggled with to the surface.

The expression on Erico's face still bothered him. Erico wasn't supposed to develop feelings, that hadn't been part of the plan. Jay thought he'd be safe with Erico. Hell, the whole town joked about Erico changing lovers like most men changed underwear.

"You're going to get hurt, ya know?" Ethan finally said.

Jay opened his eyes and glanced at his best friend. His stomach clenched as he realised just the opposite was true. "I think it's the other way around."

Ethan laughed. "Yeah, right."

Jay shrugged. He knew it wouldn't do any good to try and convince Ethan that Erico had feelings for him. Jay hadn't even been able to truly admit it to himself.

"Come on, Jay. Erico's a selfish prick and we both know it."

Jay narrowed his eyes. "I'm sorry Erico hurt you, but he's not a prick. At least not to me."

Jay's nose started to burn moments before he felt his eyes fill with moisture. He blinked rapidly, unprepared to let his own emotions be witnessed by anyone, including his best friend. Erico was different with him. What Jay couldn't wrap his mind around was why?

Truth be told, he was too young for the restaurant owner and he knew it. He may have been forced to grow up a hell of a lot earlier than most men, but at twenty, Jay wasn't sure he was willing to settle down. His problems with Randy had proved it to him the hard way.

Bounding out of the chair, Jay went to the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator and grabbed a bottle of water. He heard Ethan come into the room and waited. No doubt his friend wasn't finished.

Jay was surprised when Ethan's arms wrapped around his waist from behind. Ethan kissed the side of Jay's wet head. "I was there to see the results of Randy's love, don't forget. We all knew that asshole was bad news, but you said the same thing about him. Just because someone is nice to you, doesn't mean they're a nice person, Jay. I'm sorry you had to find that out the hard way. I just don't want you to make the same mistake with Erico."

"Erico would never hit me," Jay replied.

"Maybe not, but I don't think you were ever in love with Randy, and we both know how hard it was to break away from him. If you're lonely, find someone else. There are a lot of really nice guys around here."

Jay turned around, shutting the fridge door in the process. He gazed into Ethan's eyes but didn't know what to say. He knew his friend was right. There were a lot of men in Cattle Valley. So why did he want the one man who had the potential to hurt him like no one had before?

"Earlier, I told Erico that I needed to take a step back." Jay shook his head. "I know he wants more out of the relationship, and I'm not sure I trust him with that part of me yet."

"Yet? You mean you're considering it?" Ethan asked.

When Jay didn't answer, Ethan sighed and kissed Jay's forehead. "Just do me a favour. Don't confuse a really good fuck with love. Believe me, they're not the same thing."

Jay nodded. He'd been telling himself that very thing for a week. "Thanks for always being here for me."

Ethan grinned. "Where else would I be?"

Chapter Seven

"I'm going to the gym to walk on the treadmill," Erico told his mom.

Rosa glanced up from the book she was reading. "Don't overdo it."

Erico rolled his eyes. "Promise."

Stepping outside, Erico took a deep breath. He loved his mom to pieces, but she was starting to get on his nerves. It seemed she was either nagging about his poor eating habits or asking probing questions about Jay.

He climbed into his SUV and pulled out of the driveway. Diet questions he could handle, but he still didn't know what the hell was going on with Jay. Erico had spoken to Jay twice in the four days he'd been home from the hospital and each time Jay seemed distracted.

Pulling into The Gym's parking lot, Erico parked next to Mario's pickup. He hoped his friend wasn't teaching a class because he could sure use some advice.

Gym bag in hand, he walked into the building and looked around. He spotted Rio in his normal spot perched on a stool at the juice counter. "Mario busy?"

Rio set his glass down. "He's working with Ethan in room three."

"You know when he'll be finished?" Erico asked.

Rio glanced at the big clock on the wall. "Another ten minutes or so."

Erico held up his bag. "I'm gonna change. Steer him my way when you see him."

"Will do."

He nodded to Gill as he passed the free-weights. The locker room was empty, so he found a locker and started stripping out of his clothes. Erico sat on the bench and took off his shoes before dressing in his normal gym wear of shorts, T-shirt and running shoes.

Once he was dressed, he continued to sit there, finally giving in and grabbing his phone. He punched in Jay's number and waited.

"Hello?" Jay mumbled into the phone.

"Did I wake you?" Erico glanced at the clock. What the hell was Jay doing still in bed at twelve-thirty?

"Yeah, but that's okay. I need to get up for work anyway. How're you feeling?" Jay asked.

"Evidently better than you if you're sleeping in this late. Are you sick?"

"No. Just tired," Jay answered.

"Mom's going home tomorrow afternoon. I was wondering if you wanted to come by after you get off work?" Erico wrapped his knuckles against the wooden bench as he waited for Jay's answer.

"Uhh, well, I can't tomorrow night, but I'm on day shift Sunday. I could come by after that if you'd like?"

Erico pulled the phone away from his ear and glanced at the display to make sure he was indeed talking to the same man he'd spent a fantastic amount of time with only a few days earlier. "What's going on, Jay?"

"Nothing. I mean, I'm sorry. I'm just really busy right now."

"I miss you," Erico admitted.

There was silence for several moments. "I miss you, too. I promise I'll do everything I can to get over there on Sunday evening. Would you please tell your mom goodbye for me?"

Although Jay had said the words, they still didn't feel right to Erico. He wondered what was really going on with Jay. Mario was the one who'd told Erico not to put pressure on Jay, but he was suddenly afraid he'd lose any chance at something more if he didn't do something soon.

"I thought I'd take Mama to O'Brien's tonight for dinner. I need to stop by The Canoe anyway and get the receipt totals. I've decided to start catching up on the books while I'm here with nothing else to do."

"Will it be your first time at The Canoe since you've been gone?"

"Yes. I promised the doctor I'd stay completely out of the place for at least a week." Erico chuckled. "I guess he knows me too well."

Stress was something Erico knew he'd have to learn to deal with. He hoped having Francois at the restaurant would help.

"So you're coming to O'Brien's afterwards? Why don't you just eat at The Canoe?" Jay asked.

"Because you won't be at The Canoe. I wasn't just blowing smoke up your ass when I said I missed you."

Erico could hear Jay breathing on the other end of the phone. "Is that okay?" Erico asked.

"Yes," Jay said in a voice so soft Erico barely heard it. "It'll be nice to see you."

The locker room door opened and Mario stepped in. Erico held up his finger to Mario and returned his attention to Jay. "I'll look forward to it."

"Me, too." Jay hung up, and Erico brushed his lips over his phone.

"Jay?" Mario asked, taking a seat next to Erico.

"Yeah. I'm taking my mom to O'Brien's for dinner."

"Sudden craving for food you shouldn't be eating?" Mario teased.

"Don't worry. I've learned my lesson the hard way. My days of rich sauces and fried foods are over."

Mario suddenly sobered. "There's something you need to know, but I'm not the person who should be telling you."

The first thing that popped into Erico's head was Jay. Had he moved on to someone else? Is that why he didn't have time to call or come over to his house? Developing feelings for someone was one thing, but Erico refused to be played the fool. "Tell me."

"Francois isn't working out. He'll do until you're cleared to return to work, but you need to start looking for a replacement," Mario informed Erico.

"What? Why didn't Jay tell me? I specifically asked him to keep an eye on things." Had Jay been too preoccupied to even do that much for him?

"Because Jay's paranoid you'll have another heart attack if he tells you. He's tried to take care of the problem on his own," Mario explained.

"How?" The thought of Jay fighting off Francois' advances while trying to help the restaurant had Erico seeing red.

Mario must have noticed the sudden change in Erico's demeanour. He put his hand on Erico's shoulder and squeezed. "See? This is exactly the reason no one has said anything to you. You've got to learn to calm the fuck down."

"What has Francois done?" Erico ground out between clenched jaws.

"Nothing huge, I promise. Other than being a Grade A asshole. Jay caught him serving frozen pasta and canned sauce."

"What? You think that's not a big deal? Francois is a highly qualified chef. What the hell's he thinking serving frozen pasta in my restaurant?" Erico felt a vein in his forehead begin to pulse. He stood and began to walk around the locker room, trying to use every technique the psychologist had taught him for dealing with stress.

Fuck it. "I'm never going to be the kind of guy who doesn't get pissed off when something goes wrong. I am what I am." A thought struck him. "Is this why Jay's been avoiding me?"

Mario shrugged. "Probably one of the reasons. I think overall he's just confused about his feelings. Mix that into the mess at the restaurant he's been trying to handle and it's no wonder he's been avoiding you."

"What's he been doing at the restaurant?" Erico asked.

"Jay's been going in after hours to make the pasta and sauce. I think the hours are starting to catch up with him though. He's been really out of sorts the last few days, and I know Ethan's worried about him."

Ethan. The guy already despised him. Erico wondered what kind of bullshit he was whispering in Jay's ear. "I'll go talk to Jay. There's no reason he should be picking up Francois' slack."

"Just do me a favour and don't let him see you upset. He's been busting his ass to keep you from this, don't undo all his hard work with one conversation," Mario said with an understanding smile on his face.

The thought of Jay going to such extremes to keep the truth from him, made Erico feel better about the state of their relationship. Surely Jay wouldn't care so much about Erico's health if his feelings only extended to fucking.

"I'll hold my temper for the person who deserves it." Erico pulled his regular clothes out of the locker and started undressing.

"You might want to hire a new sous chef first." Mario walked towards the door, giving Erico privacy to change.

As he pulled on his jeans, Erico contemplated his choices. He knew if he continued to let Francois work at The Canoe, it wouldn't do his stress level any good. Maybe it wasn't a

sous chef he needed in the first place. Erico began to check through everything at the restaurant that stressed him out. At the top of the list was the paperwork involved in owning his own business. The more he thought about it, the clearer things became.

He left the locker room with a clear plan as to how to turn his life around.

* * * *

“Order up,” Jay told Kitty through the pass-through window.

He pulled the next slip of paper down and smiled. Baked chicken no skin and dry side salad. Jay walked to the swinging door and looked out over the crowd. He spotted Erico sitting by himself in a booth. Jay wondered where Rosa was.

He went back to work and quickly prepared Erico’s dinner. He was pleased to see no other orders had come in while he’d worked. Jay decided to hand deliver Erico’s meal and stopped by the bar to make sure it was okay with Sean.

“Do you mind if I take a short break? I’m all caught up with the orders,” he added.

“Sure. If something else comes in, I’ll send Kitty after you.” Sean winked.

Jay had finally broken down and explained to his boss why he’d been so tired the last several days. Unlike most of Cattle Valley, Sean seemed happy for Jay once Jay had assured his boss he didn’t plan on quitting and going to work at The Canoe.

“Hey,” Jay said, setting Erico’s food on the table. “Where’s Rosa?”

Jay sat down across from Erico. Damn, it was good to see the handsome man’s face. He’d missed Erico more than he wanted to admit, even to himself. Jay suddenly wished he was alone with the guy instead of in a crowded restaurant.

“I told her I needed to talk to you in private,” Erico answered.

Jay grinned and glanced around the room. “Not very private.”

Erico smiled back and shrugged. “It’s the best I could do.” Erico reached over and ran his fingertips over Jay’s cheek. “You look tired.”

“Maybe I’m coming down with something,” Jay was quick to say.

“Maybe you’re just overextending yourself,” Erico shot back, his voice softer than Jay was used to.

Jay began to wonder if Erico knew. The expression on the man's face gave him away more than words. "Have you been by The Canoe?"

Erico nodded. "I fired Francois this afternoon. I came by here to talk to you first, but you looked swamped, so I decided to wait."

Jay's eyes closed. He wondered if Erico was upset with him over the deception. "Are you mad?"

"Hell yes I'm mad, but not at you." Erico stood and rounded the table to sit next to Jay. "Thank you for doing what you could. I'm sorry you were put into that position in the first place."

Jay leant his head against Erico's shoulder. "What're you going to do now?"

"Cook. It's what I do. It makes me happy."

As close as he was, Jay couldn't help himself. He placed a kiss on Erico's jaw. "It's too early for that. Maybe you should just shut down for another week."

"I closed up after I got Francois the hell out of there, but I'll reopen for dinner tomorrow. I'm fine, really. I've decided to shorten the hours for another week or so while I try to find a manager, but then it'll be back to business as usual."

Jay pressed closer against Erico's side. God, he'd missed Erico's warmth. "What about a sous chef?"

Erico wrapped his arm around Jay and kissed him. "I've decided I don't need one. That's why I'm going to look for a manager. I'll let someone else deal with the paperwork and employees. That'll leave me free to cook." Erico kissed Jay again. "There's nothing stressful about cooking for me."

Jay put his hand on Erico's thigh and squeezed. "Sounds like you've done a lot of thinking lately."

"I have." Erico glanced up as Kitty came to the table.

"Sorry, sweetie, but I have a double burger with fries waiting for you," Kitty said in an apologetic tone.

"No problem. Thanks, Kitty." Jay looked back at Erico. "Well, since I don't have to make pasta anymore, maybe I can come by when I get off shift tomorrow."

Before sliding out of the booth, Erico cupped the side of Jay's face. "I know you're afraid I'm going to hurt you, but I need you to give me a chance to prove I won't."

Jay pressed his cheek further against Erico's palm. "I'll try."

* * * *

Jay stepped into the mayor's office and smiled at Carol. "Hi. Can I steal your Boy Friday for a few minutes?"

Carol grinned at Ethan. "Sure. He's not due to give me a back massage for another thirty minutes."

Ethan rolled his eyes and got out from behind his desk. "You were so much nicer before you got pregnant."

Carol tilted her head back and laughed. "You're such a liar."

Ethan chuckled. "Yeah, I am."

Jay doubted he'd ever get used to the relationship Ethan had with Carol. Although Carol was only about ten years older than Ethan, she treated him more like a son than a co-worker. Jay didn't begrudge Ethan that. He knew his best friend had grown up without a mother, so he figured the guy was due a little maternal attention.

They walked outside the office to the staircase that went up to the other city administrative offices. Jay took a seat on one of the steps. "I thought you should know I'm going to continue seeing Erico."

Ethan, who was leaning with his arm against the banister refused to look at Jay. "I figured as much."

"You did?"

"Sure. You wouldn't have worked all those hours at The Canoe if you didn't really like the guy."

Jay studied Ethan to see if he saw disappointment in his friend. He was taken aback by the unspoken anger in Ethan's expression.

"I really want this to work," Jay added.

"I know you do." Ethan sighed and sat on the step beside Jay. "More than anyone else I know, you deserve to be happy. I just don't think he's the kind of guy you need."

Even though they never talked about it, Jay knew Randy's abuse had genuinely affected Ethan. It may not have been his best friend who'd received the blows from Randy's fists, but Ethan's sense of love had been shattered by Jay's ex-lover's actions.

"I'm not planning to jump into a serious relationship blindly. I've just decided to open myself enough to see if it's even a possibility."

"And the bruises I saw on your back? Are those part of opening yourself?" Ethan asked.

Jay slapped his forehead. "Is that what all this is about? You think Erico's already gotten rough with me?"

"I know what I saw, Jay. Don't try and make excuses for him like you did Randy."

Jay didn't know whether to feel insulted or touched that Ethan continued to worry about him. He stood and lifted up the back of his shirt. "The bruises and scrapes running down the bottom of my spine are from me slipping on the ice. The other three you're probably talking about are bite marks."

Jay pulled his shirt back down and turned to stare at his friend. "I'm sure you'll think I'm totally sick and fucked up, but I like it rough. I like to feel a man slamming his cock into me. It has nothing to do with Erico abusing me. Believe me, I learned my lesson with Randy. And if God forbid, Erico ever lays a hand on me out of anger, I've got plenty of friends in this town to turn to for help."

Ethan's jaws were still firmly clenched when Jay finished. "Why didn't I know that about you?"

Jay threw up his hands. "Because you're my best friend, not my lover."

"I just don't understand how someone who's been abused can enjoy..." Ethan shook his head. "You know? The stuff you like."

Jay shook his head and walked towards the door. "I don't need to explain that part of myself. Either you're my friend or not. How I enjoy getting fucked shouldn't enter into it."

Jay walked out of the building. It was no wonder he'd always kept part of himself a secret. If his best friend could look at him that way, what would other people think of him if they knew?

"Jay!" Ethan yelled from the top of the steps.

Jay turned. "What?"

"I love you no matter what. You know that, right?"

Jay knew he couldn't stay mad at Ethan. "Yeah. I know."

* * * *

Erico walked into the pub and waved at Jay through the pass-through window.

"Almost finished up here," Jay called.

Erico nodded and took a seat at the bar. "A glass of iced tea, please."

"Caffeine?" Sean questioned.

Erico rolled his eyes. It seemed since his health became public knowledge everyone in town had become food Nazis. He'd even been barred from the bakery. "I've given up liquor, my favourite foods, and I haven't had sex in over a week. I think I'm due a glass of tea, don't you?"

Laughing, Sean passed Erico a glass. "Better drink it before Jay sees it. He's been on my butt for two days about adding more health conscious items to the menu."

Erico thrilled at the statement. It was amazing how something so simple could make him fall even more in love with Jay. How many twenty-year-old men thought about planning healthy menus? "He really is amazing."

Sean smiled. "I'm a jaded bastard, so most people don't impress me, but Jay is...special."

Before Erico could respond, Sean leant over the bar to stare him in the eyes. "Make sure before you proceed that you're serious about him."

Erico wasn't put off by Sean's warning. He'd noticed in the last couple of days how protective everyone in the town was of Jay, and rightly so. Jay had blown into Cattle Valley a scared man of nineteen, trying desperately to find a safe haven where he could be himself and the town had embraced him immediately.

Erico nodded his understanding. "I've never been more serious about anything in my life."

"So you really think you can give up your old ways?" Sean questioned Erico further.

Erico stared deep into Sean's eyes. "If you had a man like Jay in your life, would you waste your time looking for something better?" Erico shook his head. "In my eyes there is no one better."

Sean reached across the bar and slapped Erico on the shoulder. "That's what I wanted to hear." He turned towards the kitchen. "I'll finish up, Jay. You've got a man out here trying to kill himself with a glass of iced tea."

Jay flew out of the kitchen before Sean had even shut his mouth. "What?" Jay hurried to the bar and grabbed the glass of tea.

Erico grinned and shook his head. "Maybe you could throw a guy a bone and buy some decaf."

"I'll consider it," Sean laughed.

Jay grabbed his coat off the hook just inside the kitchen. "Everything's done except sterilising the slicer."

"I'll take care of it," Sean agreed.

Erico stood and held out his hand. When Jay took it, Erico's heart finally felt at peace. He knew they had a lot to talk about, but hopefully Jay truly was willing to give him a chance.

* * * *

Walking into Erico's house felt like coming home to Jay. Although he'd only spent a few nights there, his body seemed to ease as soon as he stepped through the door. He still wasn't totally convinced he was doing the right thing, but he was definitely sure he was ready to take the chance.

"Let me start a fire," Erico said after taking Jay's coat and hanging it up.

Jay followed Erico into the living room and sat on the couch. "How did things go today at the restaurant?"

Erico adjusted the logs and turned on the gas starter. "It felt damn good to get back to the kitchen."

"You didn't overdo it, did you?" Jay had worried all evening. Every time the phone rang at the pub, he feared it was someone calling with bad news. Several times he'd had to stop himself from picking up the phone to check on Erico.

“Not at all. I concentrated on cooking and nothing else. Well, I did place a couple of ads on the web for a restaurant manager.” Erico stood and dusted his hands off. “What would you like to drink?”

“Water’s fine with me,” Jay answered.

Erico walked out of the room, and Jay pulled the blanket from the back of the sofa to wrap around him. He snuggled into the corner of the couch and sighed. He felt so incredibly comfortable with Erico. It was the reason he’d decided to proceed with their budding relationship.

Erico re-entered the room and handed Jay a glass of ice water.

“You mind?” Erico asked, indicating the spot next to Erico on the couch.

“Not at all,” Jay answered truthfully.

Jay knew Erico deserved an explanation for the way he’d acted the last several days, but he wasn’t sure where to start. “It’s not easy for me to trust people.”

Erico took a sip of his water before setting it on the coffee table. “I can understand that.”

The velvety-soft fringe on the corner of the blanket got Jay’s attention and he started to run his fingers through it as he tried to organise his thoughts. “I’ve never been in love. I mean, I loved my family, but I thought that was different. Family’s supposed to love you no matter what, right?”

Erico rested his arm on the back of the sofa and began playing with the ends of Jay’s hair. “And in the end, yours didn’t,” he seemed to surmise.

“Yeah, something like that.” Jay took a deep breath. “Randy used to tell me how much he loved me after one of his beatings.”

“That wasn’t love, baby,” Erico was quick to say.

“I know that now. But I think at the time, it only served to fortify my belief that love wasn’t real, at least not for someone like me.”

“Like you? You’re the most caring, gentlest man I’ve ever known. If anyone’s easy to love it’s you.” Erico’s hand moved to cup Jay’s cheek.

After a quick kiss, Erico continued. “I never wanted to fall in love. I saw how devastated my mom was when my dad died and decided I could never do that to someone. Maybe I’m being selfish by loving you now, I don’t know. But I do know you’re the only man who’s ever gotten past the walls I’d built around my heart.”

"You're healthy now though, right?" Jay questioned.

"Now? Yeah. Well as much as someone with my genetic history can be, I guess. But I can't predict the future."

Jay nodded and scooted closer to Erico. "I suppose it might help if you had a boyfriend who kept an eye on you then, huh?"

Erico grinned. "It would definitely help. Do you know anyone who might be interested in the position?"

Jay wrapped his arms around Erico and snuggled against his chest. "I think I might know someone who'd like to apply for training."

"I think you'd take to it naturally, very little training required." Erico kissed the top of Jay's head. "I'm pretty sure you know how I feel about you, but I promise not to say the words again until you're ready to hear them."

Jay closed his eyes and sighed. "Take me to bed."

* * * *

After carrying Jay to bed, Erico returned to the living room and shut off the gas starter before locking up. He walked back into the bedroom and began peeling off his clothes as he stared at the man waiting for him.

The expression on Jay's face was one Erico knew he'd never forget. It was a combination of lust and fear. Erico hoped he'd soon be able to put his lover at ease in both respects.

Nude, Erico slid between the sheets to press against Jay's warmth. Despite what Jay thought, Erico knew the man loved him. It would take a while for Jay to understand his feelings enough to know the truth, but Erico was willing to wait. As long as the two of them were together, the tags they used to describe each other didn't make much difference to him.

He rolled on top of Erico and insinuated himself between his lover's legs. Erico had no intention of fucking Jay like he had in the past. Although he wouldn't call it by name, he wanted to make love to Jay. His biggest hope was that it would show Jay a different side to sex. Erico liked it rough and Jay was a perfect match for him in that aspect, but right then, he wanted to express more than a hard fuck would allow.

"I've missed you so much." Erico brushed his lips across Jay's.

Jay wrapped his legs around Erico and kissed him back, sucking Erico's tongue inside his mouth.

Like every time they'd been together, the intensity was immediate and Erico had to pull himself back. He broke the kiss and began working his way down Jay's body with his tongue. As he laved the dark brown discs of Jay's nipples, he could feel his lover's hard cock press against his abdomen.

He scraped one of the pebbled nubs with his teeth and delighted in the sound of pleasure he received from Jay. Erico replaced his mouth with his fingers and pinched the sensitive nipples as he continued licking his way down Jay's abdomen. He stopped at Jay's bellybutton and swirled his tongue around the slight indentation while applying even more pressure to the nubs between his thumbs and forefingers.

Jay groaned and pushed against the top of Erico's head, silently begging Erico towards his cock.

Obliging his lover wasn't a problem for Erico. He scooted down further, sucking the sensitive skin surrounding Jay's cock into his mouth.

"Oohhhh," Jay moaned as Erico continued to mark him with small bruises.

Erico tickled the base of Jay's cock with the tip of his tongue as he continued the assault on Jay's nipples. He licked his way up Jay's shaft to the crown. Maintaining eye contact, Erico slurped the sweet pre-cum as it ran in copious amounts from the slit on the head of Jay's cock.

Jay fisted the bed sheets in his hands. "Fuck me," he begged.

Erico sucked more of the sweet essence into his mouth before moving down to nuzzle his face into the crack of Jay's ass. He licked at the sensitive area with the flat of his tongue while rubbing his own cock against the sheet underneath him. Erico couldn't decide if it was the taste of his lover or the continual sounds Jay made that turned him on more.

He felt the bottle of lube being pressed into his hand and grinned.

"I need you in me," Jay mumbled. "I've felt so empty without you inside of me."

The statement shocked Erico. He withdrew his face from Jay's ass and sat up. He knew it would be a long time before Jay trusted him enough to go bareback, so he grudgingly held out his hand for a condom. *Some day.*

After rolling the rubber down his length, he opened the bottle of lube and slicked his fingers. Jay started to roll over, but Erico stopped him with a hand on his lower torso. "Stay there."

Once again, a flash of fear crossed Jay's expression.

Erico smiled, trying to put his lover at ease as he entered Jay with his forefinger. He knew the intimacy involved in sex face to face was something new for Jay. Hell, it was uncommon for him as well. Erico usually preferred the depth he could attain from behind, but this coupling wasn't only about sexual fulfilment.

After working two fingers easily in and out of Jay's hole, Erico withdrew and replaced them with the head of his cock. Lying on top of Jay, Erico braced the majority of his weight on his arms and slowly drove his cock in to the root.

Gazing down into Jay's eyes, Erico longed to say the forbidden words that he felt to the depths of his heart. Instead, he pulled out and pushed in again, starting a slow, but intense rhythm.

"I love the way your body feels wrapped around my cock," he said, rocking his shaft in and out of Jay's ass.

Jay nodded and finally spoke. "No one's ever filled me so completely."

Erico grinned. He knew, even without the words, Jay was talking about more than his cock. In that moment, Erico was so overcome with feeling, he felt tears cloud his vision. Looking into the heavily lined eyes of his lover, Erico swallowed around the lump in his throat. "You are so incredibly beautiful."

A soft pink blush worked its way up Jay's neck to colour his cheeks. "You make me feel beautiful."

Erico lowered himself even more to rub against Jay's hard cock, trapping the dripping shaft between them. He leant down and bit the side of Jay's neck as he tried to hold off his quickly approaching climax.

As Erico marked Jay with his teeth, his lover called his name. The warmth of Jay's seed spread between them signalling Jay's orgasm.

Erico managed to pump twice more before grinding himself as hard as he could against Jay's hole. He came in a rush of feeling, filling the condom to the point of worry. Without

giving himself time to collapse, Erico reached down and pinched the base of the rubber as he pulled out.

He knew as he tied off the condom and tossed it into the trashcan he'd done the right thing. When he finally allowed himself to collapse on the mattress and pull Jay into his arms his emotions threatened to overwhelm him. His promise to Jay came to mind and Erico squeezed his eyes shut. How long could he go without telling the man in his arms how much he loved him?

Erico opted for a different version of the words, although they meant the same thing to him. "You're it for me."

Epilogue

On February fifteenth, Cattle Valley held their annual Valentine's Day dance in the ballroom of the Twin Pines Lodge. Jay was stupidly nervous as he fiddled with his new tie. "Are you sure it looks okay?"

"You look fantastic," Nate said, stepping in to adjust the red silk tie. "Why are you so nervous? You've been to plenty of these events."

Jay grinned. "I've never had a date to one though."

Nate stepped back and cocked his head from one side to the other, studying Jay from head to toe. "Perfect."

Jay glanced down at the new black suit Nate and Wyn had helped him pick out. He'd never been to a prom, but in his heart, he knew even prom couldn't hold a candle to the dance he was about to attend on Erico's arm.

"Love looks good on you," Nate commented, a silly grin on his face.

Jay smiled and pressed his finger to his lips. "Shhh, that's a secret."

"No it isn't," Nate informed him.

"Yes it is. I'm hoping to tell him tonight for the first time," Jay clarified.

Nate shook his head. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, but you tell the whole town with your eyes every time the two of you are out in public together."

Jay could feel his face heat as a blush crept up his neck. "Do you think Erico knows?"

Nate nodded. "I'm sure of it."

"Then why hasn't he said anything?" Jay asked, slipping into his shiny new black loafers. Nate had already shown him how to rough up the soles with a piece of sandpaper so they wouldn't be so slippery on the wet pavement outside.

Nate laughed, grabbed Jay's face between his hands and kissed him. "I don't think there's a single person in town who hasn't warned him about pressuring you. I would imagine he's in self-preservation mode."

Jay didn't like the sound of that. "People are threatening him?"

Nate stepped back and picked up his fancy topcoat. "Not threatening exactly. More like keeping an eye on him. You've got a lot of friends in Cattle Valley. People who care a great deal about you. It's only natural for them to want to protect you from someone with Erico's reputation."

"He doesn't deserve that. Erico's given me more in the last month and a half than anyone else in my life."

Nate shrugged into his coat and opened the door to Jay's apartment. "I know that. I can tell a big difference in you since the two of you have been together. Maybe it's time you let the rest of the town know."

Nate departed without another word, and Jay was left wondering what his friend expected him to do.

* * * *

"Stay right there," Erico said before jumping out of the SUV and going around to open Jay's door. He couldn't believe how gorgeous his lover looked all dressed up. As their relationship progressed, Erico was aware Jay only seemed to wear eye makeup on special occasions. Erico hoped it was a sign Jay was slowly starting to feel good with or without the help of Maybelline.

Erico held out his hand and Jay immediately took it. Once Jay was standing in front of him, Erico lifted his lover's hand and kissed it.

"Thank you, kind sir," Jay said with a slight giggle.

"Tonight is yours," Erico replied. He felt bad that he hadn't been able to give Jay a proper Valentine's Day the night before. Because the day was a busy one for restaurants, they'd both had to work, although they had met up afterwards.

As Erico walked Jay into the lodge, he couldn't keep his eyes off him. He reminded himself to thank Nate and Wyn for helping Jay with his suit.

"Would you stop looking at me like that?" Jay chuckled, his cheeks red.

"Sorry, but I can't do that," Erico stated honestly. "Promise you'll only have eyes for me tonight."

Jay grinned and laid his head on Erico's shoulder as they waited to get into the ballroom. "I don't know. Joey and Gracie should be here and you know how much they love their Uncle Jay."

Jay turned and pressed himself against Erico. "I will promise to save every dance for you though."

Erico pretended to mull it over. "Okay. I'll share you with anyone under the age of seven, but that's where I draw the line."

Erico handed their tickets over and led Jay into the beautifully decorated room. "Wow. It looks like a flower shop exploded in here."

"I think you're right," Jay agreed.

"Where would you like to sit?" Erico asked.

Jay glanced around the room and pointed towards a big round table. "There are a couple of empty chairs."

"Looks good. It'll give me a chance to get to know Asa a little better." Erico put his hand on the small of Jay's back and followed him to the table. "Are these taken?"

"They are now," Mario said. "I was just about to go for a drink run, care to join me?"

Erico helped Jay with his chair before kissing him lightly on the lips. "What would you like?"

Jay bit his plump lower lip. "Well, I'd like to try a glass of champagne, but I see Ryan over there, so I'd better stick with some punch."

Erico smiled and nodded before heading towards the bar with Mario at his side.

"Does it ever bother you that you're dating a man who isn't even legal to drink?" Mario asked.

Erico shook his head. "Jay isn't an age to me. Guess I just don't think about it."

Mario clapped him on the back so hard it nearly sent Erico ass over tea kettle. He straightened and narrowed his eyes. "What the hell was that for?"

Mario leaned an elbow on the bar. "Good answer."

Erico adjusted his suit jacket. "Next time just say that, okay?"

Mario chuckled. "Wimp."

Erico ordered two glasses of champagne. If Ryan wanted to kick up a fuss, Erico would swear they both belonged to him.

"Uh oh. There goes your date," Mario said, gesturing across the room.

Erico wasn't surprised to see Jay holding Joey. He knew how much Jay loved the little guy. "This town's going to have to find themselves a new babysitter."

"I wouldn't hold my breath if I was you," Mario said as Gracie ran over to Jay.

"At least he waited until I left the table," he finally said. He may pretend he was jealous, but Erico loved seeing Jay with the kids. It was the main reason he'd first fallen for the man. Well, that and those sexy shorts Jay was fond of wearing.

Glasses in hand, he walked back to the table.

"Sorry," Asa chuckled. "Jay spotted Joey in his little suit and couldn't resist."

Erico set down the champagne and walked over to Bo and Rance's table. He waved to Lark and Kade before narrowing his gaze at Bo. "Dammit, Bo, Jay's my date tonight."

Bo laughed and shrugged. "Never underestimate the power of a baby, dude."

"Joey's addicted to Jay's singing," Rance added. "I told him I was going to record him to play for Joey when he gets fussy. Now that you're taking all Jay's free time, Joey's having withdrawals."

Erico had caught bits and pieces of Jay's singing voice, but he'd never actually heard him sing a song. He walked towards the corner of the room where Jay was sitting on the floor. Joey was between Jay's legs resting against his stomach as Jay played patty cake with Gracie.

Erico stood over the threesome and crossed his arms over his chest. "You're going to wrinkle your suit."

Jay glanced up at Erico and smiled. "I don't mind."

"We're playing," Gracie informed Erico with a hint of annoyance in her voice.

"I see that, but maybe I want to play with Jay for a while."

Jay finished his game of patty cake and leant over to give Gracie a kiss. "I'll find you again later."

Gracie wrinkled her nose at Erico before flouncing off towards Tyler and Hearn. Jay hoisted Joey to his chest and stood. The baby started to fuss and Jay began rubbing Joey's back. "It's okay, little guy."

Jay began walking in circles, trying to calm Joey down.

Erico leant against the wall as Jay began a soft lullaby. Within moments, Joey was sound asleep with his head on Jay's shoulder.

"Why don't you ever sing me to sleep?" Erico asked.

Jay chuckled. "Because I have better ways of putting you to sleep." As Jay passed Erico, he reached out and brushed a hand over the front of Erico's slacks. "Right?"

Erico nodded. "Can't argue with that."

* * * *

With Erico's arms wrapped around him, Jay sighed. "This has been one of the best nights of my life. Thank you."

Erico continued to lead Jay around the dance floor as he kissed him. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Jay leant in and gave Erico a soft kiss. "I love you," he whispered against Erico's lips.

Erico closed the distance and thrust his tongue deep into Jay's mouth. Jay couldn't help but moan when he felt Erico's hardened cock grind against him.

Breaking the kiss, Erico pulled back enough to stare into Jay's eyes. "I love you more than anything in the world."

"Even more than The Canoe?" Jay tried to tease.

"Way more. Since our first kiss, I've come to understand what's really important in my life. Cooking feeds my creative side, but being with you feeds my soul."

"Nate told me people have been giving you a hard time." Jay allowed his fingers to play with the curls at the base of Erico's neck.

"They have, but you're worth it," Erico stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

Jay noticed Nate and Rio dancing cheek-to-cheek. He thought about what Nate had told him earlier in the evening and smiled. Now that he'd told Erico he loved him, it was time to deal with all his protectors in town.

Jay stopped dancing. "Would you mind if we take a breather? There's something I need to take care of."

"No, baby, that's fine." Erico led Jay off the dance floor. "Would you like a glass of punch or an ice water?"

"Sure. Water sounds great," Jay told Erico. He gave his lover a brief kiss before breaking away and weaving through the crowded ballroom.

He made his way to the bandstand where Trick Allen and his band, The Cowboys, had just ended a song and were evidently getting ready to take a break. He waited for Trick to notice him and waved him off to the side.

"Hey, Jay," Trick greeted.

"Hi, Mr. Allen," Jay returned.

"Trick."

Jay nodded. "Trick. I was wondering if it would be possible for you to dedicate a song for me?"

"Sure. What's the occasion?" Trick asked.

Jay gestured to the room. "I thought it might be the easiest way to let all my friends know how in love I am, and that I'm a big boy and can take care of myself."

Trick smiled. "Any song in particular?"

"There's a song I sing in the shower when I'm alone and thinking about Erico, but it's by Ann Murray, so I'm not sure if you can do it."

Trick winked. "I know which song you're talking about, and yeah, I can do it."

"Thank you, sir."

"Trick!"

Jay smiled and nodded. "Sorry. Trick."

* * * *

"Lost him again, I see," Asa chuckled.

Erico's gaze swept the crowd looking for his lover. "Yep. He said he had something important to take care of, but Bo and Rance aren't even here anymore, so I know it's not Joey."

"Speak of the devil," Asa laughed as Jay took his seat beside Erico.

Erico wrapped his arm around Jay's shoulders and pulled him into a kiss. "I was starting to worry you'd left me."

Jay shook his head. "I'll never do that."

Erico stared into Jay's eyes. *God, I'm a love-sick fool.* "I hope not."

Jay stood and grabbed Erico's hand. "The band is coming back. Dance with me?"

"Of course." Erico followed Jay to the floor, his arm wrapped securely around his lover's waist.

"This next song goes out to Erico from Jay. Jay also wants everyone to know he appreciates your protectiveness, but he can take things from here," Trick announced before starting the song, *Can I Have This Dance*.

Erico pulled Jay as close as he could and kissed him. No one had ever done anything so special for him. "I love you."

"Love you. Now let me sing to you." Jay rested his chin on Erico's shoulder and softly sang the lyrics to him.

When Jay got to the part where he asked if Erico would be his partner every night, Erico closed his eyes. Loving Jay was a dream come true, one he hoped to never wake up from. He knew they still had a long way to go in their relationship, but Erico was looking forward to building a future with the man in his arms.

A hand on his back startled Erico. He'd been so lost in love he'd blocked out the entire room except for the man in his arms. Erico glanced over his shoulder to see Ethan.

"I just wanted to thank you for giving Jay everything he deserves," Ethan said.

Erico knew how hard the admission was for Ethan considering the animosity the younger man had carried towards him for so long. He nodded and smiled. "Thanks. That means the world to us."

Jay broke away from Erico long enough to give Ethan a friendly hug. "Love you."

Ethan kissed Jay on the cheek. "Love you back. Always will."

Once Ethan walked off, Erico pulled Jay, once again, against his chest. "Are you sure there was never anything romantic between the two of you?"

Jay grinned and shook his head before kissing Erico. Erico opened immediately and sucked Jay's tongue inside. The song ended and they finally broke their kiss. Jay stood still and stared into Erico's eyes. "There's someone for everyone. Ethan just hasn't figured that out yet, but he will some day."

"I'm so lucky to have found you," Erico said, as they walked back to their table.

"I'm the lucky one," Jay countered.

When they returned to their table, Leo was telling Mario and Asa a story. Erico didn't know the new assistant fire chief well, but he knew he'd quickly become one of Mario's closest friends.

"Quite a declaration," Mario broke from his conversation to tell Jay.

Jay shrugged and leant against Erico. "I'm happy. I thought it was time to let everyone know it."

Erico noticed Leo's gaze settle on the several empty champagne glasses in front of them.

"You're not going to need rescuing later, are you?" Leo asked.

"Nope." Erico kissed Jay's temple. "I've already been rescued."

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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Cattle Valley: The Last Bouquet
Cattle Valley: Eye of the Beholder
Cattle Valley: Cattle Valley Days
Cattle Valley: Bent-Not Broken
Cattle Valley: Arm Candy
Karaoke at the Tumbleweed

Legend Anthology: Healing Doctor Ryan
Joey's First Time
Between Two Lovers
Corporate Passion
Poker Night: Texas Hold Em
Poker Night: Slow-Play
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