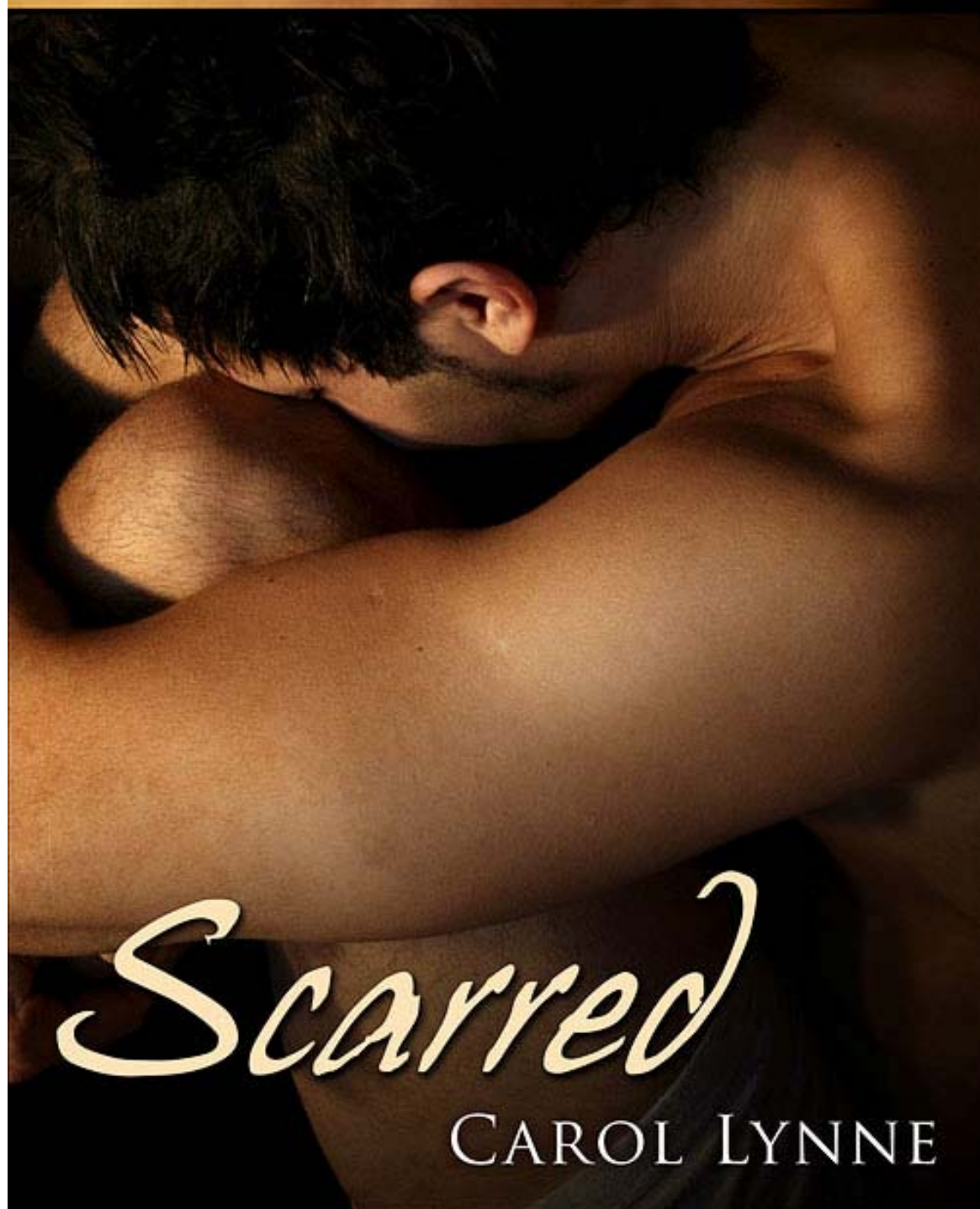




CATTLE  
VALLEY



*Scarred*

CAROL LYNNE

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Scarred

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

**Cattle Valley**

# **SCARRED**

**Carol Lynne**

## *Dedication*

For Patric Michael. Although we don't know each other,  
you've touched my life more than I can convey.  
Your strength of character is a shining example of who we all should aspire to be.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## Chapter One

"Good morning, zipper face," Zac Alben whispered to his reflection. He plugged in his electric razor and touched it to his left cheek. The left side was easy. He didn't have to worry about being gentle like he did with the right.

Zac turned to the side like he did every morning, and began shaving off the dark overnight stubble. He hated the electric razor, it never shaved close enough for his taste, but his skin was still too sensitive for a real blade.

"Breakfast is on the table," his father, Butch, called.

"Be there in a minute," Zac returned. He ran his hand over his left cheek, satisfied. Before turning to shave the other side of his face, he took a moment to stare at his reflection in profile.

Although he'd never thought of himself as gorgeous, he'd always known he was good-looking. Perhaps it was karma that he'd lost whatever beauty he'd once possessed. Zac mentally said goodbye to the handsome man in the mirror and turned to fully face the mirror.

The right side of his face always took three times longer. He'd tried growing a beard shortly after the accident that had left him freakishly scarred, but quickly found it made the jagged scars more pronounced instead of the other way around.

A noise to his left got his attention. Zac noticed his father standing in the bathroom doorway. "Do you need in here?"

"No. Just wondered what was keeping you. Scrambled eggs suck if you let 'em get cold."

"Well excuse me if I can't get ready as fast as you can anymore," Zac barked.

Butch shook his head and left without saying another word. Zac cursed himself. He needed to stop taking his anger and frustration out on his dad, a man who'd dropped everything to fly to Cattle Valley after Zac had almost lost his life.

He finished shaving and shoved the razor under the sink, knowing he wouldn't be back to the house until Monday. It was Cattle Valley Days weekend, and Zac had volunteered to work through it, giving the other EMTs the time off.

Zac entered the kitchen of the cute bungalow he'd fallen in love with on sight and stood beside the table. "Sorry about that."

Butch shook his head and took another bite of his bacon. "I'm getting used to it."

"Yeah, and that's the problem. I need to stop taking my mood out on you or else I'm going to run you off." Zac took a seat and reached for the salt and pepper.

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that," Butch began.

Zac could tell by the look in his dad's eyes he was leaving. "When're you going?"

"My flight leaves Tuesday morning. I thought I'd stick around this weekend and see what all the fuss is about first, though."

Zac nodded. Cattle Valley Days had always been a big celebration, but since the grandstand collapse the previous year, they were expecting the crowd-size to double with out-of-town guests. Zac knew most of the strangers who'd show up were good people, but there would be the inevitable crowd of morbid folks coming to see the site of the worst disaster in Cattle Valley's history.

"Sammy's off today and tomorrow. You should give him a call."

"Oh, I'm sure he'll be with his fella. I don't mind wandering around on my own."

Zac shook his head. "Leo works today, so Sammy'll probably be thankful for the company."

Butch shrugged noncommittally and continued eating. "Jakob called again this morning."

Zac's head popped up from concentrating on his breakfast. He hated that his first reaction to Jakob's name was always one of excitement. Zac schooled his features quickly. "What'd he want?"

"To know if you were on shift today. I told him you were working all weekend."

Zac went back to his cold eggs. "That all he wanted?"

"Well, he asked how you were doing, and how I was doing." Butch set down his fork and leaned his forearms against the edge of the table. "You ever gonna tell me why you keep pushing that boy away?"

"Nope. That's between us. Believe me, it's better this way." His appetite gone, Zac stood and carried his plate to the sink. He scraped the uneaten food down the disposal and set his plate in the dishwasher.

"Stop by the firehouse if you get bored." Zac gave his dad a quick kiss on the top of his cleanly shaven head. "I'll call ya later."

"Be safe," Butch said.

Zac grabbed his duffle and walked out the door. On the front porch he stopped and took a deep breath. It was going to be a scorcher of a day. Thankfully he'd be either in the air conditioned firehouse or riding around in the ambulance.

\* \* \* \*

Jakob Cox watched the parade with little enthusiasm. Although it was a typical small town parade, which Jakob usually enjoyed, he couldn't get his mind off Zac. He wondered what the weekend would've been like if Terry hadn't gone completely psycho and smashed Zac's face into a glass coffee table.

Would he be watching the parade with his arm around Zac or Terry? Would they have even acknowledged their arrangement by now?

Jakob sighed and stepped back, allowing others to enjoy the parade view that just wasn't doing anything for him. He wove his way through the crowd, working his way towards the bakery.

He reached the door just as the high school band marched by. Jakob quickly escaped into the cool interior of Brynn's Bakery and shut the door just as the brass section came by. He took a moment to appreciate the air conditioning.

"It's looking good this year."

Jakob glanced up and smiled at Gill. "Is it different from last year?"

Gill chuckled. "Not really, but at least they decided to put the horses at the end of the parade this year. Usually the band's lines aren't as together as they are now, what with everyone trying to step around the steaming piles of horse shit."

Jakob found himself smiling for the first time all day. He moved further into the bakery and studied the display case. "I thought I'd take something over to the firehouse. Is Kyle around?"

Gill shook his head. "He's working the funnel cake booth at the carnival. I told him I'd watch the shop." Gill grinned. "Cooler."

"I don't blame you." Jakob gestured to the door. "Quieter, too."

"You got that right." Gill stood and walked to the front counter. "Are you thinking along the lines of donuts or desserts?"

Jakob shrugged. "I don't know. Might be a little late for donuts. What about a pie? Maybe that coconut cream."

Gill nodded and removed a pie from the refrigerated cooler next to the display case. "That it?"

Like they did every hour of the day, Jakob's thoughts went to Zac. "Give me half a dozen of those Snicker doodles, too."

Using a square of waxed paper, Gill reached into the case and removed six cookies. "Zac must be working today. He loves these things."

"Yeah," Jakob said.

Gill put the cookies into a sack before bringing out a larger bag with a handle. He placed the boxed pie at the bottom with the cookies on the top. "Need any coffee?"

"No thanks." Jakob paid for his purchases and stuck his wallet back into his pocket. "Have a good one."

"You, too," Gill called out before Jakob opened the door.

Ice breaker in hand, Jakob headed towards the station.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Jakob reached the fire station, Leo was back with the fire truck, having led the parade. Jakob walked into the common room un-noticed. He stood in the doorway and watched Zac watch television.

Jakob smiled at the relaxed man. Since the accident, every time Jakob came around, Zac would immediately tense up and leave the room, but now, even if for a few minutes, Jakob could look his fill at the man he loved.

His chest began to ache, but Jakob didn't dare move to try and rub away the hurt the last couple of months had brought. Instead he watched the animation in Zac's face as he smiled at the television. Bart Simpson's voice was unmistakable in the background. How



many episodes had the two of them watched together? Terry had never cared for the adult cartoon, but Zac loved it as much as Jakob did.

"Mind if I watch with you?" he asked, stepping further into the room.

Zac immediately tensed, bringing his recliner to an upright position. "It's almost over." Instead of turning the scarred side of his face away from Jakob, like he did with everyone else, Zac did the opposite.

Like every time Zac did it, Jakob felt like he'd been slapped. He took a deep breath and held up the sack. "I brought some stuff from the bakery for you and Leo."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"It was my pleasure," Jakob said. He set the sack on the coffee table in front of Zac and took a seat on the couch.

"No, I mean you really shouldn't have done that. Especially because I know the way you think, and I'm sure there are cookies in there for me."

"Yeah. So?"

Zac sighed and leaned back in his chair. "It's over between us, Jakob. You doing shit like this will only make Leo suspicious."

"So what?" Jakob tried to control his temper. Fighting with Zac wasn't the way to make amends for what he'd done. "Unlike you, I'm not ashamed of what we had."

"Shame has nothing to do with it. Do you think I want my friends knowing what a slut I am?"

"Slut? How can you say that? Terry's the one who invited me into your bed. If he hadn't..."

"If he hadn't I wouldn't look like a freak. Now drop it!"

"What the hell's going on in here?" Leo asked, coming into the room. It was obvious they'd disrupted Leo's shower. He stood in the middle of the common room, dripping onto the tile floor with a towel wrapped around his waist.

Jakob stood and shook his head. "Nothing. I just stopped by to drop off a coconut cream pie." He wiped his sweaty hands on his jeans and took one last look at Zac before walking out the front door.

He stopped to sit on the bench under the big shade tree in front of the station. He didn't know why he should be surprised. Lately every time he was in the same room with Zac it ended in a fight.

Jakob leant forward and rested his head in his hands. Every night he dreamt of holding Zac in his arms again and every morning he woke alone.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Leo left the room, Zac quickly dug the cookies out of the sack and hid them in the kitchen cabinet next to the canned soup. He slipped the pie in the refrigerator and made a glass of iced tea.

"It was nice of Jakob to bring us dessert," Leo said.

"Yeah. I guess he feels guilty because we're working and he isn't."

Leo grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge and stared at Zac. "What's going on between you guys? I used to always see the two of you together, now it's like you can barely stand to be in the same room with him."

Zac picked up his glass of tea and headed towards the common room. "Drop it." Movement outside the large window caught his attention. He walked over and stared at Jakob, sitting alone on the bench outside.

A large part of Zac wanted to go out and comfort the depressed-looking man, but he stayed where he was out of self-preservation. He absently set his glass on the window ledge as he continued to stare at Jakob.

He remembered the first time he'd introduced his new partner to Terry. Things between him and Jakob had been good, maybe too good. Once he found out Jakob hadn't made any other friends in town, he'd invited him over to his house for a cookout.

Terry had been against the whole idea at first, but that quickly changed when he'd answered the door. Jakob was beyond gorgeous, Zac had picked up on that fact the first day they'd been introduced. What he hadn't known was how funny and charming Jakob was away from work. Zac still regretted the day he'd put ideas into Terry's head.

*Making up the hamburger patties, Zac yelled for Terry to get the door. He heard Terry welcome their guest and smiled. Terry continued to talk and Zac rolled his eyes. "Don't interrogate him within the first five minutes."*

*Terry led Jakob into the kitchen, and Zac couldn't help but notice the twin smiles on the men's faces. Finished making the patties, Zac washed his hands in the sink.*

*"You didn't tell me Jakob drove a Harley," Terry said. He opened the fridge and brought out two beer bottles, handing one to Jakob.*

*Zac shrugged and tossed the dishtowel to the counter. "Guess I didn't think it was important."*

*Terry surprised him by pressing him against the counter for a deep kiss. Although Zac accepted his lover's kiss, his eyes swung Jakob's way. Offending his new partner wasn't why he'd invited him over. Zac felt the press of Terry's erection against him and ended the kiss.*

*"What's gotten into you?" he asked.*

*Terry smiled. "Just testing the waters, sweetheart."*

*Confused, Zac picked up his beer and took a swig. "What's that supposed to mean?"*

*Laughing, Terry shook his head and stepped back. "Nothing." He turned to Jakob, who'd been standing quietly. "Let's go out to the deck while the little woman finishes dinner."*

*Zac narrowed his eyes. He was about to say something to Terry, when Jakob did it for him. "Nothing girly about enjoying cooking. Hell, most of the best chefs are men."*

*Terry snorted and opened the back door. "Ya coming?"*

*Jakob glanced at Zac. "Do you need some help?"*

*Zac shook his head. "I'm done in here for a while anyway. All that's left is to get these on the grill," he said, holding up the platter of hamburger patties. "You could grab me another beer though."*

*Jakob immediately did as asked and held the door for Zac. "Nice deck."*

*Terry, who was already sprawled in one of the comfortable chairs, nodded. "Zac had it put on just before I moved in."*

*Zac's jaws clenched when he realised Terry hadn't started the grill like he'd asked him to earlier. He set the platter down and turned to face his boyfriend. "I thought you were going to start this?"*

*Terry shrugged. "Must've forgot."*

*Biting his tongue, Zac went to the garage and carried back the bag of charcoal, lighter fluid and a box of matches. Terry was behind him, trying to engage Jakob in meaningless conversation. There were days Zac couldn't remember why he was still with Terry.*

*A warm body pressed against his back as two arms wrapped around his waist. "I'm sorry. Do you want me to do it?"*

*Zac leaned back against Terry's solid, muscular frame. "That's okay, I'll take care of it."*

*Terry kissed Zac's neck as his hands wandered down to palm his cock. "You won't punish me for it later, will you?"*

*Zac rolled his eyes. They had sex every single night he wasn't at the station. Why would Terry think otherwise now? Was it because he'd made an ass of himself in front of Jakob? "Do I ever punish you?"*

*"No, that's why I love you so much. You're a greedy little whore in bed." Although Terry whispered it, Zac was afraid it had been loud enough for Jakob to hear.*

*"Stop that." He elbowed Terry in the stomach.*

*"What, this?" Terry started to unzip Zac's fly.*

*Zac elbowed him harder and pulled away, nearly sending himself into the grill. "What the hell's gotten into you?"*

*"Just think about it, sweetheart, I'm sure you'll figure it out." Terry turned and sat back down.*

*Zac took a deep breath and picked up the box of matches. He struck one and dropped it onto the charcoal, stepping back at the whoosh of flames. Staring into the flames, Zac thought about what Terry had suggested. It wasn't the first time in their relationship that Terry was looking to bring another into their bed. In the past, their threesomes had always been one nighters, but Jakob was different, the two of them had to continue to work together.*

*"You ready for this?" Jakob asked, drawing Zac's attention.*

*He turned away from the grill to face the handsome EMT. Jakob sat smiling, holding a full beer bottle up for Zac.*

*"Yeah, thanks." Zac took the beer and took one of the empty chairs. It was a rare occurrence when he and Jakob were off on the same night. Even if they were to indulge in a little play, it wouldn't likely happen again for a long time.*

*Fuck! What the hell am I thinking? Zac admonished himself.*

*Jakob finished off his beer. "Mind if I get another?"*

*"Not at all. Bring a couple more out with you," Terry said.*

*As soon as Jakob went into the house, Terry started in. "Don't sit there and tell me you don't think he's hot."*

*"I didn't say that, but I work with him," Zac tried to explain.*

*"So? He's a big boy. As long as he knows the deal going in it shouldn't be a problem."*

*Zac shook his head. "Don't make a fool of yourself, Terry. Jakob may not even be interested."*

*"Interested in what?" Jakob asked, stepping out onto the deck.*

*"Fucking Zac. With me here, of course," Terry added.*

*Jakob's eyes rounded. "Excuse me?"*

*"I like to watch other men fuck Zac. Just wondered if you were up to the challenge."*

*"Terry, stop it," Zac warned. He didn't dare look over at Jakob, afraid of the disgust he'd see in his new friend's eyes.*

*"Guess that would be up to Zac," Jakob finally said.*

*Zac's head swung towards Jakob. The answer had surprised him. He was met by Jakob's smiling face.*

*"Hell, I'm not about to turn an offer like that down," Jakob chuckled.*

*"I forgot the seasonings for the burgers." Zac jumped up and headed for the house. Once inside, he grabbed the barbeque sauce out of the fridge and ran the cold glass bottle over his forehead. This isn't happening.*

*Before he could get himself together, the door opened and Jakob stepped into the kitchen. "Are you mad?"*

*Zac lowered the barbeque sauce and shook his head. "Embarrassed. Maybe a little surprised, but I'm not mad."*

*Zac shut the refrigerator door that separated them. Facing Jakob, Zac suddenly realised how much bigger and taller his partner was. "Terry had no right to ask something like that of you. Hell, he just met you."*

*Jakob nodded. "I won't lie and say it's a comfortable position for me to be in, but I also won't lie and tell you I don't want you. I have since I first met ya."*

*Jakob took a step forward and cupped the side of Zac's face, rubbing his thumb over Zac's lower lip. "You do this kind of thing often?"*

*Zac shook his head. "A couple times. Terry likes it." He shrugged. "He inherited high blood pressure from his father, so there are times he can't...well...you know."*

*"So you've told me how Terry feels about it, but do you want it?" Jakob asked, bending down to brush his lips lightly across Zac's.*

*Zac's lips tried to follow Jakob's but they moved away before he could latch onto them. "This time? Yeah, I want it."*

*With a low moan, Jakob wrapped his arms around Zac and bent down for a real kiss, pulling Zac up at the same time to meet in the middle. Zac opened his mouth and accepted the warm, beer-tasting invasion of Jakob's tongue with enthusiasm. They were so into each other, they didn't hear Terry walk into the room.*

*Terry cleared his throat. "I see you two started without me," he grumbled.*

*Shit. Zac pulled out of the kiss and turned to his boyfriend. "Just breaking the ice, I guess."*

*Terry stared at Zac for several moments before grabbing another beer.*

*"You drank the one Jakob brought you already?" Zac asked. Terry wasn't an alcoholic by any stretch of the imagination, but when he drank, he tended to get incredibly bossy.*

*"It's a party," Terry laughed. "Besides, I came in to tell you your charcoal's starting to grey."*

*Jakob followed Terry, but stopped in the doorway and smiled at Zac. "Coming?"*

*Zac nodded. Now that he knew Jakob was open to the idea, his nerves threatened to get the better of him. He stopped at the fridge and grabbed a fresh beer. By the time he reached the deck, Terry was grinning like a fool.*

*"Sit on his lap, Zac," Terry ordered, taking a drink.*

*"I have to watch the meat," he reminded Terry.*

*With a sigh, Terry stood and walked over to stand in front of Zac. "Making our company feel at home is more important. I'll flip the meat." Terry leant in and whispered in Zac's ear. "Give Jakob a taste of what he's in for."*

*Zac grinned at the thought of finally being able to feel Jakob's hands on his body. "You're such a perv," he told Terry.*

*"Yep," Terry agreed with a wide smile.*

*Once Terry crossed to the grill, Zac walked over and stood in front of the man sprawled in the wide, cushioned teak chair. He stared down at Jakob, raking the man's superior physique with his gaze. "Mind if I join you?"*

*Jakob reached down and rubbed a hand against the rising bulge in his jeans. "I'd like that."*

*Knowing Terry's rules, Zac sat on Jakob's lap, still facing his partner of a year. He leaned back against Jakob's chest and took a gulp of his beer.*

*Jakob began kissing Zac's neck almost immediately. "Can I touch you?"*

*Zac reached over with his free hand and grabbed Jakob by the wrist. "Only if you start here," he said, directing Jakob's hand to the front of his jeans.*

*Groaning, Jakob began to knead Zac's cock. "You feel good."*

*Zac glanced up and stared at Terry who was placing the finished meat on a platter. He knew how much Terry was enjoying Jakob's attention to Zac's cock.*

*"Just put the foil I brought out over it," Zac instructed. He was in no mood to stop what he was doing to eat. Jakob's attention felt far too good to think of food.*

*"Here, let me help you," Terry said after wrapping the platter. He walked over and unzipped Zac's jeans before taking a seat next to the action.*

*Jakob bit Zac's earlobe. "Does it turn you on when he watches?"*

*"With you touching me, I don't need anything else to turn me on," Zac told Jakob honestly.*

*Jakob grunted and pushed Zac's jeans and underwear down to his knees. Totally exposed to the evening air, Zac was thankful the privacy fence shielded them from prying eyes. He held his legs out towards Terry, silently asking for his partner's help.*

*With a chuckle, Terry removed Zac's clothes from the waist down. "You're such a dirty slut."*

*Zac grinned. As long as Terry was going to allow Jakob to touch him, he figured Terry deserved at least a good show. Jakob reached down and lifted one of Zac's legs to drape over the arm of the chair before positioning the other in the same fashion.*

*"Lean back against me," Jakob instructed.*

*The first touch of Jakob's hand on his bare cock nearly set Zac off. Although Terry liked to call him a slut, Zac had never felt like a bigger one than at that moment, but not because Terry was eagerly watching Jakob jack him off. No, Zac felt like a slut because although he was supposed to be in love with Terry, he craved Jakob so much more than he'd ever wanted his boyfriend.*

*One brush of Jakob's spit-slicked finger against his hole, and Zac's back bowed. "I'm coming."*

*Terry jumped out of the chair and fell to his knees in front of Zac, swallowing the load that shot from Zac's cock. Zac was surprised at the anger and resentment he felt towards Terry for the action. His cum had been for Jakob, not Terry.*

*Behind him, Jakob must have picked up on Zac's sudden change in mood. While Terry was busy licking the cum from Zac's cock, Jakob whispered in his ear. "There will be time for us. Terry won't be with us at work."*

*Zac relaxed and turned his head up and to the side to receive a deep kiss from his newest lover. Despite Terry's obvious presence, Zac couldn't wait for the chance to have Jakob all to himself.*

*"Did you hear me?" Leo asked from behind Zac.*

*Zac jumped, getting pulled back to the present. "Excuse me?"*

*Leo pointed towards the speaker in the corner of the room. "We got a call. Possible heat stroke."*

*Zac nodded. "Yeah. On it, boss."*

## Chapter Two

Zac eased the ambulance through the slowly parting crowd in front of The Canoe. He glanced over at Leo. "I've never seen so many people in Cattle Valley. Where the hell are they all coming from?"

"Everywhere," Leo replied. "I ran into a fella last night at the Grizzly Bar from freakin' England."

Zac shook his head. He'd never understand people. "So they come here to soak up the small town feel and end up populating it until it's the size of the city they left behind. I don't get it."

"It's like a gay pride weekend western-style, I guess." Leo shrugged. "Doesn't matter. They'll be gone come Monday and Cattle Valley will return to its normal state."

Zac parked as close as he could and jumped out. He went to the back of the ambulance and pulled out his kit before approaching the patient. He didn't recognise the elderly man laying on the sidewalk or most of the people surrounding him, but Zac smiled when he spotted Jay trying to cool the man with wet towels from the restaurant.

Someone off to his right gasped, drawing Zac's attention. He turned his head just in time to see the horrified expression on a teenage boy's face. Zac thought something else had happened until he realised the boy was horrified by...him.

In the span of a heartbeat, it hit him. Zac staggered back, ready to flee to the safety the ambulance provided.

"Over here," Leo yelled.

He turned away from the looks and whispers and squared his shoulders. As he knelt beside the patient, he told himself the onlookers would be gone soon. What he couldn't get out of his head was the knowledge that even though the visitors would leave Cattle Valley, his face would still be fucked up.

\* \* \* \*



"I saw what happened back there," Leo said as Zac backed into the bay at the firehouse. "He was a kid. You can't let him get to you."

Zac turned off the engine and gripped the steering wheel. "Kid or not, he was honest with his reaction. Guess I got used to people around here treating me like they always have. I know better now."

"You know what? That your friends don't give a fuck about the scars? Well, you're damn right we don't."

Zac opened the door and climbed down. "I'm going to go take a shower," he said before slamming the door shut.

Leo got out of the truck. "Don't do this, Zac. You can't let hateful people bring you down."

Zac didn't bother to turn around. Leo meant well, but Zac suddenly felt overly protected in Cattle Valley. Was it better to be lulled into a sense of normalcy, or leave and face the ugly truth, literally?

After stripping out of his clothes, Zac turned on the shower and picked up a bar of soap. Numb, he began washing himself, ignoring his cock completely. How could such a beautiful love affair turn so ugly so quickly?

When he reached his face, the puckered skin under his fingertips made him sick to his stomach. He retched as his lunch threatened to come back up.

"I hate this!" he screamed, digging at the fresh scars with his short fingernails.

If only he had kept the sex with Jakob to that one night, but he knew soon after their first time, he'd never get enough of the man. It was their third night together when things started to go wrong. Zac should have ended things right then, but he'd held on, hoping Terry's mood would improve.

It all started when Zac came home after a forty-eight hour shift. Terry was in his recliner, already drunk, watching a baseball game with Jakob. As soon as Zac stepped into the room, he knew something was wrong.

*"What's happened?" he asked.*

*From the couch, Jakob pointed towards Terry. "Ask him."*

*Zac's gaze swung back to Terry. "Well?"*

*"He won't mess around unless you're here." Terry crossed his arms. "What's the use of having two men around if I can't fuck when I feel like it?"*

*Zac started to go to Terry, but he held his hands up. "Don't try your little games on me, Zac. I'm not in the mood."*

*"Games? I was planning to kiss you, you son-of-a-bitch. Damn, I hate it when you get like this. I only have a twelve hour break before I have to go back to work. I was hoping for some downtime." Zac turned and stalked back to the front door. "Call me when you've sobered up."*

*He was climbing back into his Suburu Outback when Jakob came flying out of the house towards him. Jakob didn't even ask, he simply opened the passenger door and got in.*

*"Mind if I tag along?" Jakob asked, buckling his seatbelt.*

*Although he should refuse, Zac couldn't bring himself to do so. He'd looked forward to the evening for days. He knew it would only cause more problems with Terry, but they seemed to have a lot of problems lately that didn't include Jakob.*

*Zac pulled out of the driveway and headed towards the park. It would be so easy to drive them over to Jakob's place, but if Terry's mood deteriorated, Jakob's apartment would be the first place he'd go looking.*

*"It's still a little cold outside, but I like to sit and look out over the lake," Zac explained his choice. "Maybe we'll get lucky and there'll be some wood in the firepit. Either way, I've got a heavy blanket in the back."*

*"You must come out here a lot."*

*More and more. "It's where I do most of my thinking. Terry doesn't know about it, so I'd appreciate it if you kept it to yourself."*

*"Sure," Jakob agreed.*

*Zac grabbed the blanket out of the back and led the way down the meandering sidewalk towards the lake. "The lake's not safe enough for ice skating anymore, so we'll probably be the only ones foolish enough to sit out in the cold."*

*Jakob's hand landed on the small of Zac's back. Zac's first instinct was to look around to make sure no one was watching. Despite the cool temperature, just one touch from Jakob had the ability to warm Zac from the inside out.*

*His mood picked up when he spotted a few logs still in the firepit. "Here, hold this." Zac handed the blanket to Jakob. "I've got a few starter sticks in the back of the car."*

*He jogged back to his car and retrieved the sticks and a lighter before rejoining Jakob. He placed the sticks under the slightly damp logs and lit them before taking a seat on the bench next to Jakob. "That should do it."*

*Already wrapped in the blanket, Jakob stretched out his arm and welcomed Zac under its warmth. Zac cuddled against Jakob's side. His hand automatically found its way under Jakob's T-shirt. He loved the feel of Jakob's muscular chest under the soft patch of short hair. "Do you ever wish it was just the two of us?"*

*"Every hour of every day since the first night I made love to you," Jakob replied.*

*He was torn between enjoying the unexpected moment with Jakob and worrying that others might see them. With the sun quickly setting, he decided to enjoy the time they had together.*

*Tucked under Jakob's arm, Zac pushed up Jakob's shirt and began to lick and kiss one of the pebbled nipples. His phone went off, making him cringe.*

*"Are you going to answer that?" Jakob kissed the top of Zac's head.*

*"No." It would make things worse, he knew it, but he couldn't bring himself to talk to Terry at the moment. "There are days like today when I question my love for him," Zac admitted.*

*"If you're not happy, leave him."*

*"It's not that simple." Zac tilted his chin up. "Just kiss me."*

*One touch of Jakob's tongue and Zac's libido kicked into overdrive. He groaned and repositioned to straddle Jakob's lap. The heavy package trapped behind Jakob's fly proved Zac wasn't the only one affected.*

*It was like that every time they were together, whether at work or home. How many times had they snuck off to shower together while the rest of the guys watched television? No matter how many times Zac felt Jakob's cock fill him, he wanted more.*

*He climbed off Jakob's lap. After another quick look around the area, he unzipped his pants and let them fall to the ground, toeing off his shoes in the process.*

*"Are you sure you want to do this here?" Jakob asked, opening his jeans and pushing them to mid-thigh.*

*Zac bent over and retrieved his wallet from his pants pocket and held up a condom and the small packet of lube. Zac had gotten used to being prepared for impromptu romps with Jakob. "It's worth a ticket to me if we get caught."*

*He started to drop to his knees between Jakob's legs but thought better of it. "I think my ass cheeks are frozen already."*

*"Well then climb back on and let me warm them for you." Jakob held out the blanket in invitation.*

*Zac resumed his position on Jakob's lap and was quickly covered. He wasn't sure if it was the blanket or Jakob's arms, but he felt like he was wrapped in a cocoon of safety. The hands cupping his*

ass were familiar and gentle. Unlike Terry, Jakob seemed to take pleasure in pleasing Zac. Even when all they had time for was a simple kiss, Jakob put his whole heart into it.

He lifted the lube packet to his mouth and tore the end off before squirting half the contents onto his fingers. Gazing into his lover's eyes, Zac reached back and applied the slick to his begging hole. Before he could take his hand away, Jakob took over, brushing fingers with Zac.

"You're not sore, are you?" Jakob asked.

Zac shook his head. It was a question Jakob asked each and every time. Some men might be insulted, but Jakob's apparent care warmed Zac. The invasion of two fingers instead of one surprised him. He ground his cock against Jakob's stomach. "You make me feel so good."

"Oh, Zac, you have no idea what you do to me." Jakob brushed his fingers across Zac's prostate. "Someday, I hope we don't have to sneak around to be alone."

Zac nodded and tore open the condom package. Blindly fitting the thin barrier over Jakob's thick cock, he braced his knees on the bench and rose enough for Jakob to press the bulbous head against his opening. Although they enjoyed fucking, the two of them did most of their sneaking to talk. Terry didn't mind Jakob fucking Zac, but he growled every time the two of them just wanted to hang out.

Swivelling his hips, Zac eased his way down the length of Jakob's length. "Oh, Christ!"

"We fit so well. Can you feel it?" Jakob asked once Zac was fully impaled.

He did, but Zac knew it was about more than the way their bodies fit together. Their relationship had gone far beyond the sexual aspect. They were friends, close friends. It was a new kind of bond for Zac. Although Sammy was, and would always be, his best friend, the two of them had never engaged in a sexual relationship, so fucking a friend was all new to Zac.

"When I'm at work, and I know you're home fucking Terry, it kills me," Jakob admitted.

Zac began to move, fucking himself on the long cock. "Terry and I rarely have sex anymore. He begs me to try, and I do, but even blowjobs can't get him hard most of the time."

"I've seen him hard while watching us."

"Yeah. I think he digs watching more than actually doing." Zac shrugged. He still didn't understand it. Maybe he wasn't as good as he thought he was?

Zac clasped his hands behind Jakob's neck and planted his feet on the bench. "Fuck me like you mean it," he whispered in Jakob's ear.

"I mean it. Every time I'm inside of you I mean it." Jakob pulled Zac's head in for a deep kiss. "I need you to know that."

"I do." Zac accepted Jakob's tongue with enthusiasm. He reached between them and wrapped his hand around his throbbing cock. "I'm close," he gasped, breaking the kiss. He pressed his thumb

*against the sensitive spot just under the head of his cock and erupted, his body shivering with the intensity.*

*"Uhh huhh," Jakob grunted. He pulled Zac down, burying himself to the hilt and cried Zac's name as he came.*

*Zac collapsed against Jakob's chest, trying like hell to catch his breath. With his eyes closed, he placed small kisses against his lover's neck. "Thank you."*

*"Hey," Jakob said, leaning back to gaze into Zac's eyes. "I'm falling in love with you."*

*Zac almost returned the sentiment, but swallowed the words before they were spoken. "And Terry?"*

*Jakob shook his head. "He's an asshole who treats you like shit. I'll put up with him if I have to, but I admit I'd rather have you all to myself."*

*Zac suddenly realised what he was doing was the same as cheating. It didn't matter that Terry had been the one to suggest a sexual relationship between him and Jakob. Zac knew Terry wouldn't approve of their feelings for each other.*

*Pulling away, he climbed off Jakob's lap. "I can't do it like this. Either the three of us have to be together, or I have to break it off with one of you."*

*"Pick me," Jakob begged. "We can be happy together."*

*"Fuck! What have you done to yourself?"*

*Zac opened his eyes, surprised to find himself on the floor of the shower with a fully-clothed Sammy at his side. He blinked several times, trying to escape the past.*

*Sammy reached up and turned off the shower. "Leo!"*

*Leo rushed into the bathroom. "Is he okay?"*

*"Yeah," Zac whispered.*

*"No! We've got to get him to a doctor. He's made a mess of his face."*

*Zac slowly became aware of the blood covering the front of Sammy's shirt. "Just let me die this time," he begged.*

*"Shut the fuck up, you bastard. I can't believe you!"*

\* \* \* \*

*Jakob sat on his couch feeling sorry for himself when his phone rang. "Hello?" he answered.*

*"I need you to take the rest of Zac's shift."*

"Why, is he sick?"

There was a long pause before Leo answered. "He had some sort of breakdown. He's reopened one of his wounds with his fingernails."

Jakob jumped to his feet. "Where'd you take him?"

"To the clinic, but I need you here."

"Well I need to be wherever Zac is, so fire me if you have to."

"I don't know what the fuck is going on with the two of you, but the last thing he needs right now is to become even more upset. Butch has been called. Let him and Sammy deal with Zac."

Jakob was out the door before Leo could finish. He stared at his truck, but quickly thought better of it. With half the streets closed for the carnival, he'd be better off on foot. "At least tell me how it happened."

Leo sighed. "We were on a call and someone from out of town made a comment or something about Zac's face. All I know is by the time we got back to the station, he was in a foul mood. He went to take a shower, and I called Sammy. Sammy found him in the shower covered in blood about ten minutes later. That's all I know."

"I promise he won't know I'm there, but I have to at least stop by the clinic." Jakob didn't give Leo a chance to talk him out of it. He hung up the phone and jammed it back in his pocket as he took off towards the clinic at a full run.

By the time he entered the clinic, he was pissed. He found Sammy in the waiting room and fell into the chair beside him, trying like hell to catch his breath. "How is he?"

"Awake. Butch is in with him." Sammy shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Doc Browning was able to stop the bleeding. Turns out he didn't reopen a wound, just gouged the skin around them so there isn't anything they can stitch up."

Jakob could tell there was something Sammy wasn't telling him. "What else?"

"Sam Browning thinks Butch should take him to get treatment in Sheridan."

"What kind of treatment?"

Sammy tapped his finger against his temple.

"Is Butch going to do it?" Jakob's insides twisted.

Sammy shook his head. "I don't think so. We've got that new head-shrinker here in town. Butch called him. He should be here any minute."

Jakob scrubbed his hands over his face. "It's all my fault."

Sammy narrowed his eyes. "How's that?"

Staring at Zac's best friend, Jakob weighed the pros and cons of confessing his part in what happened the night Terry smashed Zac's face against the glass coffee table. "We were sleeping together, me, Zac and Terry."

Sammy gasped, jumped out of his chair and began pacing the waiting room. "Is that why Zac refused to press charges against Terry?"

Jakob nodded. "I think so."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. Zac's barely spoken to me since it happened. I didn't see him that day because I was on duty, but we spent some time together the night before. Terry was drunk and in a belligerent mood, so we left. When we got back to his place that night, I got in my truck and left, not wanting to stir Terry's pot anymore than I already had."

Jakob felt his eyes sting as tears threatened. "Believe me. I would've never left him if I'd thought..."

Sammy held up his hand. "I know."

Butch walked into the waiting room, his face pale. "Dr. Browning's agreed to release him after Dr. Pritchard has a chance to talk to Zac."

Butch reached out and put his hand on Jakob's shoulder. "Are you here to see Zac?"

Jakob shook his head. "He won't talk to me, I already know that. I just needed to make sure he was okay. I have to head to the station to take over his shift."

Butch's massive hand squeezed Jakob's shoulder with a surprisingly gentle grip. "I'll tell him you came by."

Jakob shrugged. "Might be better if you didn't. Just...let me know how he is, will ya?"

"Yeah."

With a half-hearted smile at Butch and Sammy, Jakob turned to leave. He almost ran into the new psychiatrist in town on his way out the door. "Hi, Dr. Pritchard."

"Jakob," Ronan Pritchard greeted with a nod.

The door closed and once again Jakob was thrust into the chaos of Cattle Valley Days. He set out for the fire station, praying it would be a quiet night.

\* \* \* \*

Zac felt good after the shot Sam had given him. He'd been honest when he'd told the doctor he didn't remember hurting himself.

The door opened and Ronan Pritchard stepped into the room. "How're you feeling?"

"Loopy, but not in a crazy way if that's why you're here." Zac had overheard his dad and Sam out in the hall talking about whether or not he should be admitted into a psych ward. He'd have to remember to thank his dad for sticking up for him.

"You mind?" Ronan asked, gesturing to the chair at Zac's bedside.

"No." Play the game, he kept telling himself. *The only way to convince them you aren't crazy is to play their game.*

"Sam tells me you had an episode earlier. Would you like to talk about it?" Ronan asked.

Two choices. Zac knew he was at a crossroads. He could be honest with Ronan or lie through his teeth. The problem was he was never good at the latter, and he knew he wouldn't be released until he said something.

"I'll be straight with you, Doc. I don't remember doing it. I know I was upset because I was reminded of what a freak I am while out on a call, but I don't remember scratching myself."

"You did more than scratch yourself, Zac. From what Sam told me, you literally scraped away portions of your skin. Can you tell me what you do remember?"

"I was taking a shower, and I started thinking about how things were before Terry did this to me. I guess I was wishing I could go back and do things differently."

"Like what?"

Zac bit his bottom lip. "You can't tell anyone what I tell you, right?"

Ronan nodded.

"I was involved in a...secret three-way. I knew going in it would get me into trouble, and I was right. But I listened to my heart instead of my head." *And I listened to Jakob when he told me everything would be okay if I broke it off with Terry.* Although Zac felt it, he didn't say it. Jakob's betrayal had cut deeper than the glass that had destroyed his face and he'd never forgive him.

"And this third? Has he been there for you since that night?" Ronan asked.

"I don't want him there for me," Zac said.

"Why?"



If Zac told Ronan he blamed Jakob for everything that had happened, his doctor would probably try to talk him out of his anger, and Zac knew he needed that anger to get over his feelings for Jakob.

"Does it really matter?" Zac asked. "It's over. He needs to move on."

Ronan leant forward in the chair and threaded his fingers together. "What happened today happened for a reason. We need to figure out what that is and deal with it and the only way is for you to be honest with me."

"Not today, Doc. As you can see, the wounds are still pretty fresh."

"Will you agree to meet with me several times a week?"

Zac shrugged. "If it'll keep me out of the crazy house, I will. But I have to work, so we'll need to schedule things around that."

With a nod, Ronan stood and held out his hand. "We'll get you through this if you can learn to trust me."

*Easier said than done.* "Sure."

\* \* \* \*

Jakob was polishing the chrome on the ambulance the following day when he heard someone coming into the bay. He figured it was Sammy, who was due to come on shift, coming to ask him more about his relationship with Zac and Terry, so he didn't turn around.

"How's it going, Jakob?"

Jakob froze as the familiar voice registered. He dropped the cloth in his hand and spun around to face Terry. Fists clenched, Jakob started towards the man with murder on his mind.

"You picked the wrong day, Terry." Before Terry could brace himself, Jakob tackled him to the hard cement floor. As the air whooshed from Terry's lungs, Jakob landed his first punch to the man's jaw.

"Wait!" Terry yelled as Jakob drew back and hit him again. "I just want to talk. To explain what really happened."

*Explain?* How could shoving Zac's face against a glass coffee table be explained? "You fucker!" Jakob landed another punch, hearing a satisfying crunch as his fist connected with Terry's nose.

Arms wrapped around his waist and pulled him off of Terry. It took a second to realise he was surrounded by his co-workers.

"Stop it!" Leo shouted.

Jakob shrugged his boss off and turned to face Terry once again. With blood streaming from his nose, Terry's face had seen better days. "If I ever see you in town again, nothing and no one will stop me from killing you."

"That's enough," Leo growled in Jakob's ear. "Get him cleaned up and get him out of here," Leo ordered.

Sammy crossed his arms over his chest. "You can do it if you want, but I'm not about to lift a finger to help him."

"It's your job," Leo reminded Sammy.

Sammy turned and walked back into the common room.

"Fuck!" Leo spat.

"I'll take care of it," Collin said.

Leo nodded. He stared at Jakob and pointed towards the living quarters. "In my office. Now."

As Jakob walked to the office to get the ass reaming he knew was coming, he clenched and unclenched his hand to make sure nothing was broken. Smashing Terry's face had been worth the repercussions he knew he'd be subjected to.

"Take a seat. I'll be back in a minute," Leo said.

Jakob did as ordered. Within moments, he heard Sammy and Leo arguing from the kitchen. He hated causing problems between the two men, but he had no control over Sammy, so he refused to take responsibility for his actions.

A slamming door caught his attention moments before a red-faced Leo strode into the office. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"I wasn't. Terry came in. I saw him. I reacted. Period." It only took a split second for Jakob to make up his mind. "And I'll do it again if I ever see him."

Leo sighed and ran his fingers through his thick head of salt and pepper hair. "I understand emotions are running pretty damn high right now, but this isn't the place."

Jakob shrugged. "I didn't invite him here. Besides, you would've done the same thing and we both know it."

Leo opened his mouth to respond but snapped it shut. After several seconds, he finally spoke. "This has nothing to do with my personal opinion of the situation. Yes, I probably would have reacted much the same, but that's beside the issue at hand. You've left me no choice but to send you home for the rest of the day."

"But...", Jakob started to object.

Leo held up his hand. "If Terry goes to the police, I need to show the department dealt responsibly with the situation."

"You can't expect Collin to carry the load by himself."

"I don't. I'll call Adam Sackston and see if he can fill in."

At least Jakob knew Adam could handle the job. Although Adam was a registered nurse, he'd helped the fire department on several occasions when they were short-handed.

"Can I come back tomorrow for my normal shift?" Jakob asked.

"I'll talk to George and give you a call."

Jakob stood. "Although I'm not the least bit sorry for what I did, I am sorry I've put you in this position. I hope you get things smoothed over with Sammy."

The corner of Leo's mouth lifted in a half-smile. "We'll be fine. Sammy's passionate about the people he loves. Seems you've moved up on his list."

\* \* \* \*

After gathering his clothes, Jakob headed towards his truck. He was surprised to find Sammy sitting on the tailgate, his head down. "Hey," Jakob greeted.

Sammy glanced up. "Hey. I just wanted you to know Zac's agreed to see Dr. Pritchard."

Jakob nodded and sat beside Sammy. He decided to make a confession to Zac's best friend. "I love him."

"Yeah. I figured that part out."

"I think if he were bigger, he'd try to do to me what I did to Terry earlier." It was a hard pill to swallow, but Jakob knew it was true. Not only did he blame himself for what Terry had done, but it had become painfully obvious Zac did too.

Sammy's head tilted to the side, catching Jakob's gaze. "Did Terry..." Sammy shook his head. "Was that night the first time Terry hurt Zac?"

"I don't know. Zac doesn't strike me as the type who'd suffer in silence though."

"The neighbour who called in the report that night said she'd heard Terry and Zac fighting for several days before it happened. Did you know about that?"

Jakob broke eye contact and looked toward the pavement, shaking his head. He felt like he'd been punched in the stomach. On one of those nights, it hadn't been Zac that Terry had argued with, it was him. Zac had been on shift.

"I was with Zac the evening he got off work, the day before he was hurt. We went to the park, talked and went back to his place. I got in my truck and drove off. I don't know what happened the next day. I was here. When I saw Collin come in to work Zac's shift, I called the house, but no one answered."

"So why won't Zac talk to you now?" Sammy asked.

"Dammit, I already told you it was my fault. If I hadn't..." Jakob jumped to the ground. "Look, I'm not supposed to even be here. I need to go before George comes in."

Sammy climbed off the tailgate and stood toe to toe with Jakob, waving his finger. "Zac may blame you, and you may blame yourself, but I don't. I still don't know what went on that night, but I know you weren't there. You aren't responsible for anyone's actions but your own."

Sammy turned and slammed the tailgate back into place. "Use the day to get your head on straight. Zac's a stubborn son-of-a-bitch, but he'll eventually listen if you're persistent enough."

After Sammy walked off, Jakob got into his truck and rolled down the windows. He thought about what Sammy said. "Well, no time like the present," he mumbled as he pulled out of the parking lot and headed towards Zac's house.

## Chapter Three

Still wearing the same pair of pyjama bottoms he'd put on the previous afternoon, Zac mindlessly flipped through channels on the TV. He didn't bother staying on one channel long enough to even register what was on. It was the only way he could keep his dad out of his room. It seemed the minute the television clicked off, Butch was right there, making sure Zac was okay.

Tired, Zac turned off the television and used the remote control to turn on the CD player instead. Zac dropped the remote beside him and rolled to his left side while George Benson belted out *A Rainy Night in Georgia*. There was something about the smooth sound of the singer that always put Zac in a romantic mood. How many times had he played the CD while making love?

He closed his eyes and let his hand wander down to slip under his pyjama bottoms. Zac moaned at the first touch. He wrapped his hand around his filling cock and started a slow stroke.

A knock at his bedroom door startled him. Feeling like a teenager getting caught, Zac released his cock and flipped the sheet over his hip. "Yeah, Dad?"

When the door opened, it wasn't Butch's big body he saw filling the space, it was Jakob's. "What're you doing here?"

Jakob stepped into the room and shut the door. "I was hoping you'd talk to me."

Zac grabbed the stereo remote. Instead of turning it down, he increased the volume. The last thing he wanted was for his dad to hear what was sure to be an argument. "Why? I'm broken, and nothing you can say will ever fix that."

Jakob started towards the bed, but Zac held up his hand. "Don't."

With a sigh, Jakob stopped. "I'm sorry." He shook his head. "I didn't know Terry would go after you. Please, don't cut me out of your life."

Zac snorted. "Yeah, well that's what happens when you play both sides."

Jakob's head snapped back. "What the hell does that mean?"

"You know what it means. Now get out!" Was it possible to still love someone you couldn't stand the sight of?

"No. I'm not leaving until you tell me what the hell you're talking about! I never played both sides. It was always you. Only you."

"Then why'd you use the same lines on me that you tried to use on Terry, Huh? He told me that the two of you had been sneaking around behind my back. Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"He's a fucking liar!"

Zac rolled his eyes. "He said you'd deny it. Just get out and leave me alone."

Jakob narrowed his eyes and put his hands on his hips. "And you believed him?" Jakob shook his head and headed to the door. He glanced back at Zac one last time before leaving the room.

Zac squeezed his eyes shut and curled into himself. He doubted he'd ever forget the expression on Jakob's face before he'd turned and walked away. Could a man fake the genuine emotion Zac saw in Jakob's eyes?

A simple yawn had Zac almost crying out in pain as the freshly scabbed skin on his face pulled. He rolled to his back, turned the music down and reached for the bottle of pain medicine on the opposite bedside table. *Two pills?* He stared at the pills in his palm, wondering if he should just take the whole bottle. If he succeeded he wouldn't have to deal with all the shit that continued to plague him, but if he didn't, he'd for sure end up in the crazy house.

Zac wasn't sure how long he stared at the bottle. He eventually put one of the pills back and popped the other one into his mouth. Even contemplating suicide was enough to have him committed. Maybe Browning was right. Maybe he did need some serious help.

The idea of death had never bothered him. How often had he just wanted it over? His life was a series of nothing special. Get up, get through the day and repeat the process until he felt numb again. That was it, his life in a nutshell.

How many times had he wondered why he was allowed to take up space when good men, truly great men, who were actually doing something with their lives were cut down, removed from the planet?

A loud noise from somewhere in the house reminded him why he'd never taken that final step. It wasn't his life he was afraid of ending, it was the knowledge of what it would do to the people left behind.

He heard his dad cussing up a storm through the thin walls, no doubt a result of the loud noise he'd just heard. Although he should probably go and investigate, Zac couldn't bring himself to care enough to get up.

Once the pain medicine started to kick in, Zac welcomed the sense of oblivion with open arms. As his eyelids started to droop, his thoughts returned to Jakob. He'd thought he'd found something really special for the first time in his life, but like everything else it hadn't worked out that way.

"Oh, Jakob," he whispered just before drifting off to sleep.

*Zac strode through the living room, only giving Terry a quick glance, on his way to the kitchen. He pulled the coffee out of the refrigerator and set it on the counter before grabbing the carafe. By the time he'd returned home the previous evening, Terry had been passed out in the chair.*

*Although he'd wanted to get the discussion over with, it was probably better he'd had a full night's sleep to cement his decision. He'd even gone as far as calling Collin before he'd gone to bed to see if his friend could cover his shift. Zac had a feeling he was in for one hell of a long day.*

*As he turned the automatic coffee maker on, Zac wondered how Terry would take the news. The man obviously hadn't been happy lately, why else would he start drinking so much. Maybe a clean break would be good for both of them.*

*With the coffee brewing, Zac walked back into the living room. He stared at Terry. The man, he'd once convinced himself he was in love with, sat sprawled in the recliner, snoring. Was it ever real between us? he wanted to ask. Terry had never been the love of his life, Zac had always known that. But at least for a while, Zac had felt something more than nothing.*

*Before he could gather the nerve to wake Terry, the coffeepot began to beep. Later. He could deal with the situation after he'd had his morning coffee on the deck.*

Zac rolled over in his sleep, momentarily waking himself when his sore cheek landed on the pillow. With a grunt, he rolled to his back and sank back into the depths of his dreams.

"What're you saying?" Terry asked.

"That I'm sorry but this isn't going to work. I think it would be best if you moved out." Zac was proud of himself for not tearing up. Emotional scenes had never been his thing, often drawing out his inner wimp.

"Why? Is this because of Jakob? Forget him. We don't need him."

"You're wrong. I need him. He makes me feel good about myself."

Terry let out a loud snort. "Are you saying I don't?"

*Zac carried his dinner plate to the sink. "Jakob's in love with me. He'd never think of inviting someone else into our bed to fuck me."*

*"Funny, he said almost the exact same thing to me two days ago."*

*Zac was shocked. "Jakob told you he loved me?"*

*Terry shook his head. "You're not listening. Your knight in shining armour confessed his love for me, not you. He's playing you, Zac, can't you see that?"*

*The plate he was washing dropped from his hand, breaking as it hit the edge of the sink. He closed his eyes and tried to swallow around the lump in his throat. "You're lying."*

*Terry laughed, the sound of his chair scraping against the oak floor made Zac jump. "Somewhere along the way you decided the grass was greener on Jakob's side of the fence. Well, think again. If it's greener it simply means he uses more fertilizer than I do. That should tell you something right there."*

*Zac shook his head. He didn't want to believe Terry. A man faced with expulsion would say anything to save face. Right? He heard Terry leave the room, but Zac couldn't move. He was suddenly so tired. Tired of searching, praying for something that would make his life matter.*

*"You know we fuck every time you leave the house, right?" Terry yelled from the living room. "He can't get enough of me. And you know why? Because I'm a man who knows how to please him!"*

*Zac leant over and threw-up in the sink. Dropping to the floor, he felt like a fighter who'd been knocked to the canvas. Only instead of a referee stepping in, his opponent was allowed to keep on hitting him, and with each blow, Zac prayed for an ending to it all.*

*The sound of breaking glass and Terry's laughter eventually drew Zac to the living room. His brand new coffee table lay in a pile of sharp, jagged pieces as Terry laughter continued to echo throughout the room. The baseball bat in Terry's hand was proof that it hadn't been an accident.*

*"Did you really mean those things you said?" Zac had to ask.*

*"Of course. Why would I lie to you? I love you. I know I'm the best you're ever gonna get. I'm just trying to keep you from making the biggest mistake of your life."*

*"I need to call Jakob," Zac said.*

*"He'll just deny it. It's what people like him do." Terry carried the bat back to the closet. "You're nothing special and the sooner you realise that, the sooner we can get back to the way things were."*

*Zac's gaze went back to the pile of glass. Nothing special, yeah that pretty much summed him up.*

*"Hey, Zac, you got a Shop-Vac?" Butch asked, banging on the door.*

*Zac sat straight up in bed, his hand clutching his chest as he tried to calm his breathing.*

*The door opened and his dad stuck his head inside the room. "Did you hear me?"*



Zac nodded. "Garage, behind the card table," he mumbled.

"Thanks. I knocked over that terrarium you had. Sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it." Zac lay back down and his dad shut the door again. He wiped the sweat from his forehead. Never had he dreamt in such detail. What was his subconscious trying to tell him?

\* \* \* \*

Jakob was already on shift several days later when Zac walked into the common room. Although he was still hurt, he couldn't let Zac's return go unnoticed. "Hey."

Zac nodded and lifted his duffle. "I'm gonna put this away. Are you planning to watch Pirate's Cove?"

"Yeah." Jakob's eyes followed Zac until he left the room. *What the hell?* Four days earlier, Zac had ordered Jakob out of his house and now he wanted to watch television together?

Jakob got up and went to the kitchen for a refill of milk and found Sammy making a bag of popcorn. "Zac's here."

Sammy nodded. "Yeah, I talked to him last night."

"He wants to watch Pirate's Cove with me."

Sammy grinned. "Is that your way of telling me to find something else to do?"

Jakob thought about it for several moments. As much as he'd like to be alone with Zac, it might be better if there was a buffer in the room, at least for awhile. "No. You can come in."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. It might do us some good to spend time around each other without arguing."

Sammy pulled the popcorn bag out of the microwave and poured the white fluffy kernels into a bowl. "If you change your mind, just ask me to make you a bag of popcorn. I'll take the hint."

Jakob grinned. It was nice to know Zac's best friend still had hopes they could work things out. "Thanks."

By the time Jakob made it back into the common room, Zac was already in his usual recliner. Despite the blistering temperature outside, Zac had a throw blanket draped over him.

"You okay?" Jakob asked, dropping back into his chair.

"Just cold. Must be the medicines I'm taking."

"Or the fact you're losing weight like crazy," Sammy said. He took his customary spot on the couch and shoved a handful of popcorn into his mouth. "You want some?" Sammy asked with his mouth still full.

"No thanks," Zac answered.

Jakob turned the channel to their favourite soap to keep from agreeing with Sammy. Zac had lost a great deal of weight in the last two months. On more than one occasion Jakob had been tempted to say something, but getting into another fight wouldn't have done either of them any good.

"Did Butch get home okay?" Sammy asked.

"Yeah. He's called about every couple of hours to check on me though. I'm not sure what the point of going back to Texas was if he's just going to nag me long-distance."

The fact that Zac was being left alone was news to Jakob. He jumped out of his chair and went to the office where he knew Leo was working on the schedules. "Did you know Zac's been home by himself?"

Leo glanced up from the computer and nodded. "Yeah. Why?"

"Why? Because Terry's probably still hanging around town. Do you think it's safe for Zac to be alone?"

"Butch had an expensive alarm system installed. The only way Terry'll get in is if Zac lets him in," Leo replied.

"I can't believe you're not worried."

Leo sighed and leant back in his chair. "I didn't say that, but to be honest, it's not Terry I'm worried about."

Jakob sat in the chair beside Leo's desk. "What're you worried about?"

Leo started to say something but stopped himself. He sat for several moments before finally answering. "Let's just say I'll be glad when Zac works things out with Dr. Pritchard."

"Has he met with him yet?"

"Yesterday and the day before. Sammy said Zac seemed in better spirits last night when he talked to him."

"That's good to hear." For purely selfish reasons, Jakob wondered if Zac had talked about him with his new psychiatrist. Maybe it had something to do with Zac watching TV with him?

Jakob stood. "Okay, well I'll let you get back to work."

Before he could make it out of the office, Leo said, "Zac's pretty damn fragile right now. Keep that in mind."

"Yes, sir." Jakob returned to the common room, trying to think of an excuse as to why he'd bolted earlier. "Sorry, I suddenly remembered I forgot to ask for next Friday off."

"What's next Friday?" Sammy asked.

"His birthday," Zac answered.

Jakob smiled. It was amazing how much those two little words meant to him. He'd only mentioned his birth date to Zac in passing. The fact that Zac had remembered meant the world to Jakob.

"Special plans?" Sammy asked.

"Not really. I thought I might go camping. It's something I used to always do with my twin brother before he was killed."

Zac said something that Jakob couldn't hear. Jakob reached for the remote and turned the commercial down. "What?"

"I said I didn't know you had a twin brother."

Jakob shrugged. He didn't like to dwell on Jeff's death, but he knew it was an opening. "Jeff and I were close. He died almost six years ago, car accident."

"I'm sorry," Zac said.

"Yeah, that sucks," Sammy agreed.

"So you're going camping by yourself?" Zac asked.

Jakob gazed at Zac. Was Zac purposely giving him an opening? "Yeah, unless you'd like to go with me?"

Zac seemed at a loss for words. "I'll probably be on shift if you're taking off."

"I'm going to make some more popcorn. Does anyone want some?" Sammy asked, getting to his feet.

Jakob smiled at Sammy. "I'll take some."

Sammy grinned and left the room.

Jakob returned his attention to Zac. "If you're not working will you go?"

The emergency alarm went off, bringing both men to their feet. Jakob hoped he'd get a chance to broach the subject again later.

\* \* \* \*

After transporting a car accident victim to the hospital in Sheridan, Zac sat in the passenger seat of the ambulance, picking at the sole of his shoe. He wished he knew how to break the ice with Jakob. He'd thought watching television would do it, and it had to some extent, but here they were, riding in silence once again.

"Yes," he finally said.

"Excuse me?" Jakob asked without taking his eyes off the road.

"If I don't have to work I'll go camping with you." He watched as Jakob's grip on the steering wheel increased. "I mean, if you still want me to."

Jakob glanced over at him. "Hell yes I want you to. How could you think otherwise?"

Zac shrugged. "I haven't exactly been civil to you lately, and I'm sorry about that."

Jakob reached for his cell phone and pressed a couple of numbers. "Leo? "Mind if Zac and I stop off at Deb's for lunch? Okay. Thanks."

"Lunch? It's almost three," Zac reminded Jakob.

"I know, and neither of us has eaten." Jakob ended the sentence with a playful wink, something that took Zac completely off guard.

They rode to the diner in silence, but it wasn't an uncomfortable one like it had been before. Jakob parked the ambulance in the back lot next door and waited for Zac to join him before walking to Deb's.

"A patty melt sounds good," Jakob said, rubbing his stomach.

The action drew Zac's attention to the washboard abdomen he knew hid under Jakob's shirt. His body started to respond, reminding him how long it had been since he'd gone without Jakob's touch.

"What're you hungry for?" Jakob asked, as they slid into an empty booth.

*You.* Zac reached for one of the menus. "Not sure. Maybe just something small like a salad or something."

Jakob quickly moved his fisted hands under the table out of sight. "The chicken fried steak's the special today. You might consider that. You could always take the leftovers home with you tomorrow."

Zac narrowed his eyes and set down his menu. "You got a problem with me eating a salad?"

Before Jakob could answer, Mary Kelly walked up to the table, order pad in hand. "What can I get ya today?"

"I'll have the patty melt, extra onions, side of onion rings and a large iced tea," Jakob said.

"Just a salad with blue cheese dressing and glass of lemonade for me," Zac told Mary.

After Mary left, Zac noticed a muscle in Jakob's jaw twitch. Of course Zac knew what Jakob's problem was, and it was definitely something he didn't feel like fighting about. "I'll eat a big supper, promise."

"Nutrition is important if you want your body to heal properly," Jakob said, putting his menu back in its holder on the table.

Zac leaned across the table and pointed towards his face. "Carrots and green beans aren't going to make these go away, so get that through your head right now."

"Why're you still treating me like the enemy?" Jakob shook his head. "You're running hot and cold, and I can't seem to catch up." Jakob slid out of the booth. "I'm gonna wash my hands."

Jakob almost ran into Mary as she carried their drinks to the table. "Sorry," Jakob mumbled.

Mary set the glasses down, wide eyed. "Was it something I said?"

Zac tried to give Mary the best smile he could muster. "He's in a mood. Pay no attention to him."

"Your order will be up in a few minutes."

"That's fine." As soon as Mary left the table, Zac turned to stare out the window. What the hell was he doing? In his heart he knew Jakob cared about him. He thought he'd gotten over the weeks of thinking otherwise. He'd spent most of the two sessions he'd had with Dr. Pritchard talking about Jakob.

He'd been right about his dream. He'd accepted Terry's lies at face value because he hadn't believed in himself. The hateful words had merely been confirmation of his fears, and he'd used them to push Jakob away.

As soon as Jakob sat back down, Zac turned away from the window. "Terry lied to me."

"Yes," Jakob said simply.

"I'm sorry. I don't know if you can forgive me. I..."

Jakob leaned over the table and planted a kiss on Zac's mouth. "You don't have to say anything else. Not now anyway."

Mary cleared her throat. "You boys hungry?"

Jakob sat back down with a broad smile on his face. "Starved."

Although Zac still didn't feel hungry, at least he felt better about things with Jakob. After only two meetings with Dr. Pritchard, Zac knew he was a long way from better. The dream had shed light on more than his feelings for Jakob. Hopefully, with Jakob at his side, he could face the demons within him that he'd always carried.

"Would you go on a date with me?" Jakob asked around a bite of food.

Zac smiled. "Yeah. I'm not off again until Sunday morning though." He lifted his fork to his mouth. "Making up time," he added.

"I get off Saturday, so at least we'll be together until then. Maybe we can have a picnic or something Sunday afternoon."

"That sounds nice." They still had a lot to talk about. With any luck, they could find time over the next few days to sort out the majority of their problems so they could just enjoy Sunday together.

"Oh, I'm supposed to meet Dr. Pritchard at eleven on Sunday."

Jakob dipped a fry in a big pile of ketchup. "No problem. I can drop you off and wait outside if that's okay?"

"Yeah. I think I'd like that."

## Chapter Four

With his arm around Zac, Jakob sat on the couch watching a ballgame. George's eyes narrowed when he came into the room and saw the two of them. Jakob knew dating Zac wasn't an issue as long as they controlled themselves, so he wasn't worried.

"So I have another set a love-birds in the station I have to try and schedule around?" George asked.

Jakob shrugged. "You don't have to, but it would be nice occasionally."

George rolled his eyes and gave an exaggerated sigh. "Whatever. Look, our newest hire just pulled in. I want you guys to show him around. He's fresh out of the service and still a little skittish, so be nice."

"Iraq?" Jakob asked.

George shook his head. "Afghanistan."

As soon as the words were spoken, the front door opened and a young, blond man walked into the common room. Actually, the guy looked more like a kid, no more than twenty-two or twenty-three.

"Hi, I'm looking for Fire Chief Manning?"

George stepped forward, his hand out. "I'm Manning, but you can call me George or chief. I answer to either one."

"Aaron Ellis," the young man replied, accepting George's handshake.

"I'd like to introduce you to our other two full-time medics, Jakob Cox and Zac Alben."

When Aaron turned to face Jakob and Zac, he flinched and quickly looked away. The action wasn't lost on Zac, who jumped up and stormed out of the room. Jakob was torn between going after Zac or dealing with the situation head-on. He hated to make an enemy the first day the kid stepped into the station, but there was no way in hell he'd let Aaron get away with what he'd just done.

"You have a problem?" Jakob asked, advancing towards Aaron.

Face pale, Aaron shook his head. "I'm sorry. I-I should go apologise. What's his name again?"

"Zac," Jakob replied. He noticed the shaking hands Aaron stuffed into his front jeans pockets "And, yeah, you owe him an apology. This is his home. We're his family, and no one is going to make him uncomfortable here, understand?"

"Yes, sir, I understand." Aaron glanced towards the bay where Zac had disappeared before addressing George. "Would it be okay if I spoke with him?"

George nodded. "That might be best. Zac was involved in a domestic dispute a couple of months ago. As you can imagine, he's still trying to deal with it."

Aaron quickly headed off, and Jakob turned to George. "If the new kid doesn't work that out with Zac, you may be faced with a choice."

George motioned towards his office and Jakob followed. Once the door was closed, George finally spoke. "Aaron's reaction wasn't what you think."

"Really? Because it looked to me like he was pretty disgusted by Zac's face."

George stretched his arms over his head before clasping his fingers together and resting them behind his head. "I'm taking liberties with Aaron's privacy by telling you this, but the kid has a few emotional scars of his own. He was in the thick of things over in the Middle East. He's been diagnosed with severe PTSD. Matt Jeffries is his sponsor here in Cattle Valley. Matt received a call about Aaron from one of his old military buddies and brought him here. The hope is to give Aaron a chance to heal in a friendly environment. I imagine the reaction you saw has to do with the things he's seen in the past."

Jakob nodded. "I don't want to come off like an asshole. I mean, I feel for the kid, but my main concern is Zac."

"I can understand that. All I'm asking is that you give Aaron a break. It took quite a bit of talking from Matt to get him to apply for the job. It all boils down to the fact that we need him as much as he needs us."

\* \* \* \*

In the back of the ambulance, Zac tried to keep himself busy by tidying the supplies. They were already neat-as-a-pin, Jakob always made sure of that, but it was something to do. The moment he'd seen the shock on Aaron's face, he'd felt himself losing his grip on the present. It was something he'd talked with Dr. Pritchard about, but still didn't have a handle on.



He was scarred. It was a simple fact of life for him now, and he needed to get used to it. Even people he knew and loved stared at his scars when they thought he wasn't looking. Dr. Pritchard had explained that it was natural. Humans are a curious species. It didn't mean they were disgusted, just curious.

Zac would have liked to believe Aaron had simply been curious, but the younger man's expression said otherwise. He heard a light tap on the door and turned to see Aaron standing in the opening with his head bowed.

"Yes?" Zac acknowledged him.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings." Aaron reached up and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. "I saw a lot in the war. Sometimes I have trouble reminding myself I'm not over there anymore."

Zac decided to throw the kid a bone. "I've never served in the military."

"I'd say you're lucky, but I have a feeling you'd argue with me on that."

"Maybe." Zac chuckled. "Climb on up, and I'll show you Jakob's new organised supply system."

"I'd appreciate that. I'm not officially on shift until Saturday, but it never hurts to get a head start."

Zac noticed a trace of a southern accent in the kid's voice. "Where're you from?"

"Virginia originally, but I moved to Ohio at sixteen. I stayed with my grandma until I was old enough to join the service. And you?"

"San Antonio, born and raised."

"How long've you lived in Cattle Valley?"

Even though Aaron was starting to grow on him, Zac made sure to keep the damaged half of his face turned towards the front of the ambulance. "Oh, geez, going on eleven years, I guess."

"Wow, sir, you must know everyone in town."

Zac nodded. "Almost. We're gettin' new folks all the time though, so there always seems to be someone strolling around town I haven't met."

"Besides Matt, Sam and Isaac's, this is the first place I've been. I just got in last night."

"You know the Docs?"

"Yes, sir. I'm renting an apartment over their garage. They've been very nice."

"They're nice people alright. And you know you don't have to call me sir, right?"

Aaron chuckled. "Old habit."

Zac reached out and squeezed Aaron's shoulder. "Sorry if I made you feel bad. I'm still kinda screwed up when it comes to my new face."

"It's really not that bad. If you don't mind me saying, sir, I've seen a lot worse." Aaron picked up a box of sterile gauze pads. "Man, I used to go through these by the cases."

If Aaron had seen a lot worse than Zac's face, Zac was glad he'd not served as a medic in the military. "Most of the calls we get in Cattle Valley are pretty routine, heart attacks, heat stroke this time of year, the occasional car wreck."

"Good. I've seen enough of the other to last a lifetime. I'm ready to just settle down, have a regular job and work through my problems."

Zac nodded. Maybe he had more in common with the new kid than he realised. "If you're interested, we've got a great psychiatrist in town now, Ronan Pritchard."

"I know. I've already spoken to him on the phone, something Matt set up for me."

"Knock knock," Jakob said. "I've put the lunchmeat out, anyone hungry?"

Zac glanced at Aaron. "You hungry?"

Aaron shook his head. "You go ahead. I'll probably go back to my apartment."

Zac eyed the thin man sitting beside him. At only around five-foot-six and probably one hundred and twenty pounds soaking wet, it was obvious Aaron had the same problem eating that Zac had. "Come on. One sandwich. I'd like a chance to get to know you better before we work together on Saturday."

Aaron looked away before eventually nodding. "Okay."

Aaron climbed out of the ambulance first and headed inside. Zac stepped down and noticed the grin on Jakob's face. "What?"

"You like him."

Zac smiled. "Yeah. He's as fucked up as I am, what's not to like?"

\* \* \* \*

Zac climbed up into the passenger seat of Jakob's big truck and buckled himself in. He always felt raw after one of his sessions with Dr. Pritchard, something he'd warned Jakob about ahead of time.

Without a word, Jakob backed out of Dr. Pritchard's driveway and headed out of town. He rested his hand between the seats, but didn't push Zac to take it. They were several miles outside of Cattle Valley before Zac reached over and threaded his fingers through Jakob's.

"I'll try not to spoil our trip, but I have some things to think about," Zac said.

"Okay. You just let me know when you need to be alone, and I'll respect that."

Zac lifted Jakob's hand to his mouth and kissed it. He couldn't believe how understanding Jakob was about the whole thing. He had a momentary worry that it was all an act and the real Jakob would emerge at any time, but he quickly pushed that thought away.

Dr. Pritchard had urged him to trust people until they proved undeserving. Zac didn't have a problem trusting friends. It was lovers he'd always had issues with. "I'm nervous," he admitted.

"Me, too," Jakob confessed. "I keep wondering if I'll be able to please you without another man in the room with us." Jakob bit off a curse. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

Zac turned in his seat to face Jakob. "A third was never my idea. I prefer a one-on-one situation."

"So why'd you do it?" Jakob asked, glancing at Zac.

*Because who am I to argue?* "I'm not very good at asserting myself."

Jakob chuckled. "You could've fooled me. You really laid into me a couple of times."

"Yeah, I did, didn't I? Sorry about that. I now know you didn't deserve it." It was a wonder Jakob still spoke to him after the way Zac had treated him. It was yet another reason to try and hold on while he learned to trust.

Jakob made a right on a gravel road and started up the mountain. "It's up to you where we camp. The lower campgrounds have the amenities, but the higher up we go, the cooler it'll be."

"Who needs amenities? All I need is you, a campfire, the stars and a box of condoms."

"Oh, you're so romantic," Jakob teased.

"I try."

\* \* \* \*

In the end, Zac suggested they hike away from the road and set up camp. It had taken an hour of hiking, but they eventually found the perfect spot. To Jakob, the trip was about more than his birthday. It was a chance for him to reconnect with the man he'd fallen in love with. He still owed his brother a toast of beer, but the rest of the trip he'd devote to Zac.

After getting the tent set up, Jakob went searching for wood as Zac gathered rocks to ring the fire. He happened across a small stream with crystal clear water. Although shallow, Jakob figured the water would reach his waist if he were seated. It was definitely something to keep in mind after they got the camp set up.

He hadn't been kidding when he told Zac he was nervous. Sex before Zac's injuries had been...different. Good, yes, great, in fact, but Jakob had never gotten used to Terry being in the bed watching and instructing.

It wasn't that he was a prude. Hell, he enjoyed a touch of exhibitionism. Making out and fondling Zac in front of an asshole like Terry had really turned him on, but after their first night together, the sex had no longer been fucking to Jakob.

He'd always been a sap when it came to making love to the man he was with, but even those feelings had increased after the first time he'd buried himself inside of Zac. Jakob's cock began to fill at the thought of once again holding a naked Zac in his arms. Unfortunately, with his arms full of wood, he could do little about the wood in his shorts except head back to camp.

The closer he got to Zac, the more nervous he became. Would it be awkward between them or would they fall back into the easy relationship they'd had before?

By the time he broke through the tree line, Zac had the fire circle finished and was breaking up small branches to use for kindling.

"Wow, what a haul," Zac said when Jakob dropped the small logs next to the fire.

"We'll need more, but right now there's something else I need to do." He hauled Zac against his chest and kissed him. They'd kissed quite a bit over the last few days, but this wasn't that kind of kiss. With each swipe of his tongue, Jakob wanted Zac to know how much he wanted to make love to him.

It didn't take long for Zac to reciprocate, proving to Jakob that his fears were unfounded. Zac's hand went to the front of Jakob's cargo shorts as they continued to ravage each other's mouths.

When his back started to hurt from stooping over, Jakob pulled out of the kiss. "Hold that thought."

He strode to the tent and retrieved one of the sleeping bags and the small sack of supplies he'd picked up while Zac was in session with Ronan. He found a nice spot under a tree and spread out the sleeping bag while Zac began to undress.

Within moments Jakob was naked, hard and wanting. He stood in the centre of the makeshift bed and stared at the nude man in front of him. Although Zac was as hard as Jakob, he continued to stare at the ground. "Zac?"

"Yeah?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to give you a chance to see me the way I used to look."

*Fuck.* Jakob walked over and took Zac's hand. He didn't say a word as he led him back to the sleeping bag. "Lie down, sweetheart."

Zac did as instructed but quickly turned his head to the side so his right cheek was resting on the flannelled material. Jakob knew Zac's wounds were still tender which touched him even more. He lay down beside Zac and insinuated his thigh between Zac's legs.

"I love you. I've told you that, right?" Jakob asked.

"Yes."

"Do you think if your scars disgusted me I'd still be here with you now?" He wished he was better with words. They'd just never come easy to him.

"Guess not."

Jakob rolled them until he was on top of Zac, able to see his lover's entire face. He leaned down and placed a gentle kiss on Zac's mouth. "I hate that you believe the scars matter to me. Don't get me wrong. I wish you didn't have them, but more for your sake than mine."

When Zac didn't say anything, Jakob tried again.

"Dammit. You could've died. I've thanked God every single day since it happened that he spared you, because I need you. Me. And I don't give a fuck about a couple of scars. Not when I can lay here and wrap my arms around you."

Tears filled Zac's eyes. "You're too good for me," he whispered. "And I'm not saying that to get another compliment. I really mean it. You only know the parts of me I've let people see. I try to keep the ugliest parts of myself buried deep inside."

The severity of the discussion cooled Jakob's ardour. Zac was finally opening up to him, and there was no way Jakob would miss a second of it. "So tell me some of your secrets?"

"I drove my mom away," Zac said.

Jakob knew Zac's mom had run off when Zac was only around ten. "All kids think that when something happens between their parents."

"No. I mean it. She told me so."

Horrified, Jakob shook his head. "When?"

Zac's brows drew together. "What do you mean when? She told me before she left. Said I was a disgusting little faggot, and the Lord would send me to hell, so why should she invest her time in me."

Jakob climbed off Zac and sat up. "Wait a minute. I thought you were ten when she left?"

"I was."

"She accused you of being gay when you were ten?" Jakob couldn't imagine. Hell, he'd still been playing with trucks at that age, not with other boys, at least not in a sexual way.

Zac nodded. "I guess I didn't know I was supposed to hide it. I used to talk about the cute boys at school when I was with my dad. I figured if Dad didn't have a problem, my mom wouldn't either, but I was wrong. She also caught me wearing her shoes one day. *That* was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. I wasn't planning to go anywhere in them. I just wanted to see what they felt like. I was curious, but she didn't see it that way."

Jakob didn't have the best relationship with his own folks, but that was more because of his twin's death than his sexuality. Instead of telling Zac exactly what he thought of his mother, Jakob decided to focus on the positives.

"You were damn lucky you had such an understanding dad. Just think of all the adults who still haven't worked up the courage to be honest with themselves or their families. The fact that you were allowed to be yourself at such a young age is huge, and a testament to your dad."

"I know. I definitely couldn't have asked for a better dad."

"So you've had what, twenty-two years or so to think about it? Can't you see it was a problem with her, not you?"

Instead of answering, Zac sat up and crawled into Jakob's lap. "Now that I've told you that, can we fuck?"

Jakob wanted more answers, but it was clear the subject was closed for the time being. He wrapped his arms around Zac, deciding to live in the moment until his lover felt comfortable enough to open up again. He ran his hands down Zac's back to cup his ass. "Have I ever told you how much I love this ass?"

"I can't recall. Why don't you tell me again?"

Jakob's middle finger slid down Zac's crack and across his hole, stopping for an extra rub of the puckered skin. "I'd rather show you."

Zac bit his bottom lip before finally bursting out in laughter. "God you can be a cheese ball sometimes."

Waiting for Zac to stop laughing, Jakob busied himself pulling the supplies out of the bag. He hadn't tried to make a joke or be a cheese ball as Zac had accused. He'd simply wanted Zac to know how much he wanted him. *Stop it*, he admonished himself. Zac was finally laughing, even if it was at Jakob's expense.

He waited for Zac to settle down before attempting to once again engage the man in the moment. Slowly, Zac's laughter began to die off. Jakob tried to concentrate on the naked man in his arms. Even though his feelings had been hurt, they were no match for his desire. He resettled Zac on his lap and dripped some lube onto his fingers.

Zac rested his forehead on Jakob's shoulder, suddenly quiet as Jakob began to massage his hole. "Sorry about that. I don't get the giggles often, but when I do it tends to last a while."

"You're right. I haven't heard you laugh that much since before..." *Dammit!* Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut?

"I know. But maybe things are starting to change," Zac said.

Jakob breeched Zac's hole with his middle finger, letting the digit slide deep. The need to fuck Zac almost succeeded in overriding his self-control. It would be their first time alone. A quick fuck wasn't what he wanted Zac to remember.

Jakob removed his finger, as he nodded towards the centre of the sleeping bag. "I want to do this right."

Zac lay down and put his right arm over his head to rest against his damaged cheek. Despite Jakob's attempt to make his lover more at ease, it was obvious Zac was still ashamed. Jakob started to protest but decided to give Zac the security blanket he apparently needed. With any luck things would begin to change once Zac became comfortable with Jakob again.

With Zac spread out beside him, Jakob rolled to his side and ran his palm across the smooth, lightly furred chest. He leant down for a kiss while his fingers pinched at both of Zac's nipples.

Although they were in the shade, the heat of the warm July day made Zac's body irresistible. Jakob's hand travelled down to rest in the patch of short hair surrounding Zac's cock. His thumb slid across the crown, catching the pre-cum as it leaked from Zac's cock.

Breaking the kiss, Jakob stared into Zac's eyes. "I need to taste you."

Zac nodded his head enthusiastically and spread his legs to accommodate Jakob's wide shoulders. "I'm yours," he whispered.

As Jakob took the head of Zac's cock into his mouth he prayed Zac's statement was the truth. Nothing in his life had prepared him for the depths of his emotions. Love was certainly one of them, but it went beyond that. A day didn't go by when Jakob wasn't afraid or worried for his lover. The need to see Zac well again surpassed any personal goals Jakob had set up for his own life and future.

Each swirl of Jakob's tongue elicited a moan from Zac. He reached blindly for the lube as he continued to stroke Zac's cock and feast on the slippery pre-cum. With his fingers slick once again, Jakob returned his attention to Zac's hole.

"Yessss!" Zac hissed at the invasion. "More."

Jakob obliged and pressed two fingers into the heated depths of Zac's body. Zac jerked when Jakob rubbed across his prostate. Jakob backed off Zac's cock enough to enjoy what he was sure was about to spill into his mouth. He wasn't disappointed as several seconds later, Zac climaxed, bathing Jakob's tongue and throat in thick cum.

Swallowing as fast as he could, Jakob managed to enjoy every drop. He introduced a third finger into Zac's hole as he released the cock in his mouth and nuzzled the large set of balls.

Zac wound his fingers into Jakob's hair and tilted his head up, away from his sac. "Fuck me."

Although the words weren't quite what Jakob wanted to hear, the emotion in Zac's gaze seemed real. *Show him the difference between fucking and making love*, Jakob told himself. Jakob was the first to admit there were definitely times when fucking the man you loved was damn hot, but he needed their first real time together to be about more than the act itself.



Sitting back on his heels, Jakob reached for the large box of condoms. When Zac started to reach for the package, Jakob shook his head. "Not this time. I won't last if you touch me."

Zac smiled and nodded. "Okay."

Jakob tried to concentrate on Zac's dark brown eyes as he rolled the condom down his length. Zac started to roll over, but Jakob once again shook his head. It may be old-fashioned, but he'd always equated the missionary position with making love. "Stay there."

Cock in hand, Jakob guided his crown to Zac's hole. He held his breath as he slowly eased past the outer ring of muscles, giving Zac's body time to accommodate to the invasion. Once he was securely inside, Jakob covered Zac's body with his own and began a slow rhythm in and out.

Jakob brushed his lips lightly across the scarred portion of Zac's face, making sure not to apply pressure to the tender wounds. When Zac didn't pull away, Jakob knew he'd hit a major milestone in gaining the man's trust.

Zac's short fingernails scraped their way across and down Jakob's back as he rose up to meet each thrust of Jakob's hips. "Love your cock."

Jakob moved his mouth to Zac's and whispered, "I'm glad you do because you're everything I've ever wanted. I can't imagine my life without you."

Under him, Zac went completely still as Jakob kissed him. Although Zac opened his mouth to allow entrance, Jakob eventually noticed there was no reciprocation. He pulled back and stared into Zac's eyes. *Blank*. It was as if Zac had shut off all emotion in the span of a minute.

"What's wrong?" Jakob asked, slowing his thrusts.

"I can't breathe." Zac began pushing at Jakob's chest. "I need to get up."

Surprised at the turn of events, Jakob tried to reason with Zac. "Would you rather we did this on our sides?"

"No! I'd rather you get off me and let me up!" Zac snapped.

A mixture of surprise and anger filled Jakob. For several seconds he froze, his cock still buried in Zac, before pulling out and jumping to his feet. Stripping the condom from his cock, Jakob studied Zac. "What the hell did I do now?"

Zac sat up and scrambled to pull his shorts on. "I just need a minute."

Without another word Zac stalked off, disappearing into the dense forest beyond their camp.

Jakob threw up his hands. "What the fuck?"

## Chapter Five

Wearing only a pair of underwear, Zac sat on the cold ground watching the camp fire. Sleep had always been a problem for him. It was either there or not. The previous week it seemed all he did was sleep, but now he couldn't seem to settle long enough to drift off.

A sound in the tent behind him drew his attention. He hoped he hadn't disturbed Jakob when he'd built the fire. He'd tried his best to be quiet, but like everything else he did he'd fucked it up, dropping one of the logs against the rock.

When a soft snore sounded, Zac went back to watching the flames. After his earlier episode, he'd been too embarrassed to speak to Jakob, let alone touch him. The two of them had prepared a quick dinner and Zac had escaped to the tent shortly after. He was still wide awake when he'd heard Jakob moving around and then the sound of a can opening.

Zac had noticed the two cans of beer in Jakob's backpack earlier, but hadn't asked. It wasn't until he heard Jakob talking that he understood what they were for.

He'd listened to Jakob toast his twin brother and remembered his lover's birthday. It had only served to remind himself why he wasn't good enough for Jakob.

Zac stopped and shook his head. No. That wasn't fair, not to Terry. Sure Terry had his faults, but the reason the relationship between them hadn't worked was because of Zac, not Terry.

No matter how hard he tried, Zac couldn't find joy in anything. Even having a great guy like Jakob in love with him didn't bring him the feelings that he knew it should. He loved Jakob, or at least he thought he did, so where was the joy he thought he'd feel? What was the point of opening up to a person if it didn't make him feel any different?

Terry knew that about him. His ex-boyfriend had seen the signs and called Zac on them, and Zac couldn't bring himself to care. It had been the beginning of the end for them, just like it was only a matter of time before Jakob figured out there was no pleasing him. It wasn't that Jakob didn't want to be pleased, he simply didn't know how to conjure the emotions that allowed him *to be pleased*.

The zipper lowering on the tent was loud in the quiet of the moment. Zac's spine stiffened as he waited for the inevitable.

Instead of questioning him, Jakob placed a patchwork quilt over Zac's shoulders and retreated back to the tent without a word.

Zac clutched the edges of the blanket as the tears began to fall. Jakob was too good a man. He deserved to know the truth about...everything.

\* \* \* \*

After returning to the tent, Jakob sat up and watched Zac's shadowed silhouette against the firelight through the screened tent flap. The day had been a rollercoaster ride, leaving him to wonder if his love for Zac was deep enough to get them through the highs and lows.

The shaking of Zac's shoulders and the subsequent sniffles alerted Jakob to his lover's tears. Jakob moved to his knees, prepared to charge out and wrap his arms around Zac, but something stopped him. Was it the knowledge that it wouldn't be a welcomed gesture?

Zac had made his feelings pretty damn clear in the last several hours. Whatever he was going through, Zac seemed to prefer to tackle it on his own. Jakob knew he should respect that, but his overwhelming desire to fix things had him riding the fence.

Jakob wasn't a doctor, but the longer he was around Zac, the more he started to agree with Sam Browning. Perhaps Zac would benefit from some intense therapy? Although Jakob felt horrible for Zac, he simply didn't have the experience to know what Zac was really going through.

The memories of Terry's abuse were obviously tearing Zac apart, but what could Jakob do if Zac refused to let him in?

Zac stood and dropped the blanket into the fire. Jakob scrambled out of the tent and raced towards the man he loved. He wrapped his arms around Zac's waist and physically lifted the smaller man off the ground, moving him out of harm's way.

After making sure Zac was safe, Jakob found a branch and made sure the fire was contained within the pit. As he watched the handmade quilt burn, Jakob tried to get his breathing and emotions under control.

Once he'd calmed down, he turned away from the fire. Zac stood emotionless. "Zac?"

With tears still wet on his cheeks, Zac continued to stare at the fire. "I wanted to kill myself," he whispered.

Bile rose in Jakob's throat at the proclamation. Instead of rushing to Zac's side, he went back into the tent and dressed. Making sure his keys were in his pocket, he found Zac a clean set of clothes and took a deep breath.

It was obvious something was seriously wrong, and Jakob knew it was beyond his realm of expertise. He carried Zac's clothes out and zipped the tent up tight. There wasn't time to break camp. He'd come back after taking care of Zac. If the weather or animals destroyed something, so be it.

"Here, sweetheart, let's get you dressed." Jakob lifted Zac's feet, one at a time, and slipped the shorts on, pulling them up to his waist.

"Did you hear what I said?" Zac asked when Jakob pulled a T-shirt over his head.

"I heard you. I'm just glad I was here for you to tell." Jakob's chest felt so tight he could barely breathe as he searched the camp for his big flashlight. It would be tricky getting back to the road in the dark, but with the aid of his compass and the passable trail they'd used to find the site, they should be fine.

Zac allowed Jakob to wrap an arm around him. "Are we going for a walk?"

"Yeah." Jakob didn't say more. Lying to Zac wouldn't get him anywhere, and he was afraid if he told the fragile man the truth, Zac might become combative.

"It's a pretty night out for a walk, don't you think?" Jakob asked twenty minutes later.

"Yes, but I'm starting to get tired."

Jakob stopped and moved to stand in front of Zac. "Would you care for a piggy-back ride?"

"I haven't done that since I was a kid," Zac said. Although Zac was finally talking, his monotone speech told Jakob he was still in the grips of whatever had overcome him at the campsite.

Jakob bent down and Zac climbed on. He passed Zac the flashlight and stood. "Just keep that aimed on the trail."

"Okay."

\* \* \* \*

Finally breaking away from a sobbing Zac, Jakob went out to the waiting room and called Butch.

It took several rings but eventually a raspy voice answered. "Hello?"

"Mr. Alben?"

"Yes?"

Jakob could hear sheets in the background rustle as Butch evidently sat up. "It's Jakob."

"What's happened?"

"I'm not real sure, to be honest, but I think Zac's depression is worse than we thought. I brought him into the clinic here in Cattle Valley. Dr. Browning's called Dr. Pritchard. I think..."

Fuck, how did you tell a man his son needed serious mental help? "Zac told me he wanted to kill himself."

"What? What the hell did you do to him?" Butch asked.

"Please don't," Jakob said. The last thing he needed was to get into a fight with Zac's father. "Just come. Please." As much as it hurt to admit it, Jakob had to add, "I think he needs you."

Wearing his uniform pants and a T-shirt, Sammy burst into the waiting room via the emergency entrance. "Where is he?"

Jakob gestured to the back. "He's in with Dr. Browning."

"What happened?" Sammy asked, leading an exhausted Jakob to a chair.

Jakob told Sammy everything, refusing to leave out the smallest detail in case Sammy had some idea of what had gone wrong. "Have you seen him like that before?"

Sammy nodded. "Not that bad, but yeah. Zac's always been incredibly moody."

Jakob shook his head. "This wasn't about being moody. He scared me, Sammy."

"He'd never hurt anyone," Sammy tried to defend his friend.

"Except himself, obviously."

Sammy bent over and rested his head in his hands, staring at the floor. "When I found him in the shower at the station, he told me to just let him die." Sammy rubbed his eyes. "Do you think he was really trying to kill himself?"

"I don't know, but he was standing too close to that fire tonight when he threw the quilt on it. He could've easily been burned, and I think he knew it."

Dr. Pritchard came running into the hospital and disappeared into the back without a word to Sammy or Jakob. A few moments later, Sam Browning came out and stood in front of them.

"I've sedated him just enough to calm him but not too much that he isn't able to communicate," Sam said.

"What's happening to him?" Jakob asked.

"It's not really for me to diagnose him, it's not my area of expertise, but my guess is Zac's bipolar."

Sammy stood, shaking his head. "I've dealt with bipolar people on calls before. Zac doesn't display the highs that usually go along with that diagnosis."

"The manic, or highs, that you're thinking of, don't always present themselves. It's possible Zac suffers only mild to moderate symptoms of manic. The depressive, or low, state could be an ongoing problem that has been left untreated for years. Zac's been through a lot recently, my guess is he's slipped into a full-blown depressive state."

"Can you help him?" Jakob asked around the lump in his throat.

"Yes. If Dr. Pritchard agrees with the diagnosis, there are medications he can take that'll help, but there's no cure."

"I know." Jakob's gaze travelled towards the swinging doors that led to the man he loved. He knew if he chose to stand firmly beside Zac, dealing with Zac's bipolar condition could turn into an ongoing struggle for both of them.

"When can I see him?" he asked.

"I don't know. Let's wait and see what Ronan has to say," Sam replied.

\* \* \* \*

Jakob followed Dr. Pritchard into his home office.

"Do you know why I asked to speak with you today?" Dr. Pritchard asked, gesturing to a chair.

"I assumed it was to talk about Zac," Jakob answered.

"Yes and no. I can't get into specifics about Zac's ongoing therapy, but I wanted to talk to you about his condition in general." Dr. Pritchard sat in the chair opposite Jakob.

"I did some research after I got home yesterday," Jakob admitted.

"So you realise Zac's job is a problem," Ronan said. It wasn't a question.

Evidently Dr. Pritchard knew if Jakob had done his research, he also knew how important a set sleep pattern was to a person with manic depression. Jakob had considered

the possibility that Zac would have to quit his job but he'd quickly thrown it out as an option.

"He loves his job. Taking it away from him could make things worse," Jakob said.

"Perhaps in the beginning, but once we get him out of this depressive state, he needs to think in terms of the future. The most important thing is teaching him to identify the triggers. His body will let him know he's slipping into depression if he cares and takes the time to listen."

Jakob sighed.

"His experience can be put to good use elsewhere if he's interested," Ronan said.

"Like?"

"The clinic could use another set of hands in the emergency department. Zac's a licensed EMT level four. He has the education and experience to assess patients who come into the emergency room. It would mean working nights, but it would also mean steady hours."

Jakob knew it was an option they needed to consider. "What about his thyroid? Did Dr. Browning test it?"

Ronan nodded. "His levels were slightly elevated, but not enough to give off clear warning signs. Now that we've made our diagnosis, Zac has been put on medicine that will get his levels back into the normal range."

Jakob started to stand. "Okay. You want me to talk to him about the job thing?"

Dr. Pritchard motioned for Jakob to sit back down. "I have something else I need to talk to you about."

"Okay," Jakob settled back in his chair.

"I need you to really give Zac's condition serious thought. Even with the mood stabilizers I've prescribed, it won't be easy. I've already discussed this with Zac and he wants you to know he won't blame you if it's all too much." Ronan cleared his throat and leaned forward in his chair. "Now, putting my psychiatrist hat away, I want to talk to you man to man."

Jakob nodded his consent.

"The two of you aren't yet in a committed relationship so now's the time to walk away if that's what you feel would be best for you. In this case, a selfish decision is needed. Anything else and you'll only grow to resent him."



Jakob shook his head. "I'm sure about my feelings, Doc. I love him. The only thing that worries me is whether or not he feels the same. I want to be the man for him, not just a nice man who's there for him. Does that make sense?"

Ronan smiled and nodded. "Perfect sense. Sounds like the two of you have some talking to do."

"Yeah, so when are they going to let me see him?"

"He'll only be in Sheridan until we can get the depression and suicidal thoughts under control. You can visit, but I would advise against engaging in serious discussions until he's released."

"Has he asked about me?" Jakob asked.

"Several times, but we've explained to him that for the first forty-eight hours only immediate family are allowed to see him."

"So when can I see him?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

Jakob nodded. "I'm supposed to work tomorrow, but maybe I can get someone to swap hours." Jakob started to stand. "Is that all?"

"For now," Ronan said. "You know, if you decide to stick it out with Zac, it wouldn't be a bad idea for you to schedule a monthly decompression appointment."

"I'll keep that in mind."

\* \* \* \*

Zac was staring out the window when his dad walked into the room. "Hey."

Butch took a seat and set his coffee on the table beside him. "Feel like talking yet?"

"Not really." His dad didn't push, never had, so Zac sank back into his thoughts. He'd probably screwed up any chance he had at a real relationship. Jakob had probably called Butch because he wanted to wash his hands of the situation, and Zac couldn't blame him a bit.

"Did Jakob call today?" he asked his dad.

"Every couple of hours. Why?" Butch responded, his nose buried in a sports magazine.

"No reason."

"Bullshit!" Butch spat, throwing his magazine to the floor. "You asked for a reason. Own it."

"I just...I miss him, that's all." Zac leaned his head against the back of the chair. "And I think maybe I screwed things up between us."

"What exactly is between the two of you?" Butch asked.

Zac shrugged. "He says he loves me."

"And you don't believe him?"

"It's not that." How did he explain the situation to his dad? "Yeah, I think *he* thinks he does, but I guess I'm just not convinced he's in love with the real me."

Butch crossed his arms, making him appear even more intimidating. Luckily Zac knew the truth. "The depression? That's not the real you. Think of it as a sickness that's been hiding who you really are. Once we treat the illness, you'll be back to your old self again."

"But that's just it, Dad. I've been this way for years. I didn't suddenly become depressed that night with Terry. The whole reason I made the move to Cattle Valley was because I thought maybe, just maybe, I'd find something that could make me happy, but nothing changed. The emptiness I felt didn't go away."

For the first time in his life, Zac watched as Butch's eyes filled with tears. "Why didn't I know? You're my son, for Christ's sake. How could I have not seen it?"

"Because I didn't want you to see it. Terry knew though. It wasn't something we ever talked about, but he knew." Zac had replayed the final night with Terry over and over again in his mind. The horrible things Terry said to him. All of Zac's fears being thrown in his face, one after another.

Tired of talking, Zac stood and gestured to his bed. "I think I'll lie down for a while."

Butch stooped over and retrieved his magazine from the floor. "In that case, I think I'll go outside and enjoy the sunshine while you sleep."

After his dad left the room, Zac kicked off his slippers, drew the blinds and crawled in bed. His eyes scanned the sterile looking room. *Welcome to Crazy Town.*

\* \* \* \*

Jakob rubbed the sleep from his eyes on his way to the kitchen. Sammy and Leo sat at the table, enjoying their morning coffee. "Morning."

"Morning," Leo greeted. He quickly moved the newspaper on top of a stack of papers.

After rummaging around, Jakob eventually found his cup and poured himself some coffee before joining his friends. "I appreciate you letting the new kid switch shifts with me at the last minute."

"No problem," Leo said.

"Whatcha got there?" Jakob gestured to the Sheridan paper, or more accurately, what was hidden underneath.

Leo and Sammy exchanged glances. "Resumes," Leo finally answered.

Jakob knew it was coming but he hadn't expected it to happen so fast. "Did you fire him already? Because I don't see how he's had time to quit, not with all the other bullshit he's dealing with."

"I talked to Butch last night," Sammy said.

"And?" Jakob prompted when Sammy said nothing else. "Did he tell you Zac planned to resign?"

"Butch thinks it's for the best. When Dr. Pritchard talked to Zac about it, Zac didn't give him an answer either way," Sammy explained. "I know this seems heartless, but we have to do what's best for the station and Zac."

"So you're firing him?"

"No!" Leo jumped in. "We just need to have options in place. No matter who we hire, it'll take some time for them to relocate."

Jakob eyed the stack of resumes Leo pulled out from under the paper. Busting Leo's balls wouldn't help. He'd done a lot of thinking overnight, and he knew taking the job at the clinic was the best option for Zac, still, it should be Zac's decision.

"Do you already have someone in mind?" he asked.

Leo sifted through the papers and pushed one towards Jakob. "Luke Hatcher. I was planning to hire him when Matt called me about Aaron. He grew up here, moved away after graduation. He's staying with Kenny Trenton for a while. Guess they've been best friends since they were in school together. It'd be nice to see one of the locals return. According to George, once kids graduate, they can't get away from this place fast enough. Of course the majority of them aren't gay."

Jakob nodded. If Luke had grown up in Cattle Valley it seemed fair he be given a shot at Zac's job. Jakob's chest tightened at the thought. He stood.

"Excuse me." Leaving his coffee on the table, Jakob fled to the weight room. He climbed onto the treadmill and began a fast walk to warm up. It was during times of turmoil that he missed Jeff the most. His sexuality hadn't mattered to his twin, something he found out while in high school.

Jakob still remembered the night Jeff asked him if he was gay. Jakob had been shocked. He was not only popular, but one of the best athletes in school. Had he inadvertently given himself away to everyone?

Jeff had been quick to set Jakob's mind at ease on that score. He'd told Jakob it was the little things that only someone as close to him as his brother would notice. The most important thing to come out of the conversation was his twin's acceptance.

He'd told Jakob flat out that he loved him regardless and nothing would ever change that. It was a big admission for a teenager, but one Jakob would always remember. To have someone love him no matter what had gone a long way in developing Jakob's sense of self-worth.

Zac was the love of his life, Jakob knew that without reservation. Accepting the mental illness that was part of Zac was a no-brainer, but he still worried about Zac's feelings. There would be rough times ahead. Jakob had no illusions of a carefree happily ever after. Life with Zac would require the right balance of support and challenge. If he noticed warning signs, Jakob needed to know Zac would listen and not become defensive.

Was he asking too much? *No*. Jakob didn't think so.

Jakob worked his way up to a jog and set the machine for twenty minutes. He still had four hours before Aaron came in to relieve him. He only hoped he could get through the day without losing the man he loved. He didn't plan on bringing up the tough subjects on his first visit with Zac, but if his lover brought them up, Jakob wouldn't candy-coat his thoughts or his feelings on the matters-at-hand.

\* \* \* \*

After his nap, Zac decided to join his dad in the private hospital's courtyard. He was flanked by a rather large orderly who explained it was the only way he'd be allowed outside the building.

Although Zac understood, it still made him feel like a prisoner. "Hey, Dad."

Butch waited for Zac to settle on the bench beside him. "Good nap?"

Shrugging, Zac glanced over his shoulder at the guard...orderly. "I guess Brutus back there thinks you might bust me out of this place."

Butch glanced back and chuckled. "That's John, he's a nice guy. The hospital's responsible for your well-being."

"So he's supposed to keep me from offing myself," Zac surmised.

"Yeah, something like that." Butch's hand squeezed Zac's thigh. "Have you noticed any difference since you started the meds?"

"Not yet." Zac still wasn't convinced the medication would help. "Did Dr. Pritchard tell you he wants me to quit my job?"

Butch nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry about that. I know how much you love it."

Zac rolled his eyes. He didn't love it. That's what no one seemed to understand. Although he was an excellent EMT, he didn't get any more joy out of it than he would if he were a sacker at the grocery store. Still, he had to earn a living. If working at the clinic was the way to do that, he wouldn't fight it.

"I don't like the idea of working nights, but I think I'll talk to Dr. Browning about the job at the clinic. Sucks that I'll lose my benefits and seniority though."

The worry over how he could make a relationship work with Jakob while they were both working odd shifts was also a concern. Of course the fact that it was a concern at all was something positive to cling to.

"There you are."

Zac turned towards the familiar voice and smiled as Jakob walked towards him. Zac stood to welcome Jakob, but suddenly thought better of it and sat back down. Looking too anxious might make him look like a fool if Jakob had come to give him the kiss-off speech. "Hi."

Butch stood and held out his hand to greet Jakob. "If you don't mind, I'm gonna go grab something to eat while the two of you talk."

Jakob nodded and sat in Butch's spot on the bench. Zac noticed Jakob's hand resting, palm up between them. He knew it was Jakob's way of inviting Zac's touch but not forcing it on him. Maybe he wasn't going to get that kiss-off speech after all.

An apology was in order and Zac knew it. He reached down and threaded his fingers through Jakob's. "I imagine I scared you pretty bad, huh?"

"Yeah." Jakob lifted Zac's hand to his mouth and kissed it. "It would've been easier to cope with had I known what you were dealing with beforehand."

"Don't take it personally," Zac said. "I'm pretty good at keeping my cards close to the vest. Otherwise I would probably be completely alone in the world."

Jakob transferred their clasped hands to his thigh. He opened Zac's hand and began to draw circles on his palm. It was obvious to Zac that Jakob was getting ready to speak and wanted to measure his words carefully.

"There's nothing you can't tell me. I love you. I know I've told you that several times now, but I don't think you understand what that means to me. I could lie and tell you my love is unconditional, but that isn't true. I need to know you love me, and I need to know you'll always be honest, no matter what. Even if you think it's something that'll hurt my feelings or piss me off. And I'd like the peace of mind that comes with knowing I can do the same with you."

It was a lot to take in, so Zac gave himself a few moments to think about what Jakob had said. He was so used to hiding his true feelings. Zac wasn't convinced he could suddenly morph into Mr. Open and Honest.

Regardless of what happened between them, there was still a secret he hadn't revealed to anyone. He glanced over his shoulder at the orderly who'd taken up position under a shade tree. John, as his dad had called him, evidently was used to waiting for patients because he'd produced a small paperback book and was reading. John glanced up and smiled at Zac.

Zac turned back around to find Jakob staring at him. "I need to tell you something, but I'm not ready for anyone else to hear it."

Jakob scooted closer and wrapped his arm around Zac. "Okay," he whispered.

"First of all, I don't know if I'll ever be able to feel what everyone else seems to take for granted."

"I know that."

Zac nodded. "Okay." Zac took a deep breath. To confess his greatest sin was to risk losing not only Jakob's love but his final secret. Biting his lip, he looked into Jakob's eyes. He needed to see Jakob's initial reaction to what he was about to tell him.

He took Jakob's hand and pressed it lightly against his cheek. "I did this."

Jakob's brows drew together. "You? Not Terry?"

"Not Terry," Zac confessed.

Jakob appeared confused but not horrified. "Were you trying to kill yourself?"

Zac released Jakob's hand and dropped his head. He'd been beyond hurt and confused that night, but his goal wasn't to commit suicide, it was to...what? Zac once again replayed the incident in detail, relaying the fight to Jakob as it occurred.

"Terry smashed my table with a baseball bat. By that time I was already at my lowest point because he told me the two of you had been fucking behind my back." Zac glanced up at Jakob. "Now I know it was all lies. But at the time, I believed him. He told me he knew how crazy I was, said I'd been able to skate through life as sane because of the way I looked."

Zac started to look away again, but Jakob reached out and cupped the side of Zac's face, holding him in place. "He said I was a good fuck and since the crazy wasn't noticeable, he hadn't minded. I told him he was wrong, that I wasn't crazy, and he started laughing. He said no one would ever really know since I was too pretty to see beyond it, that people stopped at my surface and would never bother with what was inside so my secret was safe with him."

"So you proved him wrong," Jakob whispered.

"I don't even know what I was thinking at the time. I just wanted him to shut up. I remember reaching down and picking up a piece of the glass, but that's all. Kinda like in the shower that day. I know the intent was there, as fucked up as it was, but I don't remember actually doing it."

Zac's throat constricted as he fought to breathe around the pain that washed over him. "Terry was right all along. I am crazy."

"No!" Jakob said, shaking Zac. "Terry wasn't right. I love you. Inside and out. You're depressed, not crazy. And now that we know how to help you, you'll start to see that too."

As the tears began to fall, Zac crumpled against Jakob. "I just want to be normal. I wanna feel things. I want to be happy, but I don't know how," he said around his sobs.

"Shhh," Jakob soothed, kissing the top of Zac's head as he pulled him into his lap. "I want to be there when you rediscover those things. Will you let me?"

"What if I never do?"

"I won't give up hope as long as you don't," Jakob told him. He leaned in for a kiss but Zac stopped him.

“Hang on.” Zac reached down and lifted the bottom of his T-shirt to wipe his runny nose. For some reason, the simple action drew a chuckle from Jakob. “Why’s that so funny?”

Jakob put his mouth to Zac’s ear and whispered. “I’ve swallowed your cum and licked your asshole, you really think a little snot is gonna turn me off?”

Zac’s hand flew to his mouth as he tried to stifle the laugh that threatened. Jakob pulled Zac’s hand away.

“Don’t hide it. Let it out.”

Zac removed his hand and laughed. It had been a while since he’d felt like laughing. He’d become so accustomed to faking it, he’d forgotten about the butterflies he felt when he did it for real.

Once he’d settled down, he pressed his lips against Jakob’s. The invasion of Jakob’s tongue felt better than it ever had. Zac wasn’t sure if it was the medication starting to kick in or the knowledge that Jakob knew everything and still felt like probing his tonsils.



## Chapter Six

It wasn't quite six-thirty in the morning when Zac crawled into bed. He snuggled his nude body against Jakob's and sighed. It had been a long night. At least when he worked at the station he'd been able to sleep most nights.

Although sound asleep, Jakob pulled Zac against his chest, holding him like a child with his security blanket. Zac smiled. Living with Jakob hadn't been without problems, but the two of them were working on it. Zac knew most of his issues in the beginning had to do with unfounded worries that Jakob had agreed to Butch's wishes out of obligation. Zac no longer felt that way. It was nice coming home to Jakob when he wasn't on duty at the station.

He felt Jakob's cock begin to harden against his stomach. Either Jakob was dreaming or starting to wake up. Zac reached down and wrapped his fingers around the slowly filling length.

Their sex life had definitely improved since moving in together, although the unbelievable feeling of getting fucked could also have something to do with the lithium he'd started taking a month earlier.

The first couple of weeks he was on the medication, he'd wanted nothing more than to nap all day, but that was beginning to level off and he felt better than he had in years. He still didn't feel normal, but at least he now had hope of getting there.

"Mmmm," Jakob moaned, rolling to his back. "When did you get home?"

Zac glanced at the clock as he continued to stroke Jakob's cock. "About twenty minutes ago. What time do you have to go in?"

"Eight," Jakob said around a yawn.

Zac hated the days their schedules conflicted. "Would you mind if I came up later and brought you dinner?"

"Not at all, but Sammy's making barbecued chicken on the grill. Why don't you just plan to eat with us?" Jakob threw the covers off and spread his legs.

"You don't think anyone will mind?"

Jakob opened his eyes and stared at Zac. "You'll always be a part of that family whether you work there or not. Besides, it's just me, Sammy and Leo on duty today."

Zac was glad to hear it. "What? Your shadow's not working today?"

Jakob reached over and hauled Zac on top of him. "Luke has the day off." He gave Zac a deep kiss. "You know there's nothing to be jealous of, right?"

Zac shrugged. "He's hot."

"So are you," Jakob said, cupping Zac's ass in his hands.

Zac noticed Jakob didn't deny his new co-worker was hot. Hell, Luke was more than hot, he was probably one of the sexiest men Zac had ever seen in Cattle Valley, and that was saying something.

Jakob reached to the bedside table and grabbed the bottle of lube. "As a matter of fact, I jacked off last night just thinking about you."

Zac took the lube from Jakob and sat up. He poured a good amount onto his fingers and reached behind himself. "You have some kind of Frankenstein fantasy I don't know about?"

"Don't say that!" Jakob said in a harsh tone. "It belittles not only yourself but my love for you."

"Sorry," Zac mumbled. Generally when the two of them argued it was over something Zac said without thinking. Jakob definitely didn't let Zac get away with putting himself down, even when he was trying to make a joke.

He chuckled when he felt the slide of Jakob's finger join his in stretching his hole. Zac decided to keep his mouth shut and just enjoy the short time he had with Jakob before his shift.

Sufficiently stretched, he removed his fingers and pushed Jakob's hand away. Planting his feet on the mattress, he took hold of Jakob's cock and guided it to his hole. As Jakob's shaft filled his hole, Zac wondered why the two of them had ever wasted a moment of their time together.

His body started to tingle as it stretched to accommodate his lover's girth, something Zac found particularly enlightening. "I can feel you."

Jakob chuckled. "I hope so."

"No, I mean, I can *feel* you." Zac fully seated himself on Jakob's cock and reached down to cover the man's heart with his hand. "Here."

Jakob took one hand off Zac's hip and covered Zac's hand with his own. "It's getting better isn't it?"

Zac began a slow rocking rhythm as he stared into Jakob's eyes. "You know how your foot goes numb and then when you try to walk on it, it gets that tingly, pin-pricking feeling?"

"Yeah."

"That's where I am right now. Does that make sense?" Zac had believed Jakob's words of love that had been professed day after day, but he'd never really felt them. Or at least, he'd never felt worthy of them. He refused to analyse why, suddenly, in this particular moment, he did.

Jakob grinned giving Zac yet another reason to love the man. Jakob made the most out of every situation, never a good day wasted, never a bad day ignored.

Jakob wrapped his arms around Zac's waist and rolled them over without pulling out. The thrusts intensified as Jakob made a satisfied sound. Zac moaned with each plunge of Jakob's cock, revelling in his new position.

With each snap of Jakob's hips, Zac's cock bounced against his lower stomach. "We're making music," he whispered.

Jakob's head tilted to the side as he listened to the symphony they were composing. "Next to hearing you laugh, it's the best sound in the world."

Lord, when had the two of them become so sappy? Zac didn't care. He liked the relationship he was building with Jakob. It was a long way from perfect, but if he could just hold onto the man while he worked out his issues, he could see a long life together in front of them.

Jakob moved his arms, one at a time, and hooked them under Zac's knees, opening him even further. Zac reached up and pulled Jakob's head down for a kiss. He probed the interior of Jakob's mouth, mimicking Jakob's thrusts in and out of his ass.

"Touch yourself," Jakob said, breaking the kiss.

*Gladly.* Zac reached between them with both hands and removed one instrument from their impromptu concert. He gripped his cock and slid one thumb over the crown, collecting pre-cum. He lifted his hand to Jakob's mouth and waited.

Jakob's nostrils flared as he opened his mouth for Zac's gift. "More."

Zac started jacking himself with intent and soon was rewarded. His back arched as he filled his hand with cum. "Jakob!"

"Give it to me," Jakob panted.

With shaking hands, something they tended to do a lot lately, Zac presented his gift to Jakob who proceeded to lick Zac's fingers clean.

Jakob's eyes squeezed shut as he buried himself inside Zac. The cords in his neck stood out in stark relief as he climaxed, howling Zac's name to the ceiling.

Zac untangled his legs from Jakob's arms and pulled his lover into his arms. As Jakob's weight settled against him, Zac once again wondered what he had ever done to deserve a man like the one he had.

\* \* \* \*

"Smells good," Zac said.

Sammy turned the chicken over and began brushing the heavily seasoned breasts with barbeque sauce. "It's your dad's recipe. You've had it a million times."

"So? Still smells good." Zac took a sip of his water, enjoying the cool breeze. "How're the new guys working out?"

"Good. I haven't been able to get them hooked on Pirate's Cove." Sammy laughed. "Get it?"

Zac rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Your humour's as bad as ever. I thought I just didn't know how to laugh at your jokes. I'm glad to see the problem was the jokes, not me."

"Fuck off," Sammy chuckled. He closed the grill and joined Zac in the shade of the umbrella.

"I've been trying to think of something big I can do for Jakob. Any ideas?" Jakob had given him so much over the last month. It seemed only right he try and find a way to show Jakob how much he was appreciated.

"I don't know. Why do you think you need to do something big? Jakob strikes me as the kind of guy who would appreciate anything you did whether big or small." Sammy put his feet up on the chair beside him.

Zac nodded. "He does." Although he truly wanted to thank Jakob, he also wanted to show his friends how much he appreciated the wonderful man who'd stood by him. Maybe, in a small way, he was trying to prove to everyone that he was worthy of Jakob's love and attention.

*God, that makes me sound like a real asshole.* Zac sighed. His attention was captured by the sound of a motorcycle pulling into the parking lot. "Who could that be?" Zac strained to lean back enough to see the parking lot without getting out of his chair.

"Well, since Jakob's inside with Leo, I'd guess Luke," Sammy said.

"Luke? Why would he be here? I thought Jakob said it would just be the four of us?"

Sammy shrugged. "I don't know, let's ask him. Luke!"

The town's newest EMT came around the corner of the building all smiles. Zac's stomach clenched as the devastating man walked their way. Clad only in a pair of low-rise jeans, white muscle shirt and flip flops, Luke was incredibly drool-worthy. It was the first time Zac had also been privy to the intricate tattoos on the man's arms, shoulders and from what he could see from the sheer fabric of the white shirt, stomach and chest.

Zac averted his gaze before he made a fool of himself. The fact that Jakob worked beside a man who looked like that had Zac's mood plummeting, fast.

"What're you doing here?" Sammy asked.

"I left my boots here for some unknown reason. I thought I'd take a ride into Sheridan and see what kind of trouble I could stir up."

"Where's Kenny?" Sammy stood and went to check the chicken.

"At home with his nose stuck in a book, as usual." Luke snorted. "Youth is wasted on that man." Luke walked over to peer over Sammy's shoulder. "Damn, that looks good."

"Looking's all you're gonna do because there's only enough for the four of us," Sammy replied, elbowing Luke playfully in the stomach.

Luke stumbled back and grabbed his chest. "You wound me."

Sammy laughed. "Get outta here."

"Fine, I know when I'm not wanted."

Zac doubted that. The man had probably never been turned down in his life. He watched Luke walk towards the station door and suddenly panicked. Jumping up, he followed in Luke's direction. "I'll go get the plates and tell the guys you're ready."

The air conditioned common room was a shock to his system and he immediately broke out in gooseflesh. He heard laughter coming from the kitchen and headed that way. Stepping into the room, he felt like an intruder as three sets of eyes glanced his way.

"Hey, sweetheart," Jakob greeted, walking over to give Zac a quick kiss.

"Chicken's done," he said, trying to read Luke's reaction to Jakob's display of affection.

"Well, I'll get out of your hair," Luke said, heading for the door.

"By the way, you'd better not let the sheriff catch you riding around without real shoes on, you'd get pulled over for sure," Leo said, pulling four plates out of the cabinet.

"Have you seen the cops in this town? Getting pulled over might not be such a bad thing. Maybe if I'm lucky, they'll even ask me to spread 'em while they ffff...risk me." Luke was out the door before anyone had a chance to comment.

Leo shook his head and handed the plates to Zac. "I'm glad he does his cattin' in Sheridan."

Zac couldn't help but ask, "Why Sheridan when he has an entire town full of gay men right here?"

Jakob and Leo both laughed, but it was Jakob who answered. "Something about not pissing in the pool where you swim."

"Is he really that bad?" Zac asked.

Leo pulled a large bowl of homemade potato salad out of the refrigerator. "Evidently. Although Kenny swears he wasn't always like that. Whatever he left Cattle Valley for in the first place seems to have changed him. He's a funny guy though."

*Yeah, real funny.* Zac grabbed some silverware out of the drawer and led the way to the table outside. He'd just finished setting the table when he heard the roar of Luke's motorcycle start up. *Good riddance.*

\* \* \* \*

Sammy and Leo insisted on clearing the table and doing the dishes while Jakob and Zac relaxed together in the cool night air.

"Lots of stars out tonight," Jakob commented.

Zac rested his head on the back of the chair and looked up. "Yep."

"Something wrong? You were kind of quiet during dinner."

Zac turned his head enough to meet Jakob's gaze. "Not really. Just feeling..." Damn, how did he tell Jakob how he was feeling without making him worry? Zac shrugged. "Not one of my better days. That's all."

Jakob slid off his chair and knelt in front of Zac, insinuating his body between Zac's legs. "You think it's the medicine? Maybe you should have some blood work done when you go into work later."

Zac shook his head. "I'm sure it's fine." He leant forward and kissed Jakob with a quick sweep of his tongue. He knew he was probably being paranoid about Luke, but it was bothering him enough that Jakob had noticed. "Although I might call Dr. Pritchard and see if he has time for me tomorrow."

"I'm sure he does. Let me know if you want me to go with you." Jakob settled his head against Zac's chest. "Did you get plenty of sleep after I left this morning?"

Zac threaded his fingers through Jakob's hair. "Yes, Dad." He felt Jakob stiffen and silently curse himself. "I know. That wasn't fair."

"I'm not trying to smother you," Jakob said.

Zac ran his hand down Jakob's back. "I know you're not. I don't know why things like that come out of my mouth sometimes. I always regret 'em, but it's too late to pull them back in."

"Even if you don't say them, you still think them which is basically the same thing," Jakob mumbled.

Before Zac had a chance to apologise for everything, including his existence, the sound of the alarm going off inside got their attention. Jakob jumped up and ran towards the station with Zac close behind.

"Fire at the school," Leo shouted.

It was an automatic response for Zac to head towards the ambulance. Jakob turned and shook his head, hurt clearly written in the lines of his forehead.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but you can't come," Jakob explained.

*Oh, right. I don't work here anymore.* "Of course not." Zac tried to play off his actions. He leant in and gave Jakob a quick kiss as the bay doors opened and Sammy and Leo hopped into the fire truck.

"Hey, Zac, do me a favour and call the list," Leo shouted right before turning on the siren and pulling out.

"Call my cell phone if you need me," Zac told Jakob as he got into the ambulance.

"Love you," Jakob called out as he drove away.

"Love you," Zac whispered to the empty bay.

\* \* \* \*

Zac sat at the small desk in the emergency department of the clinic and listened to the police scanner. With so little rain over the last several months and the blowing wind, the small fire at the school had turned into a raging blaze within minutes.

"Anything?" Isaac asked, coming into the room.

"No. They're still working on it. No reported injuries yet." Isaac grabbed his white coat off its hanger and quickly filled Matt and Sam in on the update.

"At least the school should've been empty this time of night," Sam said, buttoning his coat.

Matt stood off to the side. As a physical therapist he didn't often help out in the ER, but Zac figured he chose to come in just in case they needed him.

"I called Adam, but it was dart league night at O'Brien's." Zac didn't need to say more. It was natural to have a few rounds of beer while playing, and the clinic couldn't afford the liability, even if Adam wasn't drunk.

The phone beside him rang, startling Zac. "Cattle Valley Clinic," he answered.

"Let me talk to Sam," George ordered.

Zac held out the phone. "George needs to talk to you."

Sam rushed over and took the phone out of Zac's hand. "Yeah?" Sam's eyes rounded before he turned away. "Yeah. Okay, we'll be ready."

Zac could tell by the expression on Sam's face when he turned around, that something was wrong.

"What is it?" he asked. His chest tightened at the thought of something happening to the man he loved. "Is it Jakob?"

"No, well, not really. Luke and Aaron are on their way here with Jakob who's suffered smoke inhalation, but it's Eli Sanchez that George's most worried about."

"Eli? What was he doing at the school this late at night?"

"Working, apparently. Jakob saw one of the lights in the school flickering and shot inside before anyone could stop him. Good thing too, because the flames were literally licking at Eli's door."



As they began to rush around in preparation for the ambulance, Zac tried to slow his breathing. Although from the sound of it, Jakob wasn't seriously injured, he'd still taken a deadly chance in entering the building.

When the emergency doors opened and Luke and Aaron rushed Eli into the clinic, Isaac and Sam took over. "We've got him. Get Jakob masked and have some Albuterol handy in case he goes into bronchial spasms," Isaac instructed as they wheeled Eli into a private treatment room.

Zac turned back to the emergency doors and spotted Jakob sitting up inside the ambulance. "What the hell?" He ran outside and stepped up into the truck. "You should be lying down."

Jakob shook his head and lowered the oxygen mask. "I'm okay. Just need to suck down some quality air for a few more minutes."

"Bullshit. Lie down!" Jakob shook his head again and Zac looked towards the entrance to find Luke standing there. "Help me get him inside."

"He won't go. We've already tried."

Zac returned his attention to Jakob. He put his hands on either side of Jakob's face and leant forward. "Now you listen to me, you stubborn sonofabitch. You brought me here when I didn't want to come because you knew it was the best thing for me. Well, dammit, I deserve the same authority. Now lie down and let me take you inside."

Jakob once again shook his head. "It's harder for me to breathe if I'm lying down. Just help me out, and I'll walk."

"Get a wheelchair," Zac told Luke. He wrapped his arms around Jakob and half-lifted him to his feet. As big and strong as Jakob was, he appeared to be as fragile as a kitten at that moment.

Luke stepped up into the back of the ambulance to help. Zac shot the gorgeous man a dirty look. "Where's Aaron?"

Luke's eyes narrowed. "He's giving the docs Eli's vitals. Now, are we going to get into a pissing contest or are you going to let me help you get him inside?"

Zac bit his tongue and nodded. He would have time to deal with Luke after he made sure Jakob was going to be okay.

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"Where is he? Where's Eli?" Kenny Trenton asked, pushing through the door.

Zac, who was filling out the paperwork on Jakob, pointed to the closed door. "Dr. Singer and Dr. Browning are in with him. If you'll take a seat I'll see what I can find out."

"I'll wait right here if it's all the same," Kenny answered, running his fingers through his short blond hair.

Zac didn't know what the relationship was between Kenny and Eli, but the younger man was definitely worried. He knocked lightly on the door before stepping inside. Eli was flat on his back with an intubation tube down his throat.

"Kenny Trenton's outside. He's asking for word on Eli's condition."

"We found soot in his oral cavity, but we haven't determined the extent of damage to his larynx or lungs," Dr. Browning answered. "A few second-degree burns, but those'll heal quickly."

Zac nodded and stepped back out, shutting the door quietly. He relayed the message to Kenny. "You might as well go on home. They've given Eli a sedative to help him deal with the tube down his throat. If all goes well, it should be removed by morning."

"I'll stay." Kenny turned in the direction of the waiting room. "I'll be out here if anything happens."

After Kenny left, Zac went and finished his report before looking in on Jakob. Sound asleep, Jakob looked like a giant in the small emergency room bed. Zac sat in the chair next to the bed and reached for Jakob's hand. Any doubt he had about his capacity to really love someone had been resolved when he'd seen Jakob sitting in the back of the ambulance with the oxygen mask over his face. He might not always say or do the right things, but he was finally confident in his feelings. "You were lucky," he whispered.

"I know," Jakob answered in a scratchy voice.

Zac leaned forward and gave Jakob a brief kiss. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"How's Eli?"

"I'm not sure. We should know by morning."

"And the fire?"

"Under control. I believe they're just watching for hotspots. Sam said I could take you home once you feel like it."

"Then why didn't you wake me up?" Jakob asked.

“Because I didn’t think you were ready yet.”

“And now?”

Zac smiled. “You’re ready.”

## Chapter Seven

"Come on, sweetheart, I'm starving," Jakob called from his position on the couch.

Zac rushed through the room with a stack of folded towels in his hands. "Hang on. Just need to get these put away."

When Zac came back into the room, Jakob reached out his hand and pulled Zac into his lap. "Do you mind sitting with the guys tonight?"

"Why would I mind? I think sometimes you forget they were my friends first."

It wasn't that Jakob had forgotten, but lately Zac had acted uneasy about visiting him at the station. Jakob figured it was hard for Zac to be so close to a job he'd done for so long, knowing he was no longer doing it.

"Just checking," Jakob said squeezing the globes of Zac's ass. It had been over a week since his forced trip to the emergency room, and Jakob still couldn't be prouder of Zac for insisting he get treatment.

Zac melted against Jakob's chest. "Did you ask Leo for time off work for that joint therapy thing tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I told you Leo wouldn't have a problem with it." It would only be their second shared session with Dr. Pritchard although Zac had been going three times a week. Jakob hadn't felt the need to talk to Dr. Pritchard more than a handful of times since Zac was released from the hospital.

Things had been going well between them. Jakob wasn't exactly sure why he needed to take time off from work, but if it was important to Zac, it was important to him. Little by little Zac was breaking out of his shell. Jakob still worried of course, but he figured he'd do that until the day he died. Zac was too damned important to him not to worry.

"Are we ready?" Jakob asked.

"Yeah, in a second. Just let me sit here for a few more minutes."

Jakob rested his chin on top of Zac's head and continued to hold him. It wasn't like they needed to get to the park at any certain time. The fundraiser for the school would probably be going on well into the evening. He only hated that Zac had to go in early so Sam, Isaac and Matt could celebrate Matt's birthday.

That reminded him. "I might go to O'Brien's after the game to have a few beers with the guys."

"Okay. Just don't drive if you have too much to drink."

Jakob snorted. "Do I look stupid?"

Zac sat up and stared into Jakob's eyes. "No, you look hot."

Jakob swatted Zac on the ass. "Keep talking like that and those kids might have to take classes in the gym for another year."

With a groan, Zac climbed off Jakob's lap. "You're right. We'd better go if we're going."

Jakob's gaze zeroed in on Zac's ass as he walked towards the door. He couldn't resist reaching out to squeeze Zac's buns once more. "Actually, I've never been that fond of kids."

Zac started laughing and pushed back into Jakob's touch. "You're terrible."

"And horny," Jakob added.

\* \* \* \*

Zac sat under a shade tree, with a still-recovering Eli, watching the macho men of the town play a game of football. "I never understood this game."

Eli's chuckle resulted in a coughing fit. Zac reached down and handed the older man a bottle of water. "Okay?"

Eli nodded and pulled a nebulizer out of his pocket. Two quick puffs later, the colour started to return to his bronzed skin. "Damn, I feel old."

Zac reached over and squeezed Eli's forearm. "Hopefully it'll get better all the time."

"From your lips to God's ears."

Zac returned his attention to the game just in time to see Luke jump on Jakob's back in an attempt to tackle him. Jakob easily carried Luke, piggyback-style across the goal line. Zac growled under his breath as the two of them fell to the ground laughing.

"I hear ya," Eli said. "That Luke Hatcher's always gotten under my skin."

It was the first time Zac had heard someone speak ill of Luke. "Were you teaching here when Luke was still in school?"

"Yep. He and Kenny walked around town like two peas in a pod. Guess things haven't changed much," Eli said as Zac watched Kenny help Luke to his feet.

"You think he's after Kenny?"

"After? No. Got? Yes."

There was something about the way Eli said it that drew Zac's attention away from the men on the field. "You like him."

"Luke? Hell no."

"I meant Kenny. You like him, don't you?"

Eli squirmed in his chair. "I just told you Kenny and Luke were students of mine."

"So? They sure as hell don't look like students anymore. So what's the problem?"

"I'm too old, besides it'd be creepy."

One thing Zac had learned in therapy was to always be completely honest with himself. It seemed like Eli could use the same advice, but he didn't want to offend the man. "Can I speak freely?"

"Sure," Eli said although he suddenly looked uneasy.

"When you think of Kenny do you think of him in a fatherly way or do you wish you could run out there, tackle him and fuck him?"

Eli lurched forward and began coughing again.

*Shit. Did I go too far?* Zac pounded Eli on the back several times, finally reaching for his water.

"What happened?" Kenny asked, running over.

"Hey! What about the game?" Luke yelled.

Kenny didn't even turn around, just held up his hand. "Go on without me."

"He'll be okay," Zac said, holding the bottle of water out to Eli. "It'll just take his lungs time to recover."

Kenny knelt in front of Eli and lowered his head to look the man in the eyes. "Where's your breather thingy?"

Eli shook his head.

"He just did it a few minutes ago," Zac answered for Eli. *Fuck.* He felt horrible for torturing the poor man.

Eli slowly got the coughing under control and took a sip of water. "I'm okay. Go on back to your friends," Eli growled.

Kenny's head snapped back. "Funny, I thought you were my friend." He stood and glanced at Eli once more before running back into the ongoing game.

*Well that answered that question.* Zac decided to shut his mouth and watch the rest of the game. It was one thing to do that foot-in-mouth thing with Jakob, but it was obvious Eli's health simply wasn't up to it.

Zac glanced at his watch and groaned. "I've got to head to work. You sure you're okay?"

Eli nodded.

Zac was folding his lawn chair when Eli cleared his throat. "I'm a bottom more than a top," Eli mumbled.

Zac's eyes went wide. The smirk on Eli's face was priceless. Zac laughed, dropping his chair. He sunk to the grass and shook his head, suddenly getting serious. He reached out and put his hand on Eli's knee. "Life's too short to hold feelings inside. You, of all people, should know that."

\* \* \* \*

Zac jumped when the phone beside him rang. "Cattle Valley Clinic."

"Hey, it's me," Isaac said. "How're things tonight?"

"Ummm, well, I've sharpened every pencil in the entire clinic and got the gum out of the carpet in the waiting room."

Isaac chuckled. "In that case, why don't you go on home. Just forward the after-hour calls to your cell phone."

Zac sighed. "Thanks. I was starting to go crazy."

The phone went quiet from both ends. Finally Zac knew he had to say something. "Sorry, bad joke."

"I'll see you tomorrow," Isaac said.

"Nope. Tomorrow's my day off. But I promise to be here Monday."

"Oh, right. Okay, see you then."

Zac hung up with Isaac before pressing the necessary numbers into the phone to have the calls transferred to his cell phone. He quickly began to lock up cabinets and turn off lights. If he was lucky, he might make it to O'Brien's in time to have a beer with Jakob, Sammy and Leo.

He was out the door within ten minutes and jogging towards the pub. He hadn't had a beer since starting his medication, but Zac thought surely one wouldn't hurt, especially if he was with Jakob.

He opened the door and scanned the room. He immediately spotted the table of rowdy athletes and headed that way.

"Zac!" Sammy yelled and practically tackled Zac to the floor in a bear hug.

Zac got his bearings and grinned at his best friend. "Have ya had a little too much to drink?"

"Just a few," Sammy slurred. "Come and sit down."

Zac looked up and down the table. "Did Jakob go home already?"

"Naw," Sammy said, slapping his hand against Zac's chest. "He's probably still over playing pool."

He looked over in the direction of the pool table, but they were in the new addition and not visible from where he stood. "Order me a beer. I'll be right back," Zac told Sammy.

"Sure thing."

Zac wove his way through the loud crowd to the other side of the bar. He stopped in his tracks as he spotted Jakob. Not only did Zac see Jakob, but an obviously drunk Luke practically hanging all over him.

The two men stood face to face laughing. He was just about to break up the pair when Luke stood on his toes and whispered something in Jakob's ear. Jakob laughed again and ruffled his fingers over the top of Luke's shoulder-length hair.

How long had it been since he'd seen Jakob display that much happiness? Zac took a step back before turning and pushing back through the crowd on his way out the door.

\* \* \* \*

Jakob shook his head, still laughing. "I still can't believe you slept with Stretch McGee! That guy's the best in the NBA."

"I did more than sleep with him. He's a wild fuck in the sack, man," Luke said in his ear.



Jakob still couldn't believe it. Stretch McGee was the epitome of a man's man. He wondered if Stretch was a full blown queer, or just trying it out. The last he'd heard, Stretch had sought private treatment for alcohol abuse. "So how long were the two of you together?"

Luke took another drink of his beer and shook his head. "Five months. Long enough for his wife to find out. Why do you think he checked himself into the loony bin?" Luke's hand flew up to cover his mouth. "Oh, man, sorry, I didn't mean to bring that up."

Jakob took more offense to Luke's apology than the original statement. Zac had only spent six days in the hospital. He opened his mouth to say something to his drunk co-worker when Sammy came up to stand beside him.

"Where's Zac? His beer's getting warm."

"Zac? I would imagine he's still at work," Jakob answered.

Sammy shook his head. "No, he was here just a few minutes ago. I told him you were over here playing pool." Sammy's eyes narrowed. "Did the two of you fight?"

"No. Hell, I didn't even know he was here."

Sammy shrugged. "Well if you see him, tell him I'm drinking his beer. He'll have to get himself another one."

Jakob studied the area, looking for that familiar face that always made him smile. "Excuse me," he told Luke.

He checked the restroom and the rest of the pub, but no Zac. Stepping outside, he pulled out his phone and called Zac's cell.

"What?" Zac snapped when he answered the phone.

"Hey, sweetheart. Where are you?"

"Thinking. Just go back to your little shadow and have a nice night." Zac hung up.

Jakob stared at his phone for several moments before calling again. When the call went directly to voicemail, Jakob started to worry. "Dammit!"

He knew Zac seemed to have issues with Luke, but the two of them had actually become friends. Luke was always there to lighten the mood when Jakob started to worry about things at home.

Jakob started for the clinic. He wasn't drunk, not by a long shot. Once Zac had been advised not to drink alcohol, Jakob had naturally followed suit. Although he hadn't been with Zac physically earlier in the evening, he always felt connected to him.

After determining the clinic was closed down for the night, Jakob ran to his truck. Panic started to sink in when he pulled into the driveway to a darkened house. "No. No. No," he said as he unlocked the front door.

"Zac!" he shouted. "Sweetheart?"

Jakob checked the house, which didn't take long, before running back out to his truck. He tried calling Zac again, groaning when he went straight to voicemail.

"Sweetheart? Tell me where you are. Please, Zac. You're starting to really worry me." He hung up and tossed the phone onto the seat beside him. He rested his head on the steering wheel. "Think, dammit!"

A night, from what seemed like a lifetime ago, came to mind. Jakob peeled out of the driveway and raced towards the park. Tearing into the parking lot, Jakob slammed on the break. He jumped out of the truck and ran towards the lake, to Zac's special spot. Jakob couldn't believe he'd almost forgotten about it.

As he neared, he slowed to a walk. Although there wasn't a fire to light the area, the full moon overhead shone down on Zac like a beacon, leading Jakob right towards him. "Zac?"

Zac's spine stiffened. "I told you I was thinking."

Jakob stopped just behind the man he loved. "I know, but I was worried."

"Worried?" Zac glanced over his shoulder. "Why? I'm a grown man." Zac's brows drew together before he seemed to explode up off the bench. "You thought I was going to hurt myself, didn't you?"

Jakob took a step back and held up his hands. "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to. I see the truth in your eyes."

Jakob held his breath. What could he say? He had worried when he couldn't find Zac. "Why'd you run away from the bar?"

Zac shook his head. "Because I couldn't stand to watch you and Luke all over each other. I was pissed, okay? So I got out of there before I said something I'd regret. You're always telling me to think before I speak, so that's what I did. Now tell me why you thought I'd run off and do something stupid?"

"Wait! What? What are you talking about? Luke and I were not all over each other. We were talking! It's what friends do."

Zac crossed his arms. "Yeah, and do friends usually whisper in each other's ear?"

Jakob couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You've fucking lost..." He bit his tongue and closed his eyes. Shit!

"I've lost it? Is that how you defend yourself, by accusing me of losing my mind? Nice."

"Look. Luke was telling me about an affair he'd had with Stretch McGee. I guess he didn't want everyone hearing it. Damn, Zac. I'm not interested in Luke. How many times do I have to tell you that?"

Zac waved his hands out in front of him. "Let's stick to one argument at a time. You're making my head spin."

"Fine. Pick a topic," Jakob said in exasperation.

"You can't play the crazy card every time we fight."

"I don't."

Zac crossed his arms. "You just did."

"I'm sorry. God, sweetheart, I...I'm just so afraid sometimes." Jakob rubbed his nose as it started to burn. "I'm trying. I really am. Think about it. Things that everyone says in passing can now be construed differently."

"Like?"

"You know, sayings and stuff. How often have you teasingly told someone they were crazy, or that they were acting crazy? They're just words, they don't mean anything."

"Well they mean something to me," Zac whispered.

Jakob couldn't stand the disheartened expression on Zac's face. He moved forward slowly, giving Zac a chance to step back if he needed. He held out his arms and waited. It took several moments, but Zac eventually walked into Jakob's embrace.

"I love you," Zac said. "You have to have faith in me."

Jakob gave Zac a deep kiss, making sure to convey every ounce of love he felt. When he pulled back, he gazed down into Zac's eyes. "I could say the same to you. I won't cheat on you. Ever."

"But we met at work." Zac buried his face against Jakob's neck. "I think I fell in love with you before you ever came to my house that night. I guess I'm just afraid history will repeat itself."

"It won't. I happen to think there was a reason I decided to move to Cattle Valley. You know what that is?"

"What?" Zac asked with a smile in his voice.

"To sweep you off your feet and to show you what real love is all about." Jakob shrugged. "Call me conceited, but I happen to think I'm succeeding in both of those."

"You are. But you have to understand I'm trying so hard to get through this, for us. I want to kick the depression in the ass, but it can't work if you're always expecting the worst to happen. Just live in the now, and if something happens down the road, we'll deal with it. Okay?"

Jakob nodded. It would be hard, but Zac was right. He had spent every day expecting something bad to happen. No matter how much faith he had in Zac, the fear that his partner might slip back into the dark hole was a constant worry.

The pressure was starting to make him feel like an old man. Maybe it was one of the reasons he enjoyed Luke's company so much. The man didn't seem to have a care in the world. He lived his life day to day and grabbed as much pleasure and joy as he could along the way. Maybe there was a lesson in there.

Zac moved against him, brushing the front of Jakob's shorts. Like always, Jakob's body responded immediately. He ground his cock against Zac's lower torso. The reaction he received from Zac was like setting a match to dry tinder.

"Fuck me," Zac whispered, straddling Jakob's thigh.

Jakob glanced around. Although the park was empty, he didn't think it would be good for either of them to be caught in such a public spot. He reached down and cupped Zac's erection through his khaki's.

"This isn't the place for fucking, but I can take care of you." Jakob unbuttoned the top of Zac's pants and lowered the zipper. Reaching under the waistband of Zac's underwear, Jakob fished out his lover's hard cock.

"Mmmm," he groaned. "You feel good."

Although Jakob had Zac's cock in hand, Zac continued to ride Jakob's thigh, pressing his balls against the straining muscles of Jakob's leg.

"I want to feel," Zac said, freeing Jakob's cock.

Zac's hand wrapped around his length was heaven, it always had been. Since their first night together, Jakob had been addicted to Zac's touch. It wasn't the time to go slow and easy. Jakob applied pressure to the cock in his hand and worked it, running his fingers over the head to gather the pre-cum needed to smooth the way.

Zac's hips snapped with each pull of Jakob's hand. "Yeah," Zac grunted.

Jakob wrapped an arm around Zac's waist and carried him over to the bench. He put his foot up on the seat, allowing Zac to ride his thigh like a hobby horse. "That's it, sweetheart, show me."

Zac's eyes rolled back as his body jerked with the force of his climax.

"God, you're amazing," Jakob whispered. Jakob would never tire of seeing that euphoric expression on Zac's face. Zac thrust into Jakob's hand twice more, giving Jakob every drop of his seed.

Zac started to slide off Jakob's leg. "Whoa there, sweetheart." Jakob wrapped his arm tighter around Zac to keep him in place.

Zac shook his head. "Want to taste you."

Pleased with the offer, Jakob lowered Zac to his feet before taking a seat on the bench. He spread his thighs and welcomed Zac between them. Zac looked up, making eye contact with Jakob as he licked his way up the length of Jakob's cock.

Jakob groaned. Zac's pink tongue swiped across the tip several times before the entire crown popped into his lover's mouth. "Fuck." He licked Zac's cum from his hand and kept his gaze on the man pleasuring him.

The warmth of Zac's mouth as it continued to slide down his cock had Jakob ready to howl at the full moon. He placed his hand lightly against Zac's scarred cheek and brushed the tender skin with his thumb.

Zac's eyes rounded at the touch. It wasn't often that Jakob drew Zac's attention to the scars, but Jakob felt it was important. He wanted Zac to know he noticed them and desired him anyway.

Zac's free hand worked its way further into Jakob's underwear to cup and squeeze his balls. Jakob thrust further down Zac's throat, unable to stop himself. "Close," he warned.

Nodding, Zac pulled back until the head of Jakob's cock hovered just above his mouth. "Feed me." Zac continued to use his hand to jack Jakob off as he waited, tongue at the ready for Jakob's seed.

Jakob's hips came up off the bench as the first load of cum shot from his cock, painting a thick white streak across Zac's face. Fuck that was hot.

Moaning, Zac's lips closed over the head, swallowing the subsequent strands as they pumped from Jakob's cock. Jakob ran the back of his fingers lightly over Zac's Adam's apple as it bobbed up and down with every swallow.

Spent, Jakob's length began to soften still in Zac's hand and mouth. "Come up here and kiss me."

Zac released Jakob's cock, placing one last kiss on the head before climbing up to straddle Jakob's lap. "Let's not fight anymore."

Jakob pulled Zac in for a kiss, tasting his own cum still on Zac's tongue. He didn't want to argue with Zac, but he was honest enough to know there would be more. Jakob grinned. It was comforting to know they were no different than any other couple.

## Epilogue

Zac felt great. Stretching the kinks out of his back, he threw off the covers. He had a lot to do before his first ever barbeque. Reaching for the phone he called Jakob.

"Hi, sweetheart," Jakob answered, picking up on the first ring.

"Hey." Zac couldn't hold it in a moment longer. "I saved someone's life last night."

"What? We didn't get any calls."

"I know. Mr. Fisk came stumbling into the clinic around two o'clock this morning. He said he'd been throwing up for a couple of hours, his chest was tight and he was having a hard time breathing."

"Heart attack," Jakob surmised.

"Yep. But before I could place the call to Isaac or Sam, he went into full cardiac arrest."

"Damn. He was lucky he got there in time."

It wasn't often that Zac felt proud, but this was definitely a big one for him. "I just went into professional mode and did it! I saved his life. If I hadn't been there he wouldn't have made it."

"That's great. Now maybe you'll believe me when I tell you I think the clinic is a good fit for you. I know you miss working at the station, but you can really make a difference at the clinic. I'm sure Mr. Fisk would attest to that."

Jakob's praise always made Zac feel warm and fuzzy. "Thanks. Once I had the situation under control, I called Isaac. He rushed in, assessed Mr. Fisk and said I'd done everything perfectly. He even went as far as to say he couldn't have done a better job himself."

"I'm proud of you. Hang on, sweetheart."

Zac heard someone talking in the background. He recognised the voice but it no longer bothered him.

"Luke said to tell you he's sorry he can't make it this evening. He switched shifts with Aaron so he could be off last night," Jakob relayed.

"Tell him no problem. Since Aaron's going to be off, you should invite him."

Jakob paused for a few seconds. "I'll ask, but I'm not sure if he'll come. He doesn't socialize much."

"Forget it. I'll call him." Zac had worried about Aaron since their first meeting at the station. He knew from experience sitting at home alone only made things worse.

"Okay."

"So how many people, do you know?" Zac asked. He still needed to run to the store for a few last minute items, so picking up more of something wouldn't be a problem.

"The list seems to grow every time I turn around. I think around twenty-three people. Are you sure you can handle that many?"

A couple of months earlier, Zac would've said no way, but things had progressively gotten better. He and Jakob hadn't even argued since the night at the park almost two months earlier.

"I can handle it, but don't think that'll get you out of helping me when you get home."

"Of course not. I should be there in a couple of hours. I think George's going to let me off a little early."

"Did he bring in the ice cream maker like he promised?" Another first for Zac, but he felt you couldn't have an official barbeque without homemade ice cream.

"Yep. It's already in my truck."

"Okay." Zac began checking over his list on the bedside table. "Damn. I've got a lot to do and not much time. I'd better get my lazy ass in the shower."

"Wish I could be there with you," Jakob said with a growl in his voice.

"I'll think of you while I scrub my private parts. Does that help?"

Jakob grunted. "Hardly."

Zac laughed. "I'd better get moving. I'll see you when you get home."

"Love you, sweetheart."

"Love you." Zac hung up and headed for the bathroom. He had a feeling it was going to be a great night.

\* \* \* \*

Out of the corner of his eye, Jakob watched Zac buzz around the backyard, making sure their guests had fresh drinks. His first instinct was to worry Zac was overdoing it, but he quickly put that thought out of his mind.

"Nice party," Abe, Collin's partner said, stepping up beside the grill.



Jakob glanced around the backyard filled with friends. "Yeah, it is. I'm glad so many people came. I think Zac really needed it."

Like Zac, Abe also knew what it was like to live with facial scars. Although Abe's had been caused by an accident, the man had still gone into hiding for years until Collin wandered into his life.

"It's good to see you come down from your mountain," Jakob said in all honesty.

Abe shrugged. "Collin's slowly dragging me back to the land of the living." He met Jakob's gaze straight on. "Zac's lucky to have found someone like you. I know I can't imagine where I'd be if I didn't have Collin."

"You'd still be that growling bear I quickly learned to love," Collin said, stepping up to wrap an arm around Abe.

The two men shared a quick kiss before Collin handed Abe a bottle of water. "Did Zac convince Aaron to come?"

Jakob nodded and gestured to the back corner of the yard. "He's over there. I've seen Zac try to get him to join everyone else a couple of times, but so far Aaron's still sitting by himself."

"Oh, that won't do at all," Collin said. "Excuse us." He pulled Abe by the hand down the deck steps and towards Aaron.

Jakob hoped they had better luck than Zac. Although it was a step in the right direction that Aaron had agreed to come at all, Jakob would love to see his new friend open up more to the people in town.

Warmth pressed against his back as Zac's arms encircled his waist. "Hey, sweetheart. Having a good time?"

"Yeah. I'm having fun. You?"

"Doing okay. I'd be doing better if people would stop flapping their jaws and eat a couple of these burgers that are getting cold. These others are ready to take off."

Zac moved to Jakob's side and pulled Jakob's head down for a kiss. "I'll get them over here before I start the ice cream."

"Tell Nate's group last. Rio's already had three."

Zac laughed and gave Jakob another quick kiss. "Will do."

As soon as Zac stepped away, the sound of his voice filled the backyard. "Burgers are getting cold. Nope, not you, Rio, you have to wait for everyone else to have one first."

The entire yard erupted in laughter at Rio's growl. Jakob knew the big man was as gentle as they came, but he also knew Rio had a rep to protect.

Friends slowly rose from their lawn chairs and made their way to the deck where Zac had set out quite a spread of side dishes. Jakob had no idea his partner knew how to cook such a variety of food. At the station, they'd usually made the same things week after week. It made Jakob wonder what other talents Zac had that he hadn't shared yet.

It still bothered him that Zac had given up his job to take the one at the clinic, but from the sound of Zac's voice earlier that day, it might prove to be the best move Zac could've made.

The noise of the electric ice cream maker filled the air as Jakob heard Zac's laughter ring out. He glanced over his shoulder to see Zac crouched beside the contraption as he tried to get the right balance of ice and salt shoved down the sides. Nate was standing above him, no doubt giving Zac pointers on the best way to do it. Jakob didn't know what they were actually saying to each other but it didn't matter.

He felt his nose begin to burn, a sure sign his emotions were starting to surface, but he didn't care. It was the closest thing to joy Jakob had ever seen Zac display and that was worth a few tears. The rough patches in the road they'd hit along the way, and were sure to still hit, were worth it when he got the chance to witness something so incredibly beautiful as Zac laughing.

\* \* \* \*

After the last guest left, Zac found Jakob staring up at the stars in his favourite lounge chair. "Hey," he said, joining his lover.

Jakob spread his legs and made room for Zac to lie between them. "You did a good job, sweetheart. It was a great party."

"Yeah, it was." Zac rested the side of his head against Jakob's chest. There were things he wanted to share with his lover, but he hated to jinx them. Still, Jakob had been with him through the bad times. It was only fair he be allowed into Zac's heart for the good times as well.

He scooted up far enough to reach Jakob's lips. "I love you."

Jakob opened to Zac's tongue as the two of them enjoyed a deep kiss. Jakob lifted Zac and closed his legs, depositing Zac fully on his lap. "I love you, too."

Zac stared into the eyes of his everything. "I'm happy. For maybe the first time in my life I can say that without reservation. I'm truly and completely happy. And I finally get it."

"Get what, sweetheart?" Jakob asked, running his hand down Zac's spine.

"Why it's worth wading through all the pain to find it. Now that I know how it feels, I'll always fight to keep it."

The sweetest smile he'd ever seen broke out across Jakob's face. "I'll never ask more from you than that. And I'll fight right alongside you."

"I know you will." Zac leaned in for another kiss. Their lives might not always be smooth sailing, but they had already weathered enough storms to get their sea legs. Zac had no doubt the two of them could conquer whatever came their way.

## 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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